

OBAMA LACKS MORAL CLARITY ON GENOCIDE OF ARMENIANS

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Tim Rutten, [LA Times](#), 20 April 2011

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For Americans, the question of where and how to make such distinctions has a particular urgency this week, as we commemorate the 96th anniversary of the genocide inflicted on the Armenians by the Ottoman Turks. In massacres from 1915 to 1923, more than 1.5 million Armenians were killed and eastern Anatolia was ethnically cleansed of a people whose presence there extended back to antiquity.

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Here in California, where the descendents of those who escaped the genocide have made such a vibrant contribution to agriculture, business, the professions and public life, memorials of the tragedy are solemn annual events. This year, for example, a state measure introduced by Assemblyman Anthony Portantino (D-La Cañada Flintridge) designates this week as a time to recall the genocide. Members of the California congressional delegation took part last week in a Capitol Hill commemoration.

What none of the participants at either event heard was a message from President Obama or Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton acknowledging the historical reality of the genocide. That's because this administration, like its predecessors, is straddling a fine line — one that, more than ever, appears to be a distinction without a difference.

For years now Congress has considered in various forms a resolution that would officially recognize the organized mass murder of Armenians that occurred in the Ottoman Empire's waning years as genocide — something many countries have done. But contemporary Turkey, a key U.S. ally and reliable NATO partner, adamantly objects to such a designation. Rather than offend the Turks, who threaten retaliation if Congress approves the resolution, this administration, like its predecessors, opposes the designation.

It's an act of expediency that bites with particular sharpness because candidate Obama declared that "America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian genocide." This raises the question of why President Obama declines to do so and why this administration opposes the

resolution.

The measure's author, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Burbank), wrote the president last week, saying, "I ask you to return to the clarity you so forcefully expressed in 2008 ... stand with the ever-dwindling number of survivors, as well as the descendants of others, who ... continue to suffer the 'double killing' of denial, by referring to it as a genocide."

Clarity, though, is something the president seems determined to avoid, as he attempts to maintain the support of Armenian voters while soothing Turkish sensibilities. On last year's memorial anniversary, for example, he issued a statement that scrupulously avoided the word genocide.

One of the cruelest of the paradoxes at play here is that the Polish — later, American — legal scholar Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide" and whose work is the basis for the international legal sanctions against genocide, did so precisely because of the Armenians. As he told one interviewer: "I became interested in genocide because it happened so many times. First to the Armenians, then after the Armenians, Hitler took action."

In fact, the Armenian genocide was widely documented at the time. Numerous Western governments protested to the Ottomans. Imperial German officers serving with their Ottoman allies sent home accounts of the massacres. The New York Times alone published nearly 150 dispatches about the killings. Still, contemporary Turkey, which is several regimes and nearly 100 years removed from the Ottoman Empire, insists that others join it in the delusion that history is not history but malleable diplomatic clay.

We keep the memory of tragic wickedness, like the Armenian genocide, not simply out of respect for those who died but also in the hope that their example will strengthen our resolve to confront the next cabal of murderers who doubtless will come. Pretending otherwise — for whatever reason — is not prudence but cowardice.

timothy.rutten@latimes.com

