

The History Lesson

By The Editors

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Turkey is a country of the greatest strategic importance to the U.S. It is a loyal member of NATO with large and effective armed forces. It has a strong and growing economy. It is an overwhelmingly Muslim country with a democratic system of government. Its geographic position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, together with its ethnic links across Central Asia, make it a valuable ally in a whole series of potential crises. And though it has become trite to say so, if the present moderate Islamist AKP government in Ankara succeeds in entrenching an Islamic democracy, then Turkey could become a model of development for the Islamic world.

Good relations with such a country must always be vital to Washington . Yet they are especially vital at this particular moment because Turkey is on the verge of intervening in northern Iraq to counter terrorist attacks launched from there on its armed forces. Washington understands this Turkish concern very well. It is similar to our own anger at Iranian support for anti-American attacks in Iraq. But Washington's main concern is to deter Turkish actions that, however understandable, could destabilize Iraq still further and put the lives of American troops still more at risk.

Until a few years ago that would have been easily achievable. Turkey was one of America 's best friends in either Europe or the Middle East . Even today, when anti-American feeling has spread among ordinary Turks (largely for non-Turkish, pan-Islamic reasons), Ankara maintains good relations with Washington. The Turks recognize that the U.S. has strongly pushed for their long-sought entry into the European Union. They appreciate that the U.S. intervened in Kosovo and Bosnia to protect Moslems while Europe snoozed. And our two militaries still enjoy warm cooperative relations.

If the Turks are to be dissuaded from pursuing their national interests by military force in order to accommodate the U.S. , then they need to feel that the U.S. remains a good friend and will seek a solution in northern Iraq that respects their interests. It is at this very moment that Nancy Pelosi and the Democrat-controlled House Foreign Affairs Committee consider a resolution that describes the massacres of Armenians in 1915 by troops of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey's precursor state, as a "genocide," thus placing the Mark of Cain on Turkey's brow. Mrs. Pelosi is now planning to bring the resolution before the whole House. Turkey has withdrawn its ambassador in protest. Turkish troops have been shelling suspected terrorist camps in northern Iraq . The entire region is now holding its breath. We wonder exactly where the famed Democratic "realists" have been hiding while Mrs. Pelosi lights her match.

What great cause justifies taking such grave risks? Mrs. Pelosi is responding to the long campaign of diaspora Armenians in America and Western Europe to declare their people a victim of intentional extermination as surely as were the Jews of Europe, countless small nations in the Soviet Union, and the tribes of Rwanda. We can respect the passion of modern Armenians to secure justice and remembrance for their forebears even if we cannot always reach their conclusions. But how can anyone respect Mrs. Pelosi's motives, which, as she all but admits, are to secure Armenian votes? She may be compelled to take account of strategic realities before this crisis ends, but historical truth has counted for nothing with her at any point.

Historical truth, however, separates us not only from Mrs. Pelosi but also from the Armenian campaigners. No one doubts that hundreds of thousands of Armenians - maybe more than one million - were killed in the course of forced evacuations by Ottoman troops in World War I. But were these deaths the collateral damage of an extremely brutal war? Perhaps augmented by massacres carried out by locals? Or was there the official intent to exterminate that signifies genocide?

Only a few cranks dispute the Gulag and the Holocaust. Indeed, Holocaust denial is not denial at all; it is really a sly endorsement of murdering Jews. But historians of the first rank - Norman Stone, Gunter Lewy, Justin McCarthy, and Bernard Lewis - firmly dispute that the Ottomans ordered an Armenian genocide. They point out that no orders to exterminate have ever been produced (some were incompetently forged); that Ottoman files examined after defeat found no incriminating evidence; and that investigations afterwards by British and American military officials led to the release of their Ottoman suspects.

To be sure, there are also arguments on the other side by able historians - and the sheer number of deaths is suspicious. What that means, however, is that this is a historical dispute to be settled by historians rather than by legislators who in this matter are simply ignoramuses. It is an absurdity as well as an outrage that Bernard Lewis, our leading scholar of the Ottoman world, should have been fined by a French court for violating a law that condemns and seeks to punish "denial" of the Armenian genocide.

America and Europe must abandon these foolish attempts to resolve disputes in history and other disciplines by legislative fiat. The costs are too high: for Professor Lewis, one franc; for the French court, a revelation of its own Keystone Kops ridiculousness; and for America - let's not find out.