

Ultimate Crime, Ultimate Challenge
An International Conference on the 90th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide
CLOSING ADDRESS

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On behalf of the National Commission, I wish to publicly express our sincere appreciation to everyone who has participated in this conference. I want to thank the Zoryan Institute for their professional and organizational counsel. I especially wish to thank the scholars, writers, professors – all with serious work and time commitments – who traveled to Armenia to be here with us at this time, this year. The symbolism is not lost on anyone. We are here 90 years later calling for recognition and prevention so that in 2015 we can gather together only for remembrance.

Over these two days, each of our speakers has found various eloquent ways of saying the following:

Genocide is the ultimate crime against humanity. It is the extreme abuse of power. It is a betrayal of the responsibility of custody by the very people entrusted with insuring the security of their own population. The human rights challenge facing all of us is to be able to recognize that a government has the capacity for such immorality and inhumanity, and that particular governments have indeed committed genocide.

There is no national history in a vacuum. No nation can escape its history entirely, it can only transcend it. But to transcend, one must confront history, both internally and in relation to others. And those others, too, must also jointly confront theirs.

In other words, Armenia and Turkey must confront their histories. Individually and together. Armenia believes Turkey must put excuses aside and enter into normal relations with a neighbor that is neither going to go away nor forget its history.

We are not the only neighbors in the world who have had, and who continue to have, a troubled relationship. Troubled memories, a tortured past, recriminations, unsettled accounts and the enduring wounds of victimhood, plague the national consciousness of peoples on many borders. In our case, some distance between our two countries might have allowed us to put distance between our past and our future. But we have no such luxury. There is no space, no cushion, between us. We live right here, close by, reminded at all times of the great loss that we incurred. Yet it is because we live right next door that we must be willing and prepared to transcend the past.

But we can only do so if the demons of the past have been rejected by our neighbor, too. You notice, I didn't say 'by the perpetrator.' Armenians are able to distinguish between the perpetrators and today's government of Turkey. Two-thirds of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire were massacred or deported between 1915 and 1918. Today's Republic of Turkey must be able to condemn these acts for what they are. The evidence is overwhelming, clear, unavoidable.

Armenians were one of the largest minorities of the Ottoman Empire. Where did they go? Is it possible that all our grandmothers and grandfathers colluded and created stories? Where are the descendants of the Armenians who built the hundreds of churches and monasteries whose ruins still stand in Turkey? Is US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau's account of the atrocities that he witnessed a lie? Why was a military tribunal convened at the end of World War I, and why did it find Ottoman Turkish leaders guilty of ordering the mass murder of Armenians? How does one explain the thousands and thousands of pages in the official records of a dozen countries documenting the plans to exterminate the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire? If it wasn't genocide and they were simply 'war time deportations' of so-called rebellious Armenian populations near the eastern border with the Russian Empire, as Turkish apologists sometimes claim, why were the homes of Armenians in the western cities looted and burned? Why were the Armenians of the seacoast towns of Smyrna and Constantinople deported? Boatloads of people were dumped in the sea – is that what deportation is all about? Could rounding up scores of intellectuals on a single night and killing them be anything but premeditation?

When a government plans to do away with its own population to solve a political problem – that's genocide. At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was shrinking, it was losing its hold over its subjects along the periphery of the empire. For fear that in Anatolia, too, the Armenian minority would agitate for greater rights and invite foreign powers to exert pressure, the Ottoman leadership used the cover of World War I to attempt to wipe out the Armenians, beginning with the leadership, following with the men, and finally deporting women, children and the elderly.

This fits neatly into the definition of genocide: The perpetrator did cause a multitude of deaths; these persons did belong to a particular national, ethnical, racial or religious group. The perpetrator intended to and in fact did destroy, in whole or in part, that national, ethnical, racial or religious group, and this destruction followed a consistent pattern. In fact, US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau called what he witnessed, the Murder of a Nation. Others called it 'race murder'. They did so because there was no term Genocide yet. When the word was finally coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, it was done with clear reference to genocidal acts prior to that date, the Armenian Genocide included. There is no doubt that if the word genocide had existed in 1915, every one of the hundreds of articles in the NY times or elsewhere, would have used the term. Look how frequently the word 'genocide' is used today to describe events and cases where the scale and depth of the atrocities are incomparable. Armenians continue to live with the memory of suffering unrelieved by strong condemnation and unequivocal recognition.

On the contrary, Turkey spends untold amounts to deny, dismiss, distort history. Not just money, either. Today, their continued insistence on rejecting and rewriting history costs them credibility and time. One does not knock on Europe's door by blindfolding historians and gagging writers. Especially when the subject at hand is one as grave and consequential as genocide. The Turkish parliament's recent call to revisit, review, revise the documents gathered by Arnold Toynbee and James Bryce for the British Blue Book series brought the revisionist efforts to a new low. Turkey has moved on from trying to rewrite its own history to thinking it can convince others to rewrite theirs. This only frustrates the process, exacerbates the emotions and refuels the fury. Worse, such cynical moves embolden those who do not believe in reconciliation, understanding its great risks and costs.

Elie Wiesel has said that denial of genocide is the final stage of genocide because it “strives to shape history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators.” That is what Turkey – not the people but the government – is trying to do. Today’s Turks do not bear the guilt of the perpetrators, unless they choose to defend and identify with them. Armenians and Turks, together with the rest of the modern world, can reject the actions and denounce the crimes of the Ottoman Empire.

Turkey must also de-link history from politics. The excuses about what might follow genocide recognition are just that – excuses. Why are they surprised that Ararat is on our state seal? Armenians have lived on these lands for thousands of years, and Armenia’s borders have changed a great deal over the millennia. That’s a historical fact. The Armenian kingdom stretched from sea to sea. That’s a historical fact. The last change came at the beginning of the 20th century. That, too, is a historical fact. By the provisions of the Treaty of Sevres, the territory of Armenia was ten times what it is today. That is a historical fact as is the fact that Turkey defied the treaty which had been signed by its own government, and by force, created a new de facto situation, which led to the signing of another agreement, without the same signatories. This new agreement delineated, more or less, today’s borders. That too is historical fact.

But it is a political reality that both Turkey and Armenia exist today in the international community with their current borders. It is a political reality that we are neighbors and we will live alongside each other. It is a political reality that Armenia is not a security threat to Turkey. And finally, it is a reality that it is today’s Armenia that calls for the establishment of diplomatic relations with today’s Turkey.

For these reasons, anything beyond genocide recognition has not been and is not on Armenia’s foreign policy agenda.

Yesterday I was being interviewed by a Turkish television crew. I was surprised at the amount of misinformation that they had. They were surprised that the Armenian-Turkish border is open from the Armenian side, that it is Turkey that keeps it closed. They were surprised that Armenia has no pre-conditions for establishing diplomatic relations with Turkey. They were highly surprised that even the recognition of Genocide is not a precondition. They were also surprised that the Kars Treaty has not been denounced or revoked by the Government of Armenia. Now I’m surprised that official Turkish propaganda has taken over and blurred the views of many.

There’s another misunderstanding. By default, people assume that we’re opposed to Turkey’s membership in the EU. They’re wrong on this one too. Of course we would like to see Turkey become an EU member. Of course we’d like to see that Turkey meets all European standards. We’d like to see that Turkey resemble Belgium, Italy and others. We’d like to see Turkey become an EU member so that our borders will be open, so that our compatriots and Turkish scholars will speak more freely about Genocide. We would like to see Turkey as a member so that our churches and properties will be protected and restored.

Armenia believes that, at exactly this time, when Turkey is having to reconsider human and civil rights, freedom of expression and religion, it must be encouraged, and persuaded, to acknowledge its past. Such encouragement and persuasion must come from both outside – and more importantly, as Hrant Dink stressed yesterday – from within Turkish society.

Turkish writers and politicians have begun that difficult process of introspection and study. Some are doing so publicly and with great transparency. We can only assume that Europe will expect that a Turkey which is serious about EU membership, which is indeed able to juggle the complex relationships that EU membership entails, will have to come to terms with its past.

In this context, it is essential that the international community doesn't bend the rules, doesn't turn a blind eye, doesn't lower its standards, but instead consistently extends its hand, its example, its own history of transcending, in order for Armenians and Turks, Europeans all, to move on to making new history.