WIESEL IS RIGHT ON GENOCIDE RECOGNITION; WRONG ON ARMENIANS' QUEST FOR JUSTICE

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By **Harut Sassounian**, Publisher, The California Courier, 1 November 2007

The Philadelphia Jewish Voice published on October 28 an important interview with Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. Reporter Charles Smolover asked him to comment on the fact that "some in the Jewish community are reluctant to touch this issue for fear of damaging Turkey's relationship with Israel."

Mr. Wiesel's response: "I have been fighting for the right of the Armenian people to remember for years and years. How could I, who has fought all my life for Jewish remembrance, tell the Armenians they have no right to remember? But I understand the administration's view. Fortunately, as a private citizen I don't have to worry about Turkey's response. But I do feel that had there been the word 'genocide' in those days, what happened to the Armenians would have been called genocide. Everyone agrees there was mass murder, but the word came later. I believe the Armenians are the victims and, as a Jew, I should be on their side."

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This is a very important and straightforward answer from someone of Mr. Wiesel's moral stature. As an internationally-acclaimed personality, his pronouncements carry great weight. Despite the fact that the reporter's question linked the recognition of the Armenian Genocide to possible damage to Israel's relations with Turkey, Mr. Wiesel remained steadfast on the side of the truth.

Mr. Wiesel, however, was not as forceful back in 1982 when the Israeli Foreign Ministry, under pressure from the Turkish government, asked him to exclude Armenian scholars from an international conference on the Holocaust and Genocide that was to be held in Jerusalem and Tel

Aviv. Faced with the dilemma of not wanting to eliminate Armenian participation or acceding to Israeli government's demands, Mr. Wiesel resigned as president of the conference. He explained that he chose to remove himself rather than challenge the Israeli government's demands, because he had to be mindful of the threat to Jewish lives in Turkey.

In recent years, Mr. Wiesel has been much more resolute in defense of the Armenian Genocide. In his introduction to the 1986 French edition of Franz Werfel's Forty Days of Musa Dagh, he described the brutalities committed by the Ottoman Empire against the Armenian minority as "mass murders aimed at the extermination of a people in its entirety," and called the brutal killings "the first genocide of the 20th century."

On March 7, 2000, he joined 126 Holocaust scholars in signing a joint statement affirming that the Armenian Genocide was an incontestable historical fact and called on Western governments to likewise recognize it as such.

Earlier this year, he joined more than 50 other Nobel Laureates in signing a statement that recognized the Armenian Genocide.

On August 21, 2007 Abraham Foxman, the National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, said he consulted Elie Wiesel before issuing a statement acknowledging for the first time that "the consequences" of the Armenian atrocities were "indeed tantamount to genocide. If the word genocide had existed then, they would have called it genocide."

Mr. Wiesel, however, leaves a lot to be desired in answering Philadelphia Jewish Voice reporter's second question on whether "the Turks have an obligation to take some responsibility" for the Armenian Genocide?

Mr. Wiesel responded by saying: "No one is asking for the Turks to take responsibility. All the Armenians want is the right to remember. Seven generations separate us from the events that happened in World War I and nobody in his right mind would say that today's Turks are responsible for what happened. The Armenians don't want reparations; they don't even want an apology. They want the right to remember. The Turks would gain a lot if they simply acknowledged the reality of what happened. I have spoken with Turkish leaders at the highest level and their attitude about this issue is totally irrational except for one thing, which I do understand. They don't want to be compared to Hitler. But of course, nobody does."

Just about every single statement contained in the above paragraph is inaccurate. Contrary to Mr. Wiesel's assertions, Armenians do not need anyone's permission to remember or mourn their dead. Their right to remember has never been in question. It is also untrue that "seven generations

separate us" from the era of the genocide. There are still surviving eyewitnesses of the Armenian Genocide. This writer is the grandson (third generation) of genocide survivors.

Regarding Turkish responsibility, while Armenians do not blame today's Turks for the killings, they do hold the Turkish state responsible for falsifying and denying the facts of the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, Mr. Wiesel is wrong in asserting that "Armenians don't want reparations, they don't even want an apology. They want the right to remember." The fact is that Armenians do not really care whether Turks apologize for the killings or not. Armenians do insist, however, on obtaining adequate restitution for the enormous damages they suffered. Why is it that the victims of the Holocaust are entitled to reparations and Armenians are not? In contrast to the Jews, Armenians were uprooted from their ancestral homeland losing their property, cultural heritage as well as their lives. One has to agree, however, with Mr. Wiesel's assertion that "the Turks would gain a lot if they simply acknowledged the reality of what happened." Yet, contrary to Mr. Wiesel's expectations, and probably that of the Turkish government, there can be no reconciliation between Armenians and Turks without justice, which requires the return of the occupied lands and looted properties, and restitution for the 1.5 million murders.

Since the Philadelphia Jewish Voice describes Mr. Wiesel as an "outspoken advocate for justice," it is hoped that he would live up to that reputation in both the Jewish and Armenian cases. While Mr. Wiesel may not choose to be an advocate for Armenian demands, he should not misrepresent Armenians' quest for justice!