

Why the Armenian Genocide Matters for Human Rights: Beyond Personal Justice

On April 24, 1915, what is symbolically considered the start of the Armenian genocide, the Ottoman Empire rounded up a population of Armenian intelligentsia in Constantinople and began the mass deportation and extermination of its minority Christian Armenian population. This genocide would last more than two years and target not only Armenians, but the Ottoman's other non-Muslim populations as well, including Ottoman Greeks and Christian Assyrians. The socio-economic strata that arose from embedded cultural and religious assumptions within the Ottoman Empire's social fabric had become the source of "the legal and cultural attitudes that created the background for genocide" (Akçam, 2006). These feedback loops between societal stigmas and political actions – combined with a lack of accountability for the genocide in the international arena – would set the stage for a century of political impunity that continues to impact human rights today. This impunity would extend not just temporally as the Ottoman Empire became modern day Turkey, but beyond Ottoman borders, allegedly emboldening Adolf Hitler in his plans for the Europe's Jewish population: "who, after all, [spoke at the time of the Holocaust] of the annihilation of the Armenians?" The political and social climate in Turkey today surrounding the Armenian genocide will be indicative of Turkish attitudes regarding other human rights issues such as violence against women, freedom of the press, treatment of refugees from regional conflict zones, and religious freedom. Yet while the fight for the Turkish government to recognize the Armenian genocide is, for many, a personal and national search for justice, this impunity is also symbolic of the Turkish government's attitude toward human rights on a larger scale. Recognition of the Armenian genocide has evolved from Turks versus Armenians to a more generic form of conflict: abuse of political power versus civil society in Turkey.

In 1948, the United Nations drafted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights that would be the first internationally signed and recognized document regarding human rights. Following the atrocities of WWII, the world agreed that there should be a minimum standard, a baseline for humanity regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion or nationality. But today, even as we seem to converge on a more widely accepted standard of individual and collective freedoms (freedom from persecution and slavery, freedom of speech and the press, the right to an education and fair working conditions), these freedoms are being openly challenged within nations' sovereign borders. There are arguments heard by United Nations aid workers on the ground that human rights groups are diluting culture and simply advancing Western ideas about universal rights. In many places around the world, gender equality does not resonate with traditional ideas about the role of women in society, or child labor is seen as an economic necessity in place of universal primary education. In addition to the various flavors of rejection of a universal

human rights campaign, for much of recent history geopolitical agendas have largely guided of the West's lackluster response to human rights abuses around the world (Power, 2002). Indeed, the month of commemoration for the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, Turkey sent their foreign minister to the United States to ensure that the President would not use the word 'genocide.' But why is Turkey's use, or not, of the word so important for both Turkish diplomacy and Armenian identity?

Genocide recognition is an important milestone in the healing process for genocide survivors themselves, descendants of survivors and the deceased, as well as populations of Armenians and Greeks who were Islamized or in hiding within Turkey and abroad. The importance of recognition and apology is based in the psychology and political science of Human Rights theory. So why does Turkey refuse this gesture of one loaded word that would do so much symbolically to heal Armenians? What is a symbol of apology and healing for Armenians is for the Turkish government financial and personal reparations, negotiations of returning personal land, compensation for lost or confiscated property, and potentially the redrawing of national borders. But recognizing the genocide would also mean that Turkey would have to amend their history textbooks to set the record straight, and allow their population access to impartial accounts of the genocide where they had previously placed the bulk of the blame on the Armenians. If recognition is political, then awareness is societal, and loosening the reigns of social thought always has farther-reaching consequences for political regimes than they care to admit.

However, while Armenians are united in wanting Turkey to recognize the genocide, they are divided on what would happen if Turkey were to ever recognize the genocide. For generations, the energy of a national and diaspora Armenian population has gone toward the fight for social justice and, in many cases, a hatred of Turks and Turkey. Some Armenians feel that the fight against Turkish policy is the glue that holds the Armenian diaspora to Armenia, the cohesion of the Armenian identity. Take away the fight to recognize the genocide, they argue, and Armenians have no other forward-looking goals, no industry to fall back on, and no influx of people back into Armenia. But at what point does this push for recognition become futile and self-defeating, detrimental to the Armenian cause? The tide is shifting. Prominent lawyers who used to lobby for the recognition of the genocide are now pushing for more constructive avenues, redrawing the line between giving up the fight and acknowledging that so much manpower and so many resources dedicated to this single cause could be redirected to building a new Armenian identity and investing in Armenia. A portion of the young Armenian generation ponders forgiving and forgetting, while others are still saddled with a pain and loss passed down through generations. Even among the Armenians traveling to Istanbul to commemorate the genocide, generations within the same family do not and perhaps never will agree on what it would mean to have closure.

Even despite these uncertainties, there is an audible shift with a new generation of Armenian and Turkish students sitting next to one another in Taksim Square in the heart of Istanbul, fighting the same fight to hold the Turkish government accountable for the truth. Populations of Armenians who went into hiding or were Islamized after the genocide are

only in the last few years coming out in Turkish society. After all, this is not just Armenia's fight. Would abandoning, or even sidelining, the push for recognition of the genocide show a decision by Armenians to resolve the past and set a new course for the future, or would it simply give the Turkish government the green light for continued impunity? There is a Turkish civil society and a population of aware citizens growing in numbers that stand with Armenians, but at what point does this fight become self-defeating? Where does Armenia's fight stop and Turkey's fight begin? Are these mutually exclusive?

In 2013, Turkey was the first country to sign the Istanbul Convention to end violence against women, but according to Human Rights Watch just a year later almost 300 women were killed by men in Turkey, many of those by perturbed husbands or boyfriends. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights found "a pattern of judicial passivity in response to allegations of domestic violence" in Turkey (HRW, 2015). Similarly, despite an uproar after their 2014 attempt to ban Twitter and Youtube, Turkey still enjoys relative impunity related to censoring media outlets and jailing journalists, due in part to a lack of pressure from the United States and the rest of the international community (RWB, 2014). Due to Turkey's strategic economic and political position in the region, those limited reforms regarding freedom of press that have passed have yet to be seen in practice.

Even when Turkey recognizes gaps in policy and addresses these issues publically in the international arena, there is little if any change in practice. How do these current events surrounding human rights issues relate to the recognition of the Armenian genocide? Enter the dichotomy between Turkish civil society and official policy. The Centennial Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide that took place in Istanbul in April 2015 saw the Armenian diaspora and international scholars, Turkish students and activists, Turkish Armenians (both Islamized and Christian), international and Turkish media outlets and Turkish civil society organizations all working together for the recognition of the genocide by the Turkish state. Much of the conversations centered on denial as the heart of Turkey's ideology and politics. Recognition – as with Turkey's policies and social atmosphere surrounding other human rights issues – would not be the end of the fight for justice, but it would serve as a goodwill gesture from a more transparent Turkey, with more freedom, expression, and room for human rights.

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