

REMEMBER TO FORGET

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✘ By Ofri Ilani , [Haaretz.com](https://www.haaretz.com), 16 October 2009

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While denial of the European Jewish Holocaust produces international condemnations, many countries have a policy of not recognizing the Armenian genocide, which was perpetrated by the Turks. This is due not to a lack of documentation about the massacres, but to massive Turkish political pressure. Armenia, for its part, has waged a persistent - and in some cases successful - struggle demanding the rectification of this ongoing historic wrong.

This week saw a dramatic development in the long and bitter conflict between Turkey and Armenia. The two countries signed an agreement to open their border and establish normal diplomatic relations. The genocide is not mentioned anywhere in the historic accord.

"I am afraid that now countries will hesitate to recognize the genocide," says Prof. Yair Oron, a genocide expert from the Open University of Israel who has published several books about the Armenian genocide. "They will say: Why should we grant recognition if the Armenians yielded? Recognition of the Armenian genocide is a paramount moral and educational act. We in Israel are obliged to recognize it. I see this as a serious blow to those who are fighting for its recognition."

If the agreement is ratified by the parliaments of the two countries, it could prove highly beneficial

for Armenia. The small country in the Caucasus is isolated politically and lacks access to the sea. Its economy is in a shambles, and its government is corrupt. After the departure of some one million citizens over the past two decades, the country has a population of only three million. In the absence of regional allies, Armenia is compelled to rely on neighboring Iran for support.

Economically and politically, then, the agreement with Turkey, which will give Armenia access to the sea, looks like a good deal for the tiny republic. Like the Israelis, the Armenians also want to vacation in Antalya, politics be damned. But in return for the border being opened, Armenia completely dropped its demands regarding the property of genocide victims and Armenian lands in much of present-day eastern Turkey.

Moreover, Armenia has effectively dropped its demand for recognition of the genocide itself, the cornerstone of Armenian national identity. Yerevan had to accept the demand Turkey has been making for years: for an "objective historical examination" about whether the genocide took place.

This first significant peace agreement signed under the auspices of U.S. President Barack Obama raises questions of principle: Does a country have the right to forgo its past for the sake of present needs? Can a political agreement lay down an official version of history? Is the establishment of a commission the way to come to terms with memory?

Starting at the end of the 19th century, the Armenian minority living in the Ottoman Empire was subject to persecution. Tens of thousands were killed. The event known as the "Armenian genocide" involved the systematic destruction of communities between 1915 and 1918. The massacre of the Armenians began after Ottoman forces lost several battles against czarist Russia. Armenian soldiers living under the czar had distinguished themselves in battle on the Russian side, and this became the pretext for the massacre of the Armenians living in what is now Turkey.

Following lengthy deliberations, the Ottoman government decided to resolve once and for all the "Armenian problem." First, the Turks drafted about a quarter of a million young Armenians into the army. They were then stripped of their uniforms, concentrated in labor battalions and murdered. On the night between April 23 and 24, 1915, Istanbul police arrested hundreds of Armenian leaders and intellectuals in their homes; 235 were executed. Thus the Armenian leadership was destroyed, leaving the community unable to organize.

At this stage, the Armenians living in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire began to be evacuated by a "special organization" of criminals and prisoners created for that purpose. People were rounded up in their villages and cities. The men were usually shot on the spot, while the women, children and elderly were sent on forced marches into the Syrian desert. On the way, they were attacked and robbed by Kurdish gangs. Hundreds of thousands marched to their death. In October 1915, the U.S. consul general in Aleppo reported to his government on one such march of 18,000 people; 70 days later, only 35 were still alive.

Governments received reports about the genocide while it was in progress, but most did nothing.

Current estimates state that about a third of all Armenians, 1.2 million to 1.5 million, were annihilated. The Turks claim only 300,000 were killed, in what they call a defensive move against a fifth column that had joined the country's enemies. They say that no decision was ever made to wipe out the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

"The Turks say: There was a war, there were battles and Armenians were killed, but so were Turks," says Oron. "It's true that the Turks did not espouse a racial doctrine like that of the Nazis, who set out to annihilate every Jew everywhere. And it is also important to say that there were cases in which Turks saved Armenians. But there was a policy of annihilating the Armenians and taking their property."

"Would the Jewish people be willing to forgo the memory of the Holocaust for the sake of good relations with Germany, if Germany were to make that demand?" asks Prof. Richard Hovannisian, a historian who has devoted the past 40 years to fighting denial of the Armenian genocide. The American-born Hovannisian, who teaches at UCLA, is the son of Armenian exiles from eastern Turkey. The family came from a village that was emptied by the Turks. Hovannisian has published many books on the genocide and is considered one of the world's leading authorities on the subject.

"The present agreement is the result of the fact that all the great powers wanted only for everyone to be good happy neighbors, irrespective of the price entailed," says Hovannisian, speaking by phone from California. "They want to do away with all the problems, but are not taking into account the victims' different perspectives."

Criticism from the diaspora

About two-thirds of Armenians live outside Armenia, mainly in Russia, the United States, France and the Middle East. Over the years complex relations have developed between Armenia, the small Caucasian state that was established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Armenian diaspora. The Armenians living in the West send money to their homeland but can also be fiercely critical of it.

"I was disappointed. I expected the Armenian side to be more skillful in the negotiations," Hovannisian says. "It is clear that the government was under a great deal of pressure. Armenia is a small, isolated country. They are under siege, and it is only natural that they should want to be part of the world around them. But I think the government did not have the right to sign any agreement that accepts the present situation, which is the result of the genocide, as the normal state of affairs. The Armenian nation's present situation is the result of the Turkish expulsion and seizure of Armenian land. Even if we do not have the power to change this, I do not think we should recognize it. We have a moral obligation not to recognize it."

George Hintlian, former head of the Armenian community in Jerusalem, has a sharper response: "We in the Armenian diaspora are shocked. It is like an earthquake. It is the bankruptcy of international morality. They say there is reconciliation, but there is no recognition here by Turkey. It is a coerced

agreement, which the world's powers forced on Armenia. Russia, which traditionally supported Armenia, is now drawing close to Turkey."

What is especially regrettable in this context, Hintlian says, is that in recent years recognition of the Armenian genocide has increased.

"Now they are placing the holocaust in doubt and saying, we will discuss it and see if it happened. It is impossible to know what the findings will be, what kind of formula they will reach. It is unlikely that the Turks will recognize the holocaust. The commission does not have a timetable, and in the meantime, after this commission is established, no country will take a stand on the Armenian genocide. Present-day Armenia is one-tenth the size of historic Armenia, and it has signed for its final borders without getting anything in return. "

Hintlian believes that the agreement's shortcomings far outweigh its advantages.

"The practical gain is the opening of the border and the lifting of the embargo," he says. "There was a physical embargo on Armenia, and now there is an embargo on the holocaust. The facts will not be buried, but the international discussion will suffer a blow."

