TURKEY'S TAKE BACK

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Category: Opinions

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Elizabeth Redden, Inside Higher ED, 22 December 2015

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In 2006, Donald Quataert, a historian (now deceased) at the State University of New York at Binghamton, resigned from his position as chair of ITS's board, saying the Turkish ambassador had

pressured him to either quit or see the institute's funding withdrawn after he used the word "genocide" in a book review. Quataert's resignation, combined with the institute's Turkish government funding source and its current or former associations with some prominent scholars who have challenged the use of the term "genocide" -- specifically the institute's founding director and governor emeritus, Heath Lowry, and former board member Justin McCarthy -- have contributed to suspicion that the institute functioned as a kind of academic front for the Turkish state. A 1995 article published in the Holocaust and Genocide Studies journal exposed correspondence in which ITS's founding director, Lowry, drafted a letter on behalf of the Turkish ambassador criticizing a book that discussed what Lowry described as "the so-called 'Armenian genocide.'" (Lowry could not be reached for comment.)

Jenny White, an anthropologist at Boston University and a longtime member of ITS's governing board, said the perception that the institute is in the Turkish government's pocket is just not true. In the case of Quataert, she said the board would have had his back -- "I told him, 'Donald, we're never going to submit to this, the board has your back, let us handle it'" -- but that he resigned before they had the chance. Moreover, she said that scholars on the institute's board "have a variety of different views on hot-button issues in their field. That's exactly as it should be. We're not in the business of selecting people who are ideologically one way or another."

White described ITS as an "independent and impartial supporter of Turkish studies," powered by a group of scholars who volunteer their time to evaluate research proposals.

Indeed, White is among those who speculate that ITS's intellectual independence may be what led the Turkish government to revoke its funding. Interest from a $3 million trust established by the Turkish government to fund ITS has been used to support dissertation-writing grants, undergraduate scholarships and language study awards. Funding from the trust has also supported lecture series and workshops, graduate fellowships, and research and travel grants. All told, ITS has since 1982 awarded 1,313 grants to individuals and academic institutions, including 53 seed-funding grants to incentivize the creation of new faculty positions at 43 different institutions and 199 grants to pay for library resources in Turkish studies.

"Whenever anyone said you should be doing more to push Turkey's agenda, we would say we give grants. That's all we do. We give grants, and our director goes around to universities giving talks about Turkey and trying to get scholars and the institutions themselves interested in starting Turkish studies programs, Turkish language programs," White said.

White said that ITS strives to be nonpolitical in its event programming, but that the board does include political scientists who "as professional scholars have been speaking and writing about what's going on in Turkey in ways that may not be perceived as particularly flattering. That could have been part of it."

She suggested that it is the Turkish government's perception of ITS's work -- not the work itself --

that has changed. "The fact that we only want to do scholarly events, that we insist on not having an ideological program, but we focus only on scholarly merit in choosing our grants -- that sort of thing, I suppose, is not valued as much as it was, say, 10 years ago or 30 years ago," White said.

Many experts observe that the Turkish government has become increasingly authoritarian under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Turkish Embassy in Washington declined to comment on the reasons for ending ITS's funding, as did the institute's executive director, Sinan Ciddi. Turkey's ambassador to the U.S., Serdar Kilic, is a nonvoting member and honorary chairman of the ITS board.

In withdrawing financial support, White said, the Turkish government invoked a technicality. The trust established to support ITS was supposed to be renewed after five years. It apparently never was. But since that means the trust would technically have expired in 1988, scholars are still left with questions as to why the government is choosing to end its support for ITS now.

Kent F. Schull, an associate professor of Ottoman and modern Middle East history at SUNY Binghamton and a member of the associate board at ITS -- the body of scholars that evaluates grant proposals -- said his speculation (and he emphasized it was speculation) "is perhaps this is the Turkish government pushing back, saying, 'OK, you've crossed lines, we'll find someone who's more supportive of our views.'"

Schull said that ITS has over the last five years or so "in my view attempted to improve its reputation in terms of academic freedom and openness to a variety of controversial issues related to Turkey," including issues related to ethnic and religious minority groups in Turkey.

Schull had initially been skeptical of the institute's claims to independence, but said he personally tested them in applying for a library grant for Binghamton specifically for materials related to Kurdish studies -- a highly sensitive subject in Turkey. ITS awarded it.

"I said, this is my test. If you would support something like this, then things are changing around here -- at least what I assumed the Institute of Turkish Studies stood for before is changing -- and I'd like to be a part of that change."

As for the most controversial of all the issues, Schull noted that the institute has indirectly supported publication on the genocide question through subventions for The Journal of Ottoman and Turkish Studies, which he edits. In the spring, the journal published a lengthy review titled "Ottoman Historiography and the End of the Genocide Taboo."

Heghnar Watenpaugh, an associate professor of art history and an Ottomanist at the University of California at Davis, is "dubious" of the idea that ITS is being punished for its scholarly independence. In general, she said, their grantees are people who work on early modern or other nonsensitive topics. (A list of grants awarded can be found on the institute's website.)

Watenpaugh's best guess is that ITS's defunding may be a matter of Turkish party politics. "I wonder about the timing of this defunding -- does it correspond with the elections? That would be my

speculation, and the fact that the opposition party that is associated with its parent trust" was not successful in those elections, she said. Tax documents filed for the Institute of Turkish Studies Trust -- which is a separate legal body from the institute -- list two managers: Kilic, the current Turkish ambassador to the U.S., and Sukru Elekdag, a former ambassador and a member of the Republican People's Party, the main opposition party to the ruling Justice and Development Party.

Watenpaugh thinks ITS has had a "pernicious" effect on Ottoman and Turkish studies. "ITS is very pernicious not only because in my view they have proactively supported denialists but they also promote this atmosphere of censorship, where people self-censor and money is always dangled in the middle," she said.

"Many of us have been saying this for years: the ITS was a way for the Turkish government to influence Ottoman and Turkish studies in American academia, promote Armenian genocide denial, and interfere with studies critical of Turkey's human rights record," Keith David Watenpaugh, an associate professor of modern Islam, human rights and peace at UC Davis (and Heghnar Watenpaugh's husband), wrote in a Facebook post.

Fatma Muge Gocek, a professor at the University of Michigan who once sat on ITS's associate board and whose most recent book examines Turkey's denial of collective violence against the Armenians, said that the Internet has made it harder for the government to control knowledge about the genocide and that a new generation of scholars is more prone to question the Turkish state's account. "Knowledge expansion about Turkey and the politics of knowledge control are of course two separate things, and the boundaries are not clear," she said.

"Obviously, the primary target was always the political agenda," Gocek said of the Turkish government's support for ITS. "Once it's no longer useful for them, they also get rid of all of the other stuff, which has been positive, like teaching Turkish language."

The vast majority of ITS's funding has come from the trust established by the Turkish government. In 2013, the institute reported contributions from just two sources: $392,000 from the trust and $10,500 from the estate of Mark Pinson.

The institute is now seeking new sources of funds so it can continue to support Turkish studies in the U.S. Since 1982 it has contributed about $3 million in support for the field.

"If ITS stopped functioning, there's a huge gap in support for Turkish studies in the United States," said White, the member of its governing board.

"Young scholars who need help getting subventions for their book, who need dissertation write-up money, scholars who need research money, where else are they going to get that?"