

Turkey, Past and Future

Ankara's Unacknowledged Genocide

by Efraim Karsh

It is commonplace among Middle East scholars across the political spectrum to idealize the Ottoman colonial legacy as a shining example of tolerance. “The multi-ethnic Ottoman Turkish Empire,” wrote American journalist Robert Kaplan, “was more hospitable to minorities than the uni-ethnic democratic states that immediately succeeded it . . . Violent discussions over what group got to control which territory emerged only when the empire came to an end, after World War I.”¹

Bernard Lewis went a significant step further, ascribing the wholesale violence attending the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to attempts to reform its Islamic sociopolitical order. “The classical Ottoman Empire enabled a multiplicity of religious and ethnic groups to live side by side in mutual tolerance and respect, subject only to the primacy of Islam and the supremacy of the Muslims,” he wrote. “The liberal reformers and revolutionaries who abolished the old order and proclaimed the constitutional equality of all Ottoman citizens led the Ottoman Empire into the final bitter and bloody national struggles—the worst by far in the half-millennium of its history.”² And Edward Said, in an exceptional display of unanimity with his intellectual foe, was similarly effusive. “What they had then seems a lot more humane than what we have now,” he argued. “Of course, there were inequities. But they lived without this ridiculous notion that every *millet* has to have its own state.”³

Even Elie Kedourie, whose view of Ottoman colonialism was far less sentimental, could see some advantages in the empire’s less than perfect sociopolitical order: “Ottoman administration was certainly corrupt and arbitrary, but it was ramshackle and inefficient and left many interstices by which the subject could hope to escape its terrors, and bribery was a traditional and recognized method of mitigating severities and easing difficulties.”⁴

While there is no denying the argument’s widespread appeal, there is also no way around the fact that, in almost every particular, it is demonstratively wrong. The imper-

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1 Robert D. Kaplan, “At the Gates of Brussels,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 2004.

2 Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), pp. 129-30.

3 Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, eds., *The Edward Said Reader* (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 430.

4 Elie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and other Middle-Eastern Studies* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1984), p. 293.

ial notion, by its very definition, posits the domination of one ethnic, religious, or national group over another, and the Ottoman Empire was no exception. It tolerated the existence of vast non-Muslim subject populations in its

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midst, as did earlier Muslim (and non-Muslim) empires—provided they acknowledged their legal and institutional inferiority in the Islamic order of things. When these groups dared to question their subordinate status—let alone attempt to break the Ottoman yoke—they were

brutally suppressed, and none more so than the Armenians during World War I.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An important strand in Ottoman idealization has been the charge that it was the importation of European ideas to the empire, notably those of nationalism and statehood, that undermined the deeply ingrained regional order with devastating consequences to subjects and rulers alike. In Kedourie's words: "A rash, a malady, an infection spreading from Western Europe through the Balkans, the Ottoman empire, India, the Far East and Africa, eating up the fabric of settled society to leave it weakened and defenceless before ignorant and unscrupulous adventurers, for further horror and atrocity: Such are the terms to describe what the West has done to the rest of the world, not wilfully, not knowingly, but mostly out of excellent intentions and by example of its prestige and prosperity."⁵

Evocative of the fashionable indictment of nationalism as the scourge of international relations, this prognosis is largely misconceived. For it is the desire to dominate foreign creeds, nations, or communities, and to occupy territories well beyond the "ancestral homeland" that contains the inevitable seeds of violence—not the

wish to be allowed to follow an independent path of development. In each of imperialism's three phases—empire-building, administration, and disintegration—force was the midwife of the historical process as the imperial power vied to assert its authority and to maintain its control over perennially hostile populations; and while most empires have justified their position in terms of a civilizing mission of sorts, none willfully shed its colonies, let alone its imperial status, well after they had outlived their usefulness, or had even become a burden. Hence the disintegration of multinational, multidominational, and multilingual empires has rarely been a peaceful process. On rare occasions—the collapse of the Soviet Union being a salient example—violence has followed the actual demise of the imperial power. In most instances, however, such as the collapse of the British, the French, and the Portuguese empires, among others, violence is endemic to the process of decolonization as the occupied peoples fight their way to national liberation.

The Ottoman Empire clearly belonged to the latter category. A far cry from the tolerant and tranquil domain it is often taken for, Turkey-in-Europe was the most violent part of the continent during the century or so between the Napoleonic upheavals and World War I as the Ottomans embarked on an orgy of bloodletting in response to the nationalist aspirations of their European subjects. The Greek war of independence of the 1820s, the Danubian nationalist uprisings of 1848, the Balkan explosion of the 1870s, and the Greco-Ottoman war of 1897—all were painful reminders of the cost of breaking free from an imperial master.⁶ And all pale in comparison with the treatment meted out to the foremost nationalist awakening in Turkey-in-Asia: the Armenian.

PRELUDE TO CATASTROPHE

Unlike Europe, where the rise of nationalism dealt a body blow to Ottoman imperialism, there was no nationalist fervor among the Ottoman

⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

⁶ Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), chaps. 2, 5, 6.

Empire's predominantly Arabic-speaking Afro-Asian subjects. One historian has credibly estimated that a mere 350 activists belonged to all the secret Arab societies operating throughout the Middle East at the outbreak of World War I, and most of them were not seeking actual Arab independence but rather greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.⁷ This made the rise of Armenian nationalism the foremost threat to Ottoman integrity in that part of the empire.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire totaled some two million persons, three-quarters of whom resided in so-called Turkish Armenia, namely, the vilayets of Erzerum, Van, Bitlis, Sivas, Kharput, and Diarbekir in eastern Anatolia. The rest, about half a million Armenians, were equally distributed in the Istanbul-eastern Thrace region and in Cilicia, in southwestern Anatolia.⁸

As a result of Russian agitation, European and American missionary work, and, not least, the nationalist revival in the Balkans, a surge of national consciousness began to take place within the three Armenian religious communities—Gregorian, Catholic, and Protestant. In the 1870s, Armenian secret societies sprang up at home and abroad, developing gradually into militant nationalist groups. Uprisings against Ottoman rule erupted time and again; terrorism became a common phenomenon, both against Turks and against noncompliant fellow Armenians—before it was eventually suppressed in a brutal campaign of repression in 1895-96, in which nearly 200,000



An assassination attempt against Sultan Abdul Hamid by Armenian nationalists in 1905 was but one episode in a cycle of Armenian vs. Ottoman violence that convulsed Turkey early in the twentieth century.

people perished and thousands more fled to Europe and the United States.

Turkish Armenia did not remain quiet for long. By 1903, a vicious cycle of escalating violence was in operation yet again, and two years later, Turkish sultan Abdul Hamid narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by Armenian nationalists. In the early 1910s, despite years of cultural repression, including a ban on the public use of the Armenian language and a new round of horrendous massacres (in the spring of 1909), Armenian nationalism had been fully rekindled. In April 1913, for example, Armenian nationalists asked Britain to occupy the southern region of Cilicia, from Antalya to Alexandretta, and to internationalize Istanbul and the straits as a means of “repairing the iniquity of the [1878] Congress of Berlin,” which had stipulated Ottoman reforms “in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians.” At about the same time, a committee of the Armenian National Assembly, the governing body of the Apostolic Ottoman Christians, submitted an elaborate reform plan for Ottoman Armenia to the Russian embassy in Istanbul.⁹

7 Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), chap. 28.

8 For population figures, see, for example, Mallet to Grey, Oct. 7, 1914, British Foreign Office (hereafter FO), FO 371/2137/56940; “Turkey: Annual Report, 1913. By the Embassy,” FO 371/2137/79138, 25.

9 See Fontana to Lowther, Mar. 25, 1913, FO 371/1773/16941; Lowther to Grey, Apr. 5, 10, 1913, FO 371/1773/16736; Admiralty to FO, Apr. 15, 1913, FO 371/1775/17825.



The ethnic cleansing of Turkish Armenia was accomplished in a variety of ways including deportations and outright massacres. Here, Armenian deportees struggle to survive in makeshift tents erected in the Syrian desert to which they were deported in 1915.

Bowing to international pressure, in February 1914, the Ottoman authorities accepted a Russo-German proposal for the creation of two large Armenian provinces, to be administered by European inspectors-general appointed by the great powers. This was a far cry from the Armenians' aspirations for a unified independent state as its envisaged territory was partitioned into two separate entities rather than creating a cohesive whole, yet it was the most significant concession they had managed to extract from their suzerain, and most of them were anxious to preserve this gain come what may. Hence, when the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on the side of the German-Austro-Hungarian Triple Alliance, the Armenians immediately strove to demonstrate their loyalty: Prayers for an Ottoman victory were said in churches throughout the empire, and the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul, as well as several nationalist groups, announced their loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and implored the Armenian masses to perform their obligations to the best of their ability.

Not everyone complied with this wish. Scores of Ottoman Armenians, including several prominent figures, crossed the border to assist the Russian campaign. Others offered to help the Anglo-French-Russian entente by different means. In February 1915, for example, Armenian revolutionaries in the Cilician city of Zeitun

pledged to assist a Russian advance on the area provided they were given the necessary weapons; to the British, they promised help in the event of a naval landing in Alexandretta.¹⁰

Although these activities were an exception to the otherwise loyal conduct of the Armenian community, they confirmed the Ottoman stereotype of the Armenians as a troublesome and treacherous people. This view was further reinforced by a number of crushing defeats in the Caucasus, in which (non-Ottoman) Armenians were implicated in the Russian war effort. Above all, as the largest nationally-aware minority in Asiatic

Turkey, the Armenians constituted the gravest internal threat to Ottoman imperialism in that domain; and with Turkey-in-Europe a fading memory and Turkey-in-Africa under Anglo-French-Italian domination, the disintegration of Turkey-in-Asia would spell the end of the Ottoman Empire, something that its rulers would never accept.

Before long, the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to the kind of retribution that had been inflicted on rebellious Middle Eastern populations since Assyrian and Babylonian times: deportation and exile. Having been rendered defenseless, they were uprooted from their homes and relocated to the most inhospitable corners of Ottoman Asia, with their towns and villages swiftly populated by new Muslim arrivals, and their property seized by the authorities or plundered by their Muslim neighbors.

THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF TURKISH ARMENIA

The first step in this direction was taken in early 1915 when Armenian soldiers in the Otto-

¹⁰ Ironside to Foreign Office, Mar. 3, 1915, and War Office to the Foreign Office, Mar. 4, 1915, FO 371/2484/25073 and 25167; Foreign Office to Ironside, Mar. 9, 1915, FO 371/2484/28172 and 22083.

man army were relegated to “labor battalions” and stripped of their weapons. Most of these fighters-turned-laborers would be marched out in droves to secluded places and shot in cold blood, often after being forced to dig their own graves. Those fortunate enough to escape summary execution were employed as laborers in the most inhumane conditions.

At the same time, the authorities initiated a ruthless campaign to disarm the entire Armenian population of personal weapons before embarking on a genocidal spree of mass deportations and massacres. By the autumn of 1915, Cilicia had been ethnically cleansed and the authorities turned their sights on the foremost Armenian settlement area in eastern Anatolia. First to be cleansed was the zone bordering Van, extending from the Black Sea to the Iranian frontier and immediately threatened by Russian advance; only there did outright massacres often substitute for otherwise slow deaths along the deportation routes or in the concentration camps of the Syrian desert. In other districts of Ottoman Armenia, depopulated between July and September, the Turks attempted to preserve a semblance of a deportation policy though most deportees were summarily executed after hitting the road. In the coastal towns of Trebizond, for example, Armenians were sent out to sea, ostensibly for deportation, only to be thrown overboard shortly afterward. Of the deportees from Erzerum, Erzindjan, and Baibourt, only a handful survived the initial stages of the journey.¹¹

The Armenian population in western Anatolia and in the metropolitan districts of Istanbul was somewhat more fortunate as many people were transported in trains—although grossly overcrowded—for much of the deportation route, rather than having to straggle along by foot. In Istanbul, deportations commenced in late April when hundreds of prominent Armenians were picked up by the police and sent away, most of them never to be seen again; some five thousand “ordinary” Armenians soon shared their fate. Though the majority of the city’s 150,000-strong community escaped deportation, Armenians were squeezed out

of all public posts with numerous families reduced to appalling poverty. Deportations in Ankara began toward the end of July; in Broussa, in the first weeks of September; and in Adrianople, in mid-October. By early 1916, scores of deportees, thrown into a string of concentration camps in the Syrian desert and along the Euphrates, were dying every day of malnutrition and diseases; many others were systematically taken out of the camps and shot.¹²

The Ottoman authorities tried to put a gloss of legality and innocence on their actions. The general deportation decree of May 27, 1915, for example, instructed the security forces to protect the deportees against nomadic attacks, to provide them with sufficient food and supplies for their journey, and to compensate them with new property, land, and goods necessary for their resettlement. But this decree was a sham. For one thing, massacres and deportations had already begun prior to its proclamation. For another, as is overwhelmingly borne out by the evidence, given both by numerous firsthand witnesses to the Ottoman atrocities and by survivors, the rights granted by the deportation decree were never followed.

Consider the provisions for adequate supplies for the journey and compensation for the loss of property. After the extermination of the male population of a particular town or village, an act normally preceding deportations, the Turks often extended a “grace period” to the rest of the populace, namely, women, children, and the old and the sick, so they could settle their affairs and prepare for their journey. But the term normally given was a bare week, and never more than two, which was utterly insufficient for all that had to be done. Moreover, the government often carried

Slave markets were established, and thousands of young Armenian women and girls were sold.

12 Viscount Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Laid before the Houses of Parliament as an Official Paper and Now Published by Permission* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916), pp. 645-9.

11 Karsh and Karsh, *Empires of the Sand*, chap. 10.

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Visitors pay their respects at the memorial in Yerevan to the victims of the mass killings in Armenia. Independent estimates of the precise extent of Armenian casualties differ somewhat, but all paint a stark picture of national annihilation. The American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief calculated the number of deaths at about 600,000, deportees at 786,000. Others argue for higher figures.

away its victims before the stated deadline, snatching them without warning from streets, places of employment, or even their beds. Last but not least, the local authorities prevented the deportees from selling their property or their stock under the official fiction that their expulsion was to be only temporary. Even in the rare cases in which Armenians managed to dispose of their property, their Muslim neighbors took advantage of their plight to buy their possessions at a fraction of their real value.¹³

Nor did the deportees receive even a semblance of the protection promised by the deportation decree. On the contrary, from the moment they started on their march, indeed even before they had done so, they became public outcasts, never safe from the most atrocious outrages, constantly mobbed and plundered by the Muslim population as they straggled along. Their guards connived at this brutality. There were, of course, exceptions in which Muslims, including Turks, tendered help to the long-suffering Armenians, but these were very rare, isolated instances.

13 Ibid., pp. 641-2; Johannes Lepsius, *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes* (Potsdam: Missionshandlung und Verlag, 1930), pp. 301-4.

Whenever the deportees arrived at a village or town, they were exhibited like slaves in a public place, often before the government building itself. Female slave markets were established in the Muslim areas through which the Armenians were driven, and thousands of young Armenian women and girls were sold in this way. Even the clerics were quick to avail themselves of the bargains of the white slave market.

Suffering on the deportation routes was intense. Travelers on the Levantine railway saw dogs feeding on the bodies of hundreds of men, women, and chil-

dren on both sides of the track, with women searching the clothing of the corpses for hidden treasure. In some of the transfer stations, notably Aleppo, the hub where all convoys converged, thousands of Armenians would be left for weeks outdoors, starving, waiting to be taken away. Epidemics spread rapidly, chiefly spot typhus. In almost all cases, the dead were not buried for days, the reason being, as an Ottoman officer cheerfully explained to an inquisitive foreigner, that it was hoped the epidemics might get rid of the Armenians once and for all.¹⁴

As the deportees settled into their new miserable existence, they were forced to work at hard labor, making roads, opening quarries, and the like; for this, they were paid puny salaries, which effectively reduced them to starvation; work in the neighboring villages that could earn them some livelihood was strictly forbidden. Water was normally brought to the camps by trains; no springs were to be found within a radius of miles. The scenes at the arrival of the water trains, by no

14 Aaron Aaronson, "On the Armenian Massacres: Memorandum Presented to the War Office, London, Nov. 1916," Aaronson Archives (Zichron Yaacov, Israel), File 2C/14.

means a regular phenomenon, were heartbreaking. Thousands of people would rush toward the stopping place, earth-jars and tin cans in hand, in a desperate bid for their share of this elixir of life. But when at long last the taps were opened, people would often be barred from filling their vessels, having to watch the precious water running out on the sun-baked ground.

Independent estimates of the precise extent of Armenian casualties differ somewhat, but all paint a stark picture of national annihilation. In his official report to the British parliament in July 1916, Viscount Bryce calculated the total number of uprooted Armenians during the preceding year as 1,200,000 (half slain, half deported), or about two thirds of the entire community. Johannes Lepsius, the chief of the Protestant Mission in the Ottoman Empire who had personally witnessed the atrocities and had studied them thoroughly, put the total higher, at 1,396,000, as did the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, which computed the number of deaths at about 600,000 and of deportees at 786,000. Aaron Aaronson, a world-renowned Zionist agronomist who set up the most effective pro-Anglo-French-Russian entente intelligence network in the Middle East during World War I, estimated the number of deaths at between 850,000 and 950,000.¹⁵

GENOCIDE OR “COLLATERAL DAMAGE”?

Turkey has never acknowledged any wrongdoing vis-à-vis the Armenians. While some leaders and administrators of the Young Turks regime, which ruled the empire since July 1908, were court-martialed immediately after the war for crimes committed during their ten-year rule, including the Armenian atrocities, this was done in defer-

15 Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians*, pp. 649-51, “Annex F: Statistical Estimate Included in the Fifth Bulletin of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, Dated New York, 24th May 1916”; Johannes Lepsius, *Deutschland und Armenien, 1914-1918* (Potsdam: Tempelverlag, 1919), pp. lxx, 256; Lepsius, *Der Todessgang*, pp. 301-4; Aaron Aaronson, “Pro Armenia,” Nov. 16, 1916, p. 13, Aaronson Archives, File 2C/13; Aaronson, “On the Armenian Massacres.”

ence to the victorious Allied powers rather than out of true conviction. Even the newly-established Turkish republic (1923), despite its renunciation of much of the Ottoman imperial legacy, would not disown its arguably most heinous crime since its founding father, Gen. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk “whatever his disagreements with the Young Turks leaders ... was after all imbued with Young Turk ideas.”¹⁶ Not only did Ankara fail to acknowledge any intention or plan to destroy Armenian nationalism, but the deportations and killings were presented as a natural act of self-defense against a disloyal population. In the words of Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, doyen of Turkish historians: “It’s one thing to say that the Turks killed the Armenians spontaneously, and another to say that, when the Armenians revolted, the Turks, who were locked in a life or death struggle, used excessive force and killed a good many people.”¹⁷

Given their idealization of the Ottoman legacy, it was only a question of time for Western scholars to adopt this narrative.¹⁸ “The Turks had an Armenian problem caused by the advance of the Russians and an anti-Ottoman population living in Turkey, which was seeking independence and openly sympathized with the Russians coming from the Caucasus,” argued Lewis.

There were also Armenian gangs—the Arme-

Ankara failed to acknowledge a plan to destroy Armenian nationalism and presented these acts as self-defense against a disloyal population.

16 Elie Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 95-6.

17 Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. xi.

18 See, for example, Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975, History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 315; Guenther Lewy, “Revisiting the Armenian Genocide,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2005, pp. 3-12; Michael Gunter, *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also Gunter’s article in this issue, pp. 37-46.

nians boast of the heroic feats performed by the resistance, and the Turks certainly had problems of maintaining order under wartime conditions. For the Turks, it was a matter of taking punitive and preventive measures against an unreliable population in a region threatened with foreign invasion.¹⁹

The distance from here to the substitution of perpetrators for victims and vice versa is short. In Lewis's words: "No one disputes that terrible things happened [and] that many Armenians—and also Turks—died. But the exact circumstances and the final tally of the victims will doubtless never be known."²⁰ Elsewhere, he described the episode as a result of "a desperate struggle ... between two nations for the possession of a single homeland, that ended with the terrible slaughter of 1915, when, according to estimates, more than a million Armenians perished, as well as an unknown number of Turks."²¹

Few crimes have been so widely ignored as the Ottoman Empire's ethnic cleansing of its Armenian population.

The nature of the conflict was of course quite different. Far from "a desperate struggle between two nations for the possession of a single homeland," it was a brutal repression by an imperial power of a subject population; and while Armenian national aspirations undoubtedly posed

a grave threat to the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, there can be no moral or political equivalence between these aspirations and their repression.

19 Bernard Lewis, interview with *Le Monde*, Nov. 16, 1993.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3rd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 356. Interestingly, in the first and second editions of the book (1961, 1968), Lewis described these tragic events as "the terrible holocaust of 1915, when a million and half Armenians perished." (p. 356). In his *Le Monde* interview, he reduced the fatality figure to "hundreds of thousands of Armenians [who] died of hunger and cold," dismissing the description of these deaths as genocide as "the Armenian version of this event." While he raised the figure to more than a million in the third edition of *The Emergence*, he still put Armenian casualties on a par with those of their Ottoman oppressors.

Moreover, even if most Armenians helped the Russian war effort, which they most certainly did not, there was no military—let alone moral—justification for the uprooting of almost an entire nation from its ancestral habitat, not to mention those communities that were far removed from the war zone (e.g., Cilicia, western Anatolia, etc.). Even the Nazis, who exacted horrendous collective punishment for acts of resistance, did not exile a single occupied nation from its homeland (apart, of course, from their Jewish citizens, singled out for collective destruction).

Nor for that matter is there any symmetry between the military (and other) resources at the empire's disposal and those available to its subjects, not least since states by definition control the means of collective violence. In the Armenian case, this inherent inequality was aggravated by the comprehensive disarming of the community; and while some "gangs" may have retained their weapons, the vast majority of Armenians surrendered them to the authorities despite their stark realization that the 1895-96 massacres had been preceded by very similar measures.

The ethnic cleansing of a virtually unarmed nation cannot, therefore, but indicate that, in the words of Turkish-American scholar Taner Akçam, "the wartime policies of the Ottoman government toward the Armenians were never ... the result of military exigencies" but were rather the culmination of a preconceived design to destroy Armenian nationalism, for which war provided the ideal pretext.²²

Drawing on a wealth of Ottoman, German, British, and U.S. documents, Akçam unveils a disturbing picture of elaborate planning and meticulous execution of Ottoman Armenia's ethnic cleansing. He traces this design to the Ottomans' defeat in the Balkan wars of 1912-13, which sealed their creeping expulsion from Europe and convinced the Young Turks leadership, dominated since January 1913 by the radical triumvirate—minister of war Enver Pasha, minister of the interior Talat Pasha, and minister of the navy Djemal Pasha—of the empire's imminent demise absent drastic homogenization of the Anatolian homeland: "The Chris-

22 Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity*, p. xix.

tian population was to be reduced; that is, removed, and the non-Turkish Muslim groups were to be assimilated.”²³

This resulted in a campaign of massacres and expulsions against the Ottoman Greeks, suspended after November 1914 under German pressure, and culminating in the cleansing of the Armenians. The six historically Armenian provinces of eastern Anatolia were emptied of their inhabitants, who either perished on the harrowing track to exile or were resettled in the deserts of present-day Syria and Iraq. Most of the Cilician and West Anatolian Armenians endured a similar fate.

Akçam identifies a “dual track mechanism” used for the ethnic cleansing of the Armenians, and Christians more generally:

- A legal track, comprising official state acts such as the bilateral population exchange agreements of 1913-14 with Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, or the May 1915 decree authorizing the Armenian deportation. Representing Atatürk’s subscription to the Young Turk belief in the need to homogenize the fatherland, the “legal” ethnic cleansing of the Anatolian Greeks was eventually completed by the 1923 population exchange that drove some 1.3 million Greeks out of Turkey (and about 400,000 Turks out of Greece).
- An unofficial track, consisting of extra-judicial acts of violence, including forced evacuations, killing orders, and massacres. Maximum effort was expanded to create the impression that none of these actions



In March 2010, a U.S. congressional committee passed a resolution branding the Armenian massacres as “genocide” over the objections of the Obama administration. Following the vote, Turkey recalled its ambassador for “consultations.” Here, (left to right) U.S. congressman Frank Pallone (Dem.-N.J.), Nagorno-Karabakh Republic representative Robert Avetisyan, Armenian ambassador Tatul Markarian, and others attend a Capitol Hill event, April 22, 2011, commemorating the Armenian genocide.

were ever connected to the government, both during the war and in subsequent decades through systematic destruction of archival source material, yet the massive documentation provided by Akçam proves beyond a shadow of a doubt the deep involvement of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the Young Turks’ ruling party—from local administrators and bureaucrats all the way to senior members, including Talat—in the orchestration and implementation of extra-judicial violence and massacres.²⁴

Not that these findings should surprise anyone. For one thing, the “dual track mechanism” described by Akçam has remained a lasting feature of Turkish political life to this very day. In republican Turkey, this phenomenon has been known as the “deep state”—an opaque underworld where powerful elements within the state,

²⁴ Akçam’s research also reaffirms the validity of early documentation of the Armenian atrocities whose authenticity has subsequently been questioned, notably Aram Andonian’s 1920 book *The Memoirs of Naim Bey*, as many newly discovered documents echo their now discredited predecessors.

23 Ibid., p. xv.

especially the military and security services, act in conjunction with violent extremist groups and the apolitical criminal underworld to undertake special, illegal operations in the political interest of the country's ruling elite. For another, the antique imperial practice of exiling entire nations and communities has become an extreme rarity in modern times, precisely because of its deliberate genocidal intent to destroy "a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such."²⁵ It must have occurred to the Ottoman leadership that the exiling of almost an entire nation—over a million men, women, and children—to a remote, alien, and hostile environment amidst a general war without the

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minimal provisions for surviving the harrowing voyage and its aftermath, was tantamount to a collective death sentence.²⁶ In the end, whatever their initial intention, the Ottoman actions amounted to nothing short of genocide.

When in March 2010 a U.S. congressional committee passed a resolution branding the Armenian massacres as "genocide," over the objections of the Obama administration, Turkey recalled its ambassador for "consultations."²⁸ In his 2008 election campaign, presidential hopeful Barack Obama stated that "America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian Genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that President." As president, he chose to make Turkey the site of his first overseas trip ignoring the Armenian genocide altogether in his address to the Turkish parliament.²⁹ When in December 2011, France's lower chamber approved a bill making denial of any genocide a criminal offence, Ankara froze relations with Paris, recalling its ambassador and suspending all economic, political, and military meetings.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Few crimes against humanity have been so widely and so comprehensively ignored as the Ottoman Empire's ethnic cleansing of its Armenian population during World War I.

Mesmerized by the myth of a benevolent Ottoman colonialism (in stark contrast to their scathing indictment of the Western colonial legacy),

Western scholars and intellectuals have turned a blind eye to the overwhelming body of evidence of Ottoman genocidal intentions and practices. For their part, Western politicians and leaders were loath to bring the Armenian skeleton out of the closet given Turkey's position as an important anti-Soviet bastion and an alluring bridge to the Muslim Middle East. And while the end of the Cold War has increased Western propensity to address the issue—in 2005 the European parliament conditioned Turkey's accession to the European Union on its recognition of the Armenian genocide²⁷—Ankara has remained as defiant as ever.

With its strategic situation made more complex by recent Middle Eastern upheavals, and the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) openly pining for lost Ottoman glories, Turkey is unlikely to shed this longtime denial and own up to its painful past.

27 "European Parliament resolution on the opening of negotiations with Turkey," Sept. 38, 2005.

28 "Armenian genocide resolution passes US Congress Committee," Voice of America, Mar. 3, 2010.

29 "Barack Obama calls for passage of Armenian genocide resolution," Armenian National Committee of America, Jan. 20, 2008; remarks by President Obama to the Turkish parliament, Ankara, Office of the Press Secretary, Apr. 6, 2009.

30 *The Guardian*, Dec. 22, 2011.

25 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 78 U.N. Treaty Series (UNTS) 277, entered into force on Jan. 12, 1951, art. 2.

26 It has been argued (see Michael Gunter's article in this issue) that the claim of an Armenian genocide "rests on a logical fallacy and ignores the huge loss of life among Turkish civilians, soldiers, and prisoners-of-war. ... that surely cannot be explained in terms of a Young Turk plan of annihilation." Of course, the Young Turks' indifference to their own people's suffering and mortality does not preclude the existence of an annihilationist plan vis-à-vis the Armenians, just as Hitler's readiness to sacrifice millions of German lives did not preclude his annihilationist design vis-à-vis the Jews.

