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## **Obama and the Denial of Genocide**

The Obama administration is trying to bury the Armenia genocide resolution like every previous administration.

The Obama administration, citing its relations with Turkey, has pledged to block the passage in the full House of Representatives of a [resolution](#) passed this past Thursday by the Foreign Relations Committee acknowledging the 1915 genocide by the Ottoman Empire of a 1.5 million Armenians. Even though the Obama administration previously refused to acknowledge and even worked to suppress well-documented evidence of recent war crimes by Israel, another key Middle Eastern ally, few believed that the administration would go as far as to effectively deny genocide.

Following the committee vote, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [announced](#) that “We are against this decision,” and pledged that the administration would “work very hard” to prevent the bill from coming to the floor.

Despite widespread support for the resolution by House Democrats, she expressed confidence that the administration would find a means of blocking the resolution, saying, “Now we believe that the U.S. Congress will not take any decision on this subject.”

As candidates, both Clinton and Barack Obama had pledged their administrations would be the first to formally recognize the Armenian genocide. Clinton acknowledged this was a reversal, but insisted circumstances had “changed in very significant ways.” The State Department, however, has been unable to cite any new historical evidence that would counter the broad consensus that genocide had indeed taken place in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire. The official excuse is that it might harm an important rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. However, there is no indication the Armenian government is at all concerned about potential negative fallout in their bilateral relations over a resolution passed by a legislative body in a third country.

More likely, the concern is over not wanting to jeopardize the cooperation of Turkey, which borders Iran, in the forthcoming enhanced sanctions against the Islamic republic.

Back in 2007, a similar resolution acknowledging the Armenian genocide also passed through the House Foreign Relations Committee. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi promised that she would allow it to come for a vote. With 226 cosponsors — a clear majority of the House — there was little question it would pass. However, in response to claims by the Bush White House and Republican congressional leaders that it would harm the “Global War on Terror,” Pelosi broke her promise and used her power as speaker to prevent a vote on the resolution. She will also certainly buckle under pressure from an administration of her own party.

### **The Historical Record**

Between 1915 and 1918, under orders of the leadership of the Ottoman Empire, an estimated two million Armenians were forcibly removed from their homes in a region that had been part of the Armenian nation for more than 2,500 years. Three-quarters of them died as a result of execution, starvation, and related reasons.

[According](#) to Henry Morgenthau, U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during that period, “When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.” While issuing a “death warrant to a whole race” would normally be considered genocide by any definition, this apparently isn’t the view of the Obama administration.

The [Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#), signed and ratified by the United States, officially defines genocide as any effort “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” The earliest proponent of such an international convention was Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish lawyer who originally coined the term “genocide” and identified the Armenian case as a definitive example.

Dozens of other governments — including Canada, France, Italy, and Russia — and several UN bodies, as well as 40 U.S. states, have formally recognized the Armenian genocide. The Obama administration does not, however, and is apparently determined to prevent Congress from doing so.

Congress has previously gone on record condemning Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for refusing to acknowledge the German genocide of the Jews. Congress appears unwilling, however, to challenge Obama’s refusal to acknowledge the Ottoman genocide of the Armenians. While awareness of anti-Semitism is fortunately widespread enough to marginalize those who refuse to acknowledge the Holocaust, tolerance for anti-Armenian bigotry appears strong enough that it’s still considered politically acceptable to deny their genocide.

## **The Turkey Factor**

Opponents of the measure argue that they’re worried about harming relations with Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire and an important U.S. ally. However, the United States has done much greater harm in its relations with Turkey through policies far more significant than a symbolic resolution acknowledging a tragic historical period. The United States clandestinely backed an attempted military coup by right-wing Turkish officers in 2003, arming Iraqi and Iranian Kurds with close ties to Kurdish rebels in Turkey who have been responsible for the deaths of thousands of Turkish citizens. The United States also invaded neighboring Iraq. As a result, the percentage of Turks who view the United States positively declined from 52 percent to only 9 percent.

Generations of Turks have been taught that there was no Ottoman genocide of the Armenians, but that there were scattered atrocities on both sides. Indeed, most Turks believe their country is being unfairly scapegoated, particularly when the United States refuses to label its treatment of American Indians as genocide or acknowledge more recent war crimes. As a result, some argue that a more appropriate means of addressing the ongoing Turkish denial of historical reality would be through dialogue and some sort of re-education, avoiding the patently political device of a congressional resolution that would inevitably make Turks defensive.

Failure to acknowledge the genocide, however, is a tragic affront to the rapidly dwindling number of genocide survivors as well as their descendants. It’s also a disservice to the many Turks who opposed the Ottoman Empire’s policies and tried to stop the genocide, as well as the growing number of Turks today who face imprisonment by their U.S.-backed regime for daring to publicly concede the crimes of their forebears. For example, Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist who won the 2006 Nobel Prize for literature, was prosecuted and fled into exile to escape death threats after making a number of public references to the genocide.

Some opponents of the resolution argue that it is pointless for Congress to pass resolutions regarding historical events. Yet there were no such complaints regarding resolutions commemorating the Holocaust, nor are there normally complaints regarding the scores of dedicatory resolutions passed by Congress in recent years, ranging from commemorating the 65th anniversary of the death of the Polish musician and political leader Ignacy Jan Paderewski to noting the 150th anniversary of the first meeting of the Republican Party in Wisconsin.

The Obama administration insists that that this is a bad time to upset the Turkish government. However, it was also considered a “bad time” to pass the resolution back in 2007, on the grounds that it not jeopardize U.S. access to Turkish bases as part of efforts to support the counter-insurgency war by U.S. occupation forces in Iraq. It was also considered a “bad time” when a similar resolution was put forward in 2000 because the United States was using its bases in Turkey to patrol the “no fly zones” in northern Iraq. And it was also considered a “bad time” in 1985 and 1987, when similar resolutions were put forward because U.S. bases in Turkey were considered important listening posts for monitoring the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

For deniers of the Armenian genocide, it’s always a “bad time.”

While the passage of the resolution would certainly lead to strong diplomatic protests from Turkey, it is dubious that there would be much of a rupture between Ankara and Washington. When President Ronald Reagan, a major backer of the right-wing military dictatorship then ruling Turkey, once used the term genocide in relation to Armenians, U.S.-Turkish relations did not suffer.

The Obama administration, like administrations before it, simply refuses to acknowledge that the Armenian genocide even took place. As recently as the 1980s, the *Bulletin of the Department of State* [claimed that](#) “Because the historical record of the 1915 events in Asia Minor is ambiguous, the Department of State does not endorse allegations that the Turkish government committed genocide against the Armenian people.” Even more recently, [Paul Wolfowitz](#), who served as deputy secretary of defense in President George W. Bush, stated in 2002 that “one of the things that impress me about Turkish history is the way Turkey treats its own minorities.”

The operative clause of the resolution simply calls upon Obama “to ensure that the foreign policy of the United States reflects appropriate understanding and sensitivity concerning issues related to human rights, ethnic cleansing, and genocide documented in the United States record relating to the Armenian Genocide and the consequences of the failure to realize a just resolution.” Therefore, if Obama really doesn’t want Congress to pass such a resolution, all he needs to do is make an executive order acknowledging the genocide. Despite whatever excuses one wants to make, failure to do so amounts to genocide denial.

### **Genocide Denial**

Given the indisputable record of the Armenian genocide, many of those who refuse to recognize Turkey’s genocide of Armenians, like those who refuse to recognize Germany’s genocide of European Jews, are motivated by ignorance and bigotry. The Middle East scholar most often cited by members of Congress as influencing their understanding of the region is the notorious genocide-denier Bernard Lewis, a fellow at Washington’s Institute of Turkish Studies.

Not every opponent of the current resolution explicitly denies that there was genocide. Some acknowledge that genocide indeed occurred, but have apparently been convinced that it’s detrimental to U.S. security to state this publicly. This is still inexcusable. Such moral cowardice is no less reprehensible than refusing to acknowledge the Holocaust if it were believed that doing so might upset the German government, which also hosts critical U.S. bases.

Obama is not the first Democratic president to effectively deny the Armenian genocide. President Bill Clinton successfully persuaded House Speaker Dennis Hastert to suppress a similar bill, after it passed the Republican-led Foreign Relations Committee by a vote of 40-7 and was on its way to easy passage before the full House. President Jimmy Carter also suppressed a Senate effort led by Bob Dole, whose miraculous recovery from near-fatal wounds during World War II was overseen by an Armenian-American doctor who had survived the genocide.

Interestingly, neoconservatives — quick to defend crimes against humanity by the Bush administration, the Israeli government, and others — are opportunistically using Obama’s flip-flop on this issue as evidence of the moral laxity of Democrats on human rights.

Adolf Hitler, responding to concerns about the legacy of his crimes, once asked, “Who, after all, is today speaking of the destruction of the Armenians?” Obama is sending a message to future tyrants that they can commit genocide without acknowledgement by the world’s most powerful country.

Indeed, refusing to recognize genocide and those responsible for it in a historical context makes it easier to deny genocide today. In 1994, the Clinton also refused to use the word “genocide” in the midst of the Rwandan government’s massacres of over half that country’s Tutsi population, a decision that contributed to the delay in deploying international peacekeeping forces until after the slaughter of 800,000 people.

As a result, the Obama administration’s position on the Armenian genocide isn’t simply about whether to commemorate a tragedy that took place 95 years ago. It’s about where we stand as a nation in facing up to the most horrible of crimes. It’s about whether we are willing to stand up for the truth in the face of lies. It’s about whether we see our nation as appeasing our strategic allies or upholding our longstanding principles.