

# The Taboo of the Armenian Genocide, Part Two

## The Politics of American Avoidance

**David CIRILLO**

The Armenian Genocide has been a topic of trials and tribulations in American politics for quite some time. It has been an issue in Presidential campaigns, like that of now-President Obama: when he promised to recognize it. It has been the topic of votes, such as the most recent 2010 vote which failed to recognize the genocide. It has been a funnel for interests, lobbying, and foreign investment. With Germany recently recognizing the genocide and an American Presidential election at hand, speculation of American recognition is once again at a high. As politicians debate the issue, or avoid it altogether, the American political system moves forward. There are various key players in American politics, but in specificity to the Armenian Genocide issue, there are the Armenian, Turkish, and Israeli lobbies, and the constituencies they represent.

### The Armenian Lobby

The Armenian lobby in America differs in presence from other places affected by the diaspora. Its closest comparison is France; Armenians have some power as the third largest Armenian population in the world as a result of the diaspora<sup>1</sup>. This conglomeration of population creates power through constituency. In America, there are 483,366 persons of Armenian descent as of 2011, although this is often viewed as an underestimate. This is compared to only about 206,911 Americans of Turkish ancestry<sup>2</sup>. The Armenians are concentrated in high density, specifically in California. Half of all Armenian Americans are located in

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just twenty congressional districts<sup>3</sup>. The city of Glendale, California is made up of around 200,000 people; 40% of that population is Armenian, with Armenians also holding a majority of seats on the city council since 2005<sup>4</sup>. Glendale voted for the recognition of an Armenian genocide Commemoration Day in 2016, unanimously passing the resolution. Where this expands to national influence is via the national representatives and groups sprouted from a localized majority. Adam Schiff was elected to congress in 2003, representing the 28th district of California which includes Glendale. Schiff has based a significant amount of his platform and time in congress on Armenian issues, such as the Armenian genocide. In 2007, Schiff introduced US House Resolution 106, a bill intended to officially recognize the Armenian genocide<sup>5</sup>. He has also advocated strongly for Presidential recognition of the genocide, in 2016 saying, “Mr. President, for them and for their descendants, the word ‘genocide’ is sacred because it means the world has not and will not forget. To deny genocide, on the other hand, is profane,”<sup>6</sup>. This type of representation goes far, as do public figures such as the Clooneys and Kardashians, celebrities of Armenian descent who openly support the cause of recognition. Furthermore, organizations such as the Armenian National Committee of America and Armenian Assembly of America are quite active in their lobbying efforts of the United States government. They have succeeded in some fronts, such as having secured the highest amount of American aid of any country other than Israel up until the most recent years of the Obama administration<sup>7</sup>.

However, its problem is just that: it is a localized effort. Local governments with large Armenian constituents support recognition, as do many senators and congressman, especially when from states with larger Armenian populations, but that seems to dissipate in national office. Then-congressman Ford in 1965 fully noted the genocide of Armenians and supported recognition; when he became President in 1975, he fought against a resolution declaring April 24th as ‘National Day of Remembrance of Man’s Inhumanity to Man’, in part recognizing the Armenian genocide. The resolution failed. This is not only a past history of evolution on the issue when diverted to a national position. Bill Clinton made a campaign pledge to recognize the genocide. So did George W. Bush. Neither did<sup>8</sup>. In 2006, while still Senator Obama, after criticizing the Bush Administration for

refusing to recognize the genocide, he promised, “As president I will recognize the Armenian genocide,”<sup>9</sup>. But when President, that sudden acknowledgement tends to disappear. President Obama has commemorated the events every year of his presidency, but has avoided using the word “genocide” in his remarks to commemorate the massacre, describing it as “meds yeghern,” an Armenian term meaning “great calamity”<sup>10</sup>. As Obama's current Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, wrote in 2002, “No U.S. president has ever made genocide prevention a priority, and no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for his indifference to its occurrence. It is thus no coincidence that genocide rages on,”<sup>11</sup>. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee for President, was a fervent supporter of resolutions recognizing the Armenian genocide throughout her tenure in the United States Senate; she also served as a senator from New York, one of the states with the largest Armenian populations alongside California and Massachusetts. However, as Secretary of State under President Obama, Clinton has chosen to oppose resolutions in favor of its recognition, referring to the killings as “a matter of historical debate”<sup>12</sup>.

## The Turkish Lobby

Why is there such a transformation in expressed political viewpoints? Many refer to the importance of the relationship between Turkey and the United States. Turkey has always served as an ally and an important hub of stability for the United States in connection with the Middle East, especially from a military standpoint. Now Turkey plays an even more important role as the United States deals with both the Syrian Refugee crisis and the fight against the Islamic State, both of which include Turkey as the geographic kingpin. These are important factors, but history has shown that recognition does not destroy diplomacy, and although it sometimes affects military rights and land usage, the American-Turkish relationship is much too important right now for both players, much like Turkish-German relations. Furthermore, with US aid to Turkey numbering in the millions for decades, the United States is still in a strong position in regard to Turkish power dynamics; the refugee crisis is also not hitting the United States as hard as it is Europe due to sheer geography, further contrasting the immediate reliance on Turkey by countries such as Germany<sup>13</sup>. Yet, once again, Germany acknowledged

the genocide. There could've been motive in order to show strength in a power dynamic getting further and further skewed toward Turkey over Germany as the refugee crisis continues, but even so, the United States sheepish activity goes beyond natural convention, especially when considering the issue has been brought up in Congress, only to fail, twice in the last decade.

There are powerful lobbying tactics directly endorsed by the Turkish government, such as the recent hiring of former CIA director Porter Goss in 2015 to lead Turkish lobbying operations<sup>14</sup>. Turkish-American associations don't operate as heavily via politics due to the dispersal of Turks around America, specifically in the north-east, unlike in Germany where there are almost three million Turks, creating a powerful localized force<sup>15</sup>. Turkey has strong affiliations with the State Department and connections to members of congress for quite some time. In 1975, when the resolution for a 'National Day of Remembrance of Man's Inhumanity to Man' was announced, the Turkish ambassador met directly with Thomas O'Neil, the House Majority Leader, despite the latter being originally in favor of it. In 2010, as the most recent resolution to recognize the Armenian genocide made its way through congress, Turkey deployed its lobbying firm, the Gephardt Group led by Richard A Gephardt, the former House majority leader, who, ironically, fought for the recognition of the genocide while in congress. Turkey also hired a public relations firm, Fleishman-Hillard, surrounding the vote. Members of Turkish parliament also paid visits to Washington, holding meetings with both parties before the vote. With the lobbying group costing Turkey over \$70,000 a month and the public relations firm over \$100,000 a month, Ankara invests heavily in this endeavor. The Armenian government, on the other hand, did very little in this period, hiring no lobbyists for the vote whatsoever. Armenian organizations in the United States did much of the lobbying instead, spending \$380,000 the year leading up to the 2010 vote.

While Turkey has a strong governmental lobby, it has been growing lobbying agencies from grassroots organizations. This is only a recent phenomenon, with the Armenian lobby always thought to be larger and stronger. In 2001, Dietrich Jung and Wolfango Piccoli, authors of *Turkey at the Crossroads: Ottoman Legacies and the Great Middle East*, wrote, "Turkey has historically met the joint opposition of the powerful Armenian- and Greek- American lobbies, and suffered from

the absence of an effective pro-Turkish lobby”<sup>16</sup>. The Turkish Coalition of America has since become a powerful lobbying group, taking the time before the 2010 vote to target and write to each of the House’s Foreign Affairs Committee member considered a swing vote. The vote ultimately failed, with many stating the importance of Turkish relations as a reason. Then-Representative Mike Pence stated at the time, “I do not minimize the horror that took place...[but] now is not the time for this committee of the American Congress to take up the measure that is now before us,” giving further reasons surrounding Turkey’s strategic capability, not wanting to anger an important ally in a tumultuous region’ this argument as common, and one spread both by congress and Turkish lobbyists, a sign that the Turkish effort to suppress the vote had succeeded<sup>17</sup>.

### **The Israeli Lobby**

Turkey hasn’t been alone in its endeavors, however. It has had help, most notably from Israel. The United States has the highest population of Jews outside of Israel, especially in concentrated areas such as New York, meaning their political clout is impactful. Israeli political action committees, such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, have often transformed this clout into political power via lobbying. Israeli arguments in favor of denial were sometimes linked to the exceptionality of the holocaust, the specificity of genocide to which can only be attributed to the holocaust, an incomparable event. But more often, the arguments were linked to Israeli policy. With Turkey being Israel’s only ally in the Middle East for decades, serving as a military and security partner, Israeli-American organizations put Turkish interests at the forefront of its American lobbying agenda. In 2002, Keith Weisman of AIPAC stated how difficult it was to “say to the Armenians that [Jews] had a genocide and you didn’t”, but AIPAC was asked and instructed by “higher authorities..behind the scenes”, including Israel<sup>18</sup>. The height of Israeli lobbying against Armenian genocide recognition was in the 1990s and early 2000’s. The situation was often called out for the same reason the United States is, putting strategic interests over moral truths<sup>19</sup>. Israeli groups were specifically vulnerable to such criticisms, representing a country founded in the aftermath of genocide against the Jewish population. Israel turning a blind eye in order to pursue foreign policy interests was seen as a

betrayal to some scholars, most notably scholar Israel Charny, who lambasted Israeli hypocrisy over the genocide<sup>20</sup>. It persisted, however, and quite successfully, for decades. This relationship has since changed. As the AKP has become more Islamist over the course of the 21st century, Turkey has moved closer to allies such as Iran, and away from its previously western tendencies. This has soured Israeli-Turkish relations. Relations came to a head in 2010, with a flotilla of Turkish activists headed for the Gaza strip being intercepted by Israel. Ten of these activists died, Relations became tense in the aftermath, Israel recognized the Armenian genocide in full force, and was even being accused of helping bring the 2010 Armenian genocide resolution to a committee vote<sup>21</sup>.

## The Future

As President Obama's second and final term is coming to an end, a new administration will have to tackle the same issues of recognition. Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee for President, and might very well be that successor. Like Obama, she conformed to a more global foreign policy, playing safe with Turkey rather than applying her previous positions on the genocide. Whether or not she would continue to do as such in her own administration is up for debate. As Secretary of State under President Obama, she served and carried out his policies, including on the Armenian genocide. Therefore, it may not be the same reaction as she would have in her own administration. She did, after all, proclaim, "As president, I will recognize the Armenian genocide," in 2008<sup>22</sup>. So did President Obama. Eight years later, that promise goes unfulfilled. Clinton's pragmatism toward foreign policy as Secretary of State, and her evolution on this issue, all point to a continuation of avoidance, although she could return to her senate-era fervency on the issue; with current support from Armenian power players such as George Clooney even without such a promise, however, it seems unlikely<sup>23</sup>.

Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, is unpredictable. Trump has no known statements on the Armenian genocide, but he has been known to be hostile toward Turkey. In 2015, he accused the ruling government of Turkey of secretly working with the Islamic State, virtually due to the prospects of oil<sup>24</sup>. He has also suggested a ban on Muslims to the United States, and seeing as Turkey is a largely Muslim country, such an alliance doesn't seem to be prioritized by

Trump<sup>25</sup>. Such things could lead to recognition of the genocide in a Trump presidency, but if he managed to lead a recognition effort on behalf of the United States, it might be more through rhetorical rants than through policy. Would such a keen businessman want to destroy an integral relationship, however? Only time will tell.

Politics is politics, and for the United States, such politics places the importance of Turkey as a strategic and diplomatic ally over the recognition of the Armenian genocide. In American politics, as spread by lobbyists on behalf of interest groups and states themselves, the issues are often seen as being mutually exclusive. Germany, as taken from Merkel's comments, has chosen a different route, a power play of sorts in the midst of important migrant negotiations. Similar to calls for better treatment among Turkey's Kurdish populations, many European countries spoke out as the United States stayed silent, deeming Turkish relations too important to compromise in the process<sup>26</sup>. It is possible the United States will join its allies like Germany and France in the recognition of the Armenian genocide, but it is far more likely that won't happen until Turkey's geopolitical importance to the United States lessens or there is a major call from the populace to do as such. Another factor of possible change could be Israel; relations have been tense since 2010, but signs of reconciliation have been mounting in 2016, with reports expecting full relations to be restored<sup>27</sup>. With Israel being one of the most powerful lobbyists in America, this force could transform congressional support. With Israeli-Turkish relations in flux, European-Turkish diplomacy in trouble, the further islamization of Turkey, the Western world's further reliance on Turkey in dealing with the refugee crisis and the Islamic State, and the American Presidential successor yet to be chosen, much is fluctuating in the realm of international politics. Meanwhile, another country recognizes the Armenian genocide and goes through the motions of retaliation from Ankara as the United States waits on the sidelines in what is seemingly becoming cyclic in modern history, a cycle that, as of now, seems far from being broken.

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