

Denialism and the Armenian Genocide

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Elif Shafak is currently being prosecuted in Turkey because fictional characters in her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*² speak of a “genocide” and the mass killing of Armenians.³ Academics, journalists, teachers, human rights activists and publishers also continue to be labelled as “traitors” to the state, criminalised and subjected to death threats and other forms of intimidation (both nationally and internationally) for merely recognising or debating this genocide. In the case of Hrant Dink, the journalist and editor of the Istanbul based *Agos* newspaper, targeting ultimately led to his assassination in January 2007.

The Armenian genocide, which began in 1915, “continued through 1917 and picked up again in 1918, when Turkish [nationalist inspired] troops entered the Caucasus. In the end, Anatolia’s 3,000 year old 1.5 - 2 million strong Armenian community was gone”.⁴ Armenians were subjected to a range of genocidal processes which included massacres, death-marches, starvation and ethnic cleansing. As Turkish historian Halil Berktaş observes, “1915 fits into a pattern of nationalist, Social Darwinistically fed ideologies of mobilization and violence”.⁵ To Israel Charny, President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, the killing that took place of “other Christian (therefore non-Turkish) groups such as the Assyrians and Greeks as well as the Armenians ... was ‘outright genocidal murder’”.⁶ The Marxist historian E. J. Hobsbawm has observed, that “Turkish modernization”, as envisaged by the Committee of Union and Progress, “shifted ... to a military-dictatorial frame and from the hope in a secular-imperial political loyalty to the reality of a purely Turkish nationalism”.⁷ The aim “was to opt for an ethnically homogenous nation, which implied the forcible assimilation [i.e. cultural genocide] of such Greeks, Armenians, Kurds and others as were either not expelled *en bloc* or massacred ... Within the Young Turks, the balance thus tilted ... to westernising but strongly ethnic or even racist modernisers”.⁸

In this scheme, “Yezidi were victims alongside Armenians in the genocide of 1915”.⁹ Many Alevis also firmly believed that they, too, were going to share the same fate as the Armenians. A study that is “based on original documentation from the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior, US and European consular, diplomatic, and private archives and memoirs” by Hilmar Kaiser, a historian specializing in German-Ottoman relations, concludes that “Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, and Balkan Muslims, as well as a many other smaller groups” were targeted “according to a single scheme”. Outlining this “scheme”, Charny writes, “the extermination of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915-1916 provided the economic basis for a full-scale ethnic re-structuring of the Ottoman provinces ... The deportation of the Kurds marked the beginning of the second phase of the demographic reorganization of the Ottoman Empire. A number of other and smaller groups were included into the assimilation programme as well, such as the deportation of Druzes from the Hauran towards Asia Minor. Jewish inhabitants of Zakho were targeted like Iranian Shiites in Mesopotamia. The assimilation of individuals was, however, only one part of the restructuring. Besides the ‘turkification’ of human beings, whole regions or critical localities were targeted as a second major aspect of the government’s programme. Therefore, whole districts were designated as a ‘turkification region’ ... Throughout 1915 and 1916, Greek villagers were deported

inland and distributed in the same manner as the Kurdish deportees among Turkish villages ... In 1917, the anti-Greek campaign was fully extended to villages along the Black Sea coast. Death-marching in snow storms and massacres”, were also undertaken.¹⁰

Charney confirms that, “the Ottoman rulers in Palestine ordered and carried out the expulsion of Jews from Jaffa-Tel Aviv in 1914 ... and again in 1917 ... A serious number of deaths resulted from these forced uprootings, and the worst that was feared never came to be, thanks only to international intervention ... The Ottomans also expelled nationalist Arabs from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria ... The Ottomans were on a rampage to get rid of any and all who were not like them.”¹¹

Consequently, “the Ottoman Empire devoted enormous resources” towards eradicating the ‘other’: “At one stage, the Empire was fighting on no less than four separate battle fronts ... Every available man, weapon, automobile and rail car was required for war effort. Yet we have Australian prisoners-of-war reporting trainloads of Armenian deportees coming from north-east Asia Minor to the Taurus Mountains. Soldiers needed to fight at the fronts were instead sent to escort columns of Pontian Hellenes on death-marches hundreds of kilometres in length and sent to the mountains of historic Assyria to burn Assyrian villages and kill every Assyrian they could lay their hands on ... Armenians were deported to the deserts of northern Syria and either massacred or left to die ... The Military Governor of Van entered the city of Sairt, commanding a force of 8000 troops. He ordered his Kassab Tabouri (Butchers’ Battalions) to massacre all the Christians of the district: Assyrian and Armenian alike. Nor were the massacres restricted to the territory of the Ottoman Empire ...”¹²

According to R.J. Rummel, the US political scientist who coined the term *democide* for murder by government: “I do not doubt that this [Armenian] genocide occurred. Extant communications from a variety of ambassadors and other officials, including those of Italy, the then neutral United States, and Turkey’s closest ally Germany, verify and detail a genocide in process. Moreover, contemporary newsmen and correspondents documented aspects of the genocide. Then, two trials were held. One by the post-war government that replaced the Young Turks, which gathered available documentation and other evidence on the genocide and found the leaders guilty. The second trial was of the Armenian who assassinated the former Young Turk leader Talaat in Munich in 1920 ... Finally, Turkish government telegrams and minutes of meetings held by government leaders establish as well their intent to destroy all the Armenians in Turkey. In my related *Death By Government* I have quoted selections from this vast collection of documents and need not repeat them here. The sheer weight of all this material in English alone ... [is] in some ways as diverse and authoritative as that on the Holocaust”.¹³

As the US poet and academic, Peter Balakian, explains, specifically with reference to the nature of targeting actions against the Armenians: “In fact, documentation of the genocide is abundant and incontrovertible ... Lemkin, the man who coined the term ‘genocide’, ... named the Armenian case in first developing the concept of genocide, and he consecrated the term ‘Armenian genocide’ ... The International Association of Genocide Scholars is unanimous in its assessment



that it was one of the major genocides of the modern era.”¹⁴

Its 1997 resolution stated that it re-affirmed “that the mass murder of Armenians in Turkey in 1915 is a case of genocide which conforms to the statutes of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. It further condemns the denial of the Armenian Genocide by the Turkish government and its official and unofficial agents and supporters”.¹⁵ In 2005, in a letter that was addressed to the Turkish Prime Minister, it reminded him of its position on the matter and additionally pointed out that “Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin, when he coined the term genocide in 1944, cited the Turkish extermination of the Armenians and the Nazi extermination of the Jews as defining examples of what he meant by genocide”.¹⁶ It clarified the point that “to deny its factual and moral reality as genocide is not to engage in scholarship but in propaganda and efforts to absolve the perpetrator, blame the victims, and erase the ethical meaning of this history”.¹⁷

Nevertheless, despite all this ‘evidence’ concerning the genocide, it is instructive to note that certain governments (such as the USA, UK and Israel), corporations (particularly, but not exclusively, ones related to the ‘military industrial complex’ in the US), think tanks and lobbying groups have actively chosen *not* to interpret these ‘events’ as genocide because of political expediency, ideological biases and/or profits that stand to be made if stances that are “agreeable” to the denialist Turkish state are adopted. Consequently, even though the United States has “full information about the genocide”, R.J. Rummel confirms that, “for political reasons, the State Department refuses to ... even acknowledge that the genocide took place. Now, Israel – ISRAEL – not only joins the United States in this, but also pressures its genocide scholars and others against public comments on it. How explain this? By two words that I increasingly find distasteful – *real politic*. I hope some day we can encase in lead the foreign policy these words describe and drop it in the deepest part of the ocean. The sound we might then hear could be the cheering of all the dead souls whose memory this policy has consigned to oblivion”.¹⁸

To Robert Fisk, the Middle East correspondent for *The Independent*, we need to additionally be aware that “the holocaust deniers of recent years – deniers of the Turkish genocide of 1.5 million Armenian Christians in 1915, that is – include Lord Blair, who originally tried to prevent Armenians from participating in Britain’s Holocaust Day”.¹⁹ For Donald Bloxham, Professor of History at Edinburgh University, “if the British government wishes to continue its policy of not calling a spade a spade in relation to the Armenian genocide, it would be at least more honest if it acknowledged that this is entirely due to its desire to maintain good relations with the Turkish state, and nothing at all to do with proper examination of the

historical record. Such honesty about *realpolitik* may be difficult, since this would call into question the integrity of Britain's supposed commitment, enshrined in our annual Holocaust Memorial Day, to learning the lessons of past genocides in order to prevent them in future".²⁰

Thomas O'Dwyer, writing in *Ha'aretz* in 2003, has commented upon the equally questionable manner in which, "not for the first time, we have witnessed the State of Israel's complicity in the lie ... This is political expediency at its most morally bankrupt. Tripping over itself in its stupid defense of the untenable Turkish position" which denies the Armenian genocide, "the Israeli Foreign Ministry has again and again played an active role in suppressing even discussion of the issue ... What is shocking is that there should be any question whatsoever of Israel denying the murder of a nation ... Turkey's denials of the Armenian

massacre will not endure – but the memory of Israel's refusal to speak out against the denial just might".²¹ The Israeli academic Yair Auron, author of 'The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide', has clarified that, in his opinion, "the Israeli government's abetting of Turkey's denial is not only a 'moral disgrace', it also 'hurts the legacy and heritage of the Holocaust. When we help a country deny the genocide of its predecessor, we also help the deniers of the Holocaust, because they watch what's happening. They see that in this cynical world, if you invest persistent efforts in denial, then denial, to some extent at least, succeeds"²² ... Out of political expediency, other governments, including that of the United States and Israel, have aided and abetted Turkey in its rewriting of history".²³

To Rabbi Kenneth I. Segal, spiritual leader of the Beth Israel Congregation in Fresno, California, "a 'political stench' [has] emanated from the role played by the Israeli Embassy in the United States in the matter".²⁴ With the statement by Shimon Peres in 2001, Auron observes that the then Israeli Foreign Minister "joined the deniers on behalf of the Israeli

government. This was not The Holocaust (with capital H), this was not a holocaust or even a genocide, claimed the minister. What is it but an Israeli escalation from passive to active denial, from moderate denial to hard-line denial? Imagine the Israeli and Jewish reaction to a similar claim by another country's Foreign Minister, regarding the Holocaust. What would be their reaction if the Holocaust had been called a 'tragedy'? Peres' views were repeated, unfortunately, by the Israeli Ambassador to Turkey in Georgia and Armenia, Rivka Cohen, in February 2002 in Yerevan, and then by the Israeli Foreign Ministry".²⁵

For Auron: "We cannot minimize the historical significance of this terrible statement. Not a holocaust, not genocide; only 'victims', 'plight', and 'tragedy', without even mentioning who the perpetrators were. There is no mention of a killer, as if it were a natural disaster, but there is mention of the emotional relevance to both sides – the Turks and the Armenians (imagine Jews and Germans being mentioned together in the case of the Holocaust!) ... There is a lot of cynicism, arrogance, internal contradiction, and irresponsibility in this dangerous official statement."²⁶

"Within Israel itself", it needs to be understood that there has also, for several years, been "Israeli involvement in preventing a memorial day for the Armenians"²⁷ to commemorate and/or recognise the Armenian genocide, just as there have been

Israeli government inspired attempts to halt any recognition of the Armenian genocide in the US Senate. This stance has been criticised from several Israeli quarters: "In an article in *Ha'aretz*", for example, "Akiva Eldar claimed: 'The politics of [Israeli] weapons dealers has long since pushed morality aside'²⁸ ... An editorial" in the same paper has "compared the intention behind the attempts to deny the Holocaust to the intention of the Turkish government. It says that Israel cannot whitewash the evil implicit in such assistance: 'The memory of the Holocaust which befell us commands us to display understanding for the sense of suffering of the Armenian people, and not to be an obstacle in the path of American legislation of its memory' ... An editorial in the popular *Yedioth Ahronoth*" has also concluded that "What was inflicted upon the Armenians in 1915 certainly belongs in the category of genocide" ... In the issue of *Maariv*, ... an article by journalist Shmuel Shnitzer" raised the point that "We, who struggle against the attempts of shady historians and slick politicians to deny the gas chambers and the genocide of the Jewish people, are natural allies of the Armenians in the war against erasure and denial ... If we have minimal decency, if the truth is precious to us even when it is inconvenient to the government or any other, we are obliged to strengthen the American Senate in its initiative to stand up for memory – ours and that of other victims of the evil plot to exterminate a people and then to enlist a thousand reasons to cover up the horror" ... Sheila Hattis wrote" in *Davar* "that the reports of the involvement of Jews and Israeli diplomats in the efforts to prevent establishment of a day of remembrance of the Armenian Genocide was 'one of the most nauseating reports appearing in the press in recent times' ... Boaz Evron's article"²⁹ in *Yedioth Ahronoth* points to "another reason" which possibly explains the Israeli government's questionable genocide denialist position on the matter. It is one, he suggests, that must be confronted and criticised: "We, who recall the Holocaust every day, are not willing to allow anyone else any part or possession of his [or her] own Holocaust. Isn't it our main asset today? It is the only thing around which we attempt to frighten Israelis against leaving the country. It is the only thing by which we attempt to silence the Gentiles".³⁰

In Israel itself, an initiative by Haim Oron to secure Armenian genocide recognition was also recently opposed by key Israeli government representatives. According to the 15th March 2007 edition of *Today's Zaman*: "The Israeli parliament, the Knesset, declined yesterday to approve a resolution recognizing Armenian claims of genocide ... The resolution, submitted by lawmaker Haim Oron, drew anger from some quarters in the Israeli government and was rejected by parliament ... Oron ... was quoted as saying ... 'It is a debt we owe to the Armenian people and one we owe to ourselves' ... Oron said he has been under heavy pressure from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office as well as the Foreign Ministry to withdraw his motion."³¹

On the 90th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 2005, Larry Derfner noted the following in *The Jerusalem Post*: "What does the State of Israel and many of its American Jewish lobbyists have to say about it[?] ... If they were merely standing silent, that would be an improvement. Instead, on the subject of the Armenian genocide, Israel and some US Jewish organizations, notably the American Jewish Committee [AJC], have for many years acted aggressively as silencers ... Israel and the US Jewish establishment may say they're neutral over what happened to the Armenians 90 years ago, but their actions say the opposite. They've not only taken sides, they're on the barricades ... Ninety years after the Armenian genocide, there is a decent Jewish response to the sickening behavior of the State of Israel, the American Jewish Committee and [many] other US Jewish organizations: Not in our name".³² In a subsequent article, he had this to say: "I've learned how Israeli governments and some of their American Jewish lobbyists have been so crucial to Turkey's

campaign to cover the genocide up. They've acted, and continue to act, mainly in the name of Israel's military, economic and political relations with Turkey. In 60 years, then, it seems Israeli government leaders and more than a few Diaspora *macherim*³³ have picked up a few pointers on how to excuse the inexcusable. Knowing their role in the legacy of the Armenian genocide, I can't listen to these people talk about the legacy of the Holocaust".³⁴

A 2007 report in *Today's Zaman*, moreover, confirms that: "In a letter addressing influential members of US Congress, including head of the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee Tom Lantos, US-based Jewish groups demanded that voting on congressional resolutions urging the US administration to recognize an alleged genocide of Armenians be delayed. The letter was jointly signed by B'nai B'rith International, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee [AJC] and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs [JINSA]."³⁵

In terms of other lobbying activities that have been undertaken, it is worth reflecting upon the following: "Turkey is known to have offered funding for academic programmes in universities such as Princeton and Georgetown. In 1998, UCLA's history department voted to reject a \$1m offer to endow a programme in Turkish and Ottoman studies because it was conditional on denying the Armenian genocide. In August 2000, Turkey threatened Microsoft with serious reprisals unless all mention of the Armenian genocide was removed from an online encyclopaedia. According to Professor Colin Tatz, an Australian academic, 'Turkey has used a mix of academic sophistication and diplomatic thuggery to put both memory and history in reverse gear'.³⁶ "Since 1999, the Turkish government has engaged the services of The Livingston Group to block these congressional resolutions" seeking to acknowledge the Armenian genocide. "The lobbying firm is led by the highly influential former Cong. Bob Livingston ... More than \$10 million" has been "paid" to "the Livingston Group" by the Turkish government "in the past 5 years (figures based on a recent study conducted by Public Citizen) ... Efforts of the American Turkish Council (ATC) and the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA) in countering these two [Armenian genocide recognition] resolutions" have also been made.³⁷ The ATC "has consistently lobbied against successive [Armenian] Genocide resolutions, using the names of top US companies including Raytheon, Boeing, Lockheed-Martin and others in their advocacy efforts".³⁸ Other key 'players' that have been involved in supporting the Turkish state's Armenian genocide denialist and/or anti-Armenian 'genocide recognition' stances include the American Business Forum in Turkey (ABFT),³⁹ several 'neocons' and "Morton Abramovich, the former US Ambassador to Turkey" and former Assistant US Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research (1985-89) who "is President of the Carnegie Foundation, a member of the editorial board of the prestigious journal *Foreign Policy*, and a founder of American Friends of Turkey. As a Washington insider, he has been an important asset to Turkey in supporting the denial of the Armenian Genocide".⁴⁰ Additional 'assets' have been identified: "In 1990, the Philip Morris lobby and the powerful Aerospace Industries Association were at the forefront of the effort to defeat Senate Resolution 212 on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide".⁴¹ Kate Ackley also confirms that "companies such as Citigroup, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Pfizer, Philip Morris International, Raymond James and others are working through the [American Turkish] Council to stop the resolution".⁴² Richard Gephart has also "been busy" since spring 2007 "promoting his new favorite cause – not universal health care or Iraq, but the Republic of Turkey, which now pays his lobbying firm, DLA Piper, \$100,000 per month for his services. Thus far, Gephart's achievements have included arranging high-level meetings for Turkish dignitaries" and "circulating a slim paperback volume ... that denies the existence of the Armenian genocide of 1915".⁴³



Auron has additionally clarified that “Turkish Jewry’s prominent involvement in the domestic American debate” has “added an additional dimension to the issue. The chief rabbi of Turkey sent a personal letter to every member of the US Senate” some time ago “saying: ‘The new initiative [aimed at recognising the Armenian genocide] greatly troubles our community. We recognise the tragedy which befell both the Turks and the Armenians ... but we cannot accept the definition of ‘genocide’”.⁴⁴ Genocide, the chief rabbi noted, as far as the Armenian case was concerned, represented a “baseless charge”.⁴⁵ Auron confirms that “the rabbi’s reasoning was”, actually, “identical to that of the Turkish authorities”.⁴⁶ He further used the “argument that such action” – i.e. recognition of the Armenian genocide as ‘genocide’ – “would diminish and relativize the significance of the [Jewish] Holocaust”.⁴⁷ Ron Kampeas has reported that “top Turkish officials and Turkish Jewish leaders” in 2007 had, indeed, jointly “sought help from US Jewish leaders to stave off an effort in the US Congress to define World War I-era massacres of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide ... The Turkish lobbying has had some effect ... Significantly, a Jewish community delegation ... was one of three delegations Turkey sent to Washington in recent months”.⁴⁸

In Turkey, meanwhile, where the state still persists with an Armenian – and Assyrian, Pontic Greek and Kurdish – genocide denialism policy even as it continues with a culturally genocidal policy against Kurds and Armenians,⁴⁹ Halil Berktaş clarifies that: “Such denialist indoctrination continues to emanate from the most authoritarian, militaristic, nationalistic ... elements of the military-bureaucratic complex, which are forcefully imposing it on the rest of Turkish society, including the media, political parties, and even the government. They are, indeed, using and manipulating this discourse to pursue objectives that are not limited to the Armenian question as such. What they are maximally after is straitjacketing all other public visions, outlooks and discourses, and establishing un-crossable “red lines”, so-called, so as to maintain the whole political system in ideological bondage to the deep state. It is as part of that blinding, blinkering and straitjacketing attempt that they are also trying to persuade (or rather, stampede) all the rest of Turkish society into standing in solidarity with the main actors of 1915, the decision-makers and the executors [of the genocide], on the grounds that they were – Turks. In Turkish nationalist discourse, therefore, Enver, Talaat and Cemal, and Bahaddin Sakir, Kuscubasi Esref, Dr. Nazim and all others of the TM, and the likes of the sub-governor of Bogazliyan, are divested of all other qualities except their Turkishness; stripped of their dictatorial inclinations, their putschism, their authoritarianism, their extralegality and non-accountability, their propensity to have their opponents and critics (including free-thinking journalists) assassinated, their extreme nationalism tinged with racism and Social Darwinism – stripped, in other words, of all evidence of a political-ideological outlook that today, with the advantage of hindsight, we might qualify as proto-fascist.”⁵⁰

For Elif Shafak: “For me, the recognition of 1915 is connected to my love for democracy and human rights ... If we had been able to face the atrocities committed against the Armenians in Anatolia, it would have been more difficult for the Turkish state to commit atrocities” – defined as genocidal in their nature and scope during the 1990’s by Article 19, Haluk Gerger, Ismail Besikci⁵¹ and Karen Parker – “against the Kurds”. Even as Shafak observes that “a society based on amnesia cannot have a mature democracy”,⁵² Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (amongst others) reminds us that Turkey is still practicing linguistic genocide against the Kurds and still remains in breach of two articles of the United Nations’ Genocide Convention.⁵³

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Notes

- Desmond Fernandes is a representative of the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities and was a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography (1994-2006) and Genocide Studies (2001-2006) at De Montfort University, Bedford, England. He is the author of *Perspectives on the Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Kurdish Genocides* (Apec, Stockholm, in press), *US, UK, German, Israeli and NATO ‘Inspired’ Psychological Warfare Operations Against the ‘Kurdish Threat’ in Turkey and Northern Iraq* (Apec, Stockholm, in press), *The Kurdish Genocide in Turkey* (Apec, Stockholm, in press), *Colonial Genocides in Turkey, Kenya and Goa* (Apec, Stockholm, in press) and co-author of *Verfolgung, Krieg und Zerstörung Der Ethnischen Identität: Genozid An Den Kurden In Der Türkei* (Medico International, Frankfurt, 2001). Please note: Emphasis, as presented in this text, is by the author.
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- Auron, Y. (2003) *The Banality of Denial*, p. 107, 108.
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- As well as ‘others’ – refer to my book *The Kurdish and Armenian Genocides* for further details.
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