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Turks, Armenians, and Genocide: Is Genocide Foreign to Foreign Policy?

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Abstract. This article describes difficulties in forging foreign policy consensus on preventing, attenuating, or intervening to stop genocide.

The Speaker of the United States (US) House of Representatives recently withdrew a resolution (shortly before it was to be voted on) that would have formally condemned the mass killings of Armenians in Turkey 85 years ago as genocide. This was not a simple vote (or withdrawn attempt to vote) on the virtue or vice of genocide but instead comprised a host of considerations.

Closest to voting on the virtue or vice of genocide would be considering genocide's ethical implications. Some would argue that genocide is always contraindicated as behavior and, therefore, merits a deontological proscription. Others would argue that condemning one specific genocide attempt to the exclusion of some others would be unethical unless those others are somehow less bad in severity, scope, or some other aspect than that which was condemned. (This also begs the question of whether genocide is genocide or instead can be quantified on ordinal, interval, or ratio scales.) Otherwise, uncondemned examples might lose their status as genocide and might serve as exemplars of future behavior that are, indeed, genocide but will not be so labeled. Still others might argue that some groups of individuals might merit something that looks like genocide, if not genocide itself, based on their own genocidal or even more evil behavior. Finally, one might contend that accurately condemning genocide as genocide could lead to worse consequences than not condemning it--such as otherwise leading to some greater genocide or behaviors meriting genocide or worse as a response. On the other hand, one might be justly accused of invalidating a people's history and, thus, causing untoward psychological trauma throughout generations by not condemning genocide.

Genocide also can have domestic political considerations from the perspective of a legislative body. In this case, a member of the House majority who is deemed extremely vulnerable in an upcoming election had been pressing the issue to condemn what he claimed to be Turkish genocide against Armenians. He was doing so because his political district has the largest Armenian-American constituency in the US, and he wanted as many of their votes as possible. The intersection of the ethical and the domestic political is exemplified by noting that the intention of using a group of people as a means to get elected might render his quest as unethical even as the same quest with another intention might be considered ethical.

Genocide also can have strategic considerations for the political entity of which a legislative body is a component. In this case, one concern was the fear of weakening (1) the overall political relationship of the US and Turkey, (2) Turkish acquiescence of US use of Turkish soil and airspace in military operations against Iraq, (3) Turkish membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, (4) cooperative endeavors between Turkey and other US allies such as Israel, and even (5) various oil ventures involving the Caucasus. Effects on other regional concerns related to Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and still other proximal countries might well be at issue, even if too difficult, to more cogently perceive.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

What was the right House response? What was the right US Government response given that the Executive Branch pressured the House Speaker to withdraw the resolution? And did Turkey as Ottoman Empire authority engage in genocide, and does modern Turkey's creation as independent state in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire absolve it of blame?

In the foreign policy world, it might just possibly be considered too much of a luxury to reflexively and instinctively condemn genocide wherever it might be. As categorically imperative as some moral agents might feel condemnation to be, and as morally satisfying as condemnation might be, one might emerge morally righteous from at times taking a different tack. (See Altounian, J. (1999). Putting into words, putting to rest and putting aside the ancestors: How an analysand who was heir to the Armenian genocide of 1915 worked through mourning. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 80, 439-448; Boyajian, L. Z., & Grigorian, H. M. (1998). Reflections on the denial of the Armenian genocide. *Psychoanalytic Review*, 85, 505-516; Schmitt, E. (October 20, 2000). House vote averted on Turks 'Genocide': Pressure from White House to save relations with a NATO ally. *The New York Times*, p, A15; Staub, E. (2000). Genocide and mass killing: Origins, prevention, healing and reconciliation. *Political Psychology*, 21, 367-382; Suedfeld, P. (2000). Reverberations of the Holocaust fifty years later: Psychology's contributions to understanding persecution and genocide. *Canadian Psychology*, 41, 1-9; Wessells, M. G. (1999). Systemic approaches to the understanding and prevention of genocide and mass killing. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5, 365-371.) (Keywords: Armenia, Foreign Policy, Genocide, Turkey.)