

## Politicians, Stay Out of Our History\*

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The U.S. Congress has no moral authority to pass judgment on any other country's history, particularly with its Iraqi invasion record in public view – nor does any other parliament or political body, for that matter. History cannot be legislated and politicians ought to stay away from trying to do so. It is not their duty.

This does not mean that historians can determine the outcome of what is essentially a political problem, either. To give something a label is a political act, which is precisely what complicates the matter. But the task of coming to terms with one's history is the work and duty of that nation's citizens. This was the position taken by the late Hrant Dink, the slain editor of an independent Armenian weekly, AGOS, who, on numerous occasions was treated by diaspora Armenians as a traitor or an "Uncle Tom," or worse, because he wanted them to leave Turkey alone. Not because he did not believe what had happened in 1915 was genocide, but because he thought letting Turks come to terms with their history as their country's democratization deepened was more valuable than scoring political points and cooling your heart with sweet revenge. (More on Dink later.)

(Eminent French historians have said as much in warning their politicians to leave history out of their legislation. In a country that happens to want to criminalize the denial of an Armenian genocide, the leadership wants its historians to judge the record of the war in Algeria.)

Foreign journalists and others these days often ask why the Turks care so much about a non-binding resolution about crimes committed 90 years ago by an Empire whose legacy they rejected when they founded their republic. In fact, most non-Armenian Turks had no idea Turkey had an "Armenian issue" until a terrorist organization called ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) started to kill Turkish diplomats in the 1970s. ASALA was protected by the French government until they made the fatal mistake of killing French citizens when they bombed France's Orly Airport in 1983.

Because Turkey's rulers had never bothered to include the Armenian issue in school textbooks, it was only under these traumatic circumstances that most Turkish citizens realized that they had to come to terms with a dark page of their history. This did not prove easy. There was no material in Turkish; ASALA's bombing had raised emotions on all sides; and the official story was dominant. At best, that story claimed the incident was a case of mutual massacres. (The

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Turkish government has since proposed to form a commission of historians in conjunction with the Republic of Armenia, including independent historians, but the call was not answered – a fact that added to the suspicions of the Turkish public about the political nature of the matter.)

Lately, with the pioneering work of Taner Akçam and others, Turkish historians have come up with different versions of the story, providing context and studying the Armenian nationalist/revolutionary movements and their history as well. Interested members of the public now had access to material written by Armenian authors and translated to Turkish. It was discovered that some among the Ottoman elite held the Union and Progress Party that was responsible for the deportation and the massacres in total contempt and called its leaders criminals, thereby alluding to atrocities. It was known that the Party and its secret “Special Organization” had at times instigated massacres, opposed by state officials. The Ottoman Parliament, which counted some Armenians among its members, debated the matter and condemned those responsible. But it was also clear that some leaders of the independence movement were implicated in what had happened. In the process of nation-building for the new republican Turkey, there was no question of either return or restitution for the Armenians. After all, a court had tried and sentenced the culprits in 1919 while Istanbul was under allied occupation.

Some Turkish historians decided that what happened in 1915 was indeed genocide, while others accepted the catastrophe but did not define it as such. Two years ago, after bitter judicial battles, a conference was finally held in Istanbul that brought together those who had an alternative view of the fate of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. The issue was being normalized and a process of digging deep into history and into the nation’s soul began. Some of those who did not accept the Armenian case wanted to go to the International Court of Justice and have a proper judicial verdict - a course of action the Armenian side did not favor. Yet there were, and are, restrictions on having a truly open debate. Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which punishes those who insult Turkishness, is a Sword of Damocles to those who dare challenge the official version of things.

The Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was tried and sentenced under 301. His murder was a symbol of the intense fight within the country, and it catalyzed a movement. He was targeted and threatened by ultranationalists and, though he was under considerable danger, he was not given protection. His was a murder foretold. Officials in security services connived. The judicial process is a travesty so far.

Yet, close to 200,000 people marched silently at his funeral, holding banners that read, “We are all Hrant,” and “We are all Armenians.” As expected, this infuriated the nationalists and they struck back. The pressure on Turkey by foreign politicians only exacerbated the tension, polarized the country and poisoned the

atmosphere. In such a politicized environment even those who may be inclined to look at history differently will refrain from doing so. They see their country and themselves as a nation being subjected to a vicious attack. The Diaspora and their allies are seen to want the Turks to accept the label of genocide and then begin a debate.

Understandably, most Turks believe this is akin to hanging first and asking questions later. The politicization of the issue is now closing the space for debate and freedom of expression. It intensifies a xenophobic nationalism, undermining liberal political openings and further democratization. The current government will not move against 301, even though it is at best profound embarrassment and at worst a sign of obstructionism.

So if the aim was to get to the bottom of the historical truth, to understand what had happened and how it had happened, to set the historical record straight despite all sorts of obfuscation and denial on the part of official historians – if that was the aim, then that aim is now far removed. That is a shame.

Under these circumstances the Congressional resolution is an unnecessary, counterproductive and wrongheaded initiative. It is written with a revanchist intent and gives every indication that the resolution will be used to further political goals. Even those who voted against it did so not because they don't believe a genocide was committed, but because Turkey is strategically too important for the United States. That certainly does not do Turkey much honor. It's what I would call cynicism.

I happen to think that such degree of politicization does not truly honor the memory of the victims, either. It certainly does not serve the interests of the Armenians who live in Armenia proper. As for American interests in Iraq and the harm a strong Turkish reaction may cause to these: no Turkish government can stand idly by if the resolution passed. It would have to respond in a way that calms down a furious public, and that means the use of Incirlik Airbase would be at least restricted.

But the fallout would go further than this. Turkish-American relations can barely withstand yet another traumatic incident. A severe crisis in relations would probably ensue. And the convulsions that stem from Turkey's identity crises would intensify.