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Armenian Issue Presents a Dilemma for U.S. Jews

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

LEXINGTON, Mass., Oct. 17 — On the docket for the weekly selectmen’s meeting here on Monday were the location of park benches, a liquor license for Vinny T’s restaurant and, not for the first time, the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in Turkey 90 years ago.

The debate in this affluent Boston suburb, home to many Jews and Armenians, centered on a local program to increase awareness of bias. The issue was not the program itself, but its sponsor, the [Anti-Defamation League](#), the Jewish advocacy group, which has taken a stand against a proposed Congressional resolution condemning the Armenians’ deaths as genocide.

“If you deny one genocide,” said Dr. Jack Nusan Porter, a child of Holocaust survivors and a genocide studies scholar who attended the meeting, “you deny all genocides.”

The Congressional resolution has created an international furor and deeply offended the Turkish government, both a key ally of [Israel](#)’s and a crucial logistics player for the American presence in Iraq. But as events in Boston suburbs in recent months have shown, it has also put American Jews in an anguished dilemma as they try to reconcile their support of Israel with their commitment to fighting genocide. In the end, the Board of Selectmen here voted unanimously to cut ties with the Anti-Defamation League, as did three other Boston suburbs this week. Three other towns had already done so, with more considering the option.

For many Jews, the issue has involved much soul-searching.

“It’s hard to talk about it because there are two things or more in conflict here,” said Rabbi David Lerner of Temple Emunah in Lexington. “Israel is in a very vulnerable position in the world, and Turkey is its only friend in the Middle East. Genocide is a burning issue for us, now and in the past. It’s something of who we are.”

The House resolution condemning the killings of Armenians as genocide is nonbinding and largely symbolic, but Turkey’s reaction has been swift and furious. It has recalled its ambassador from Washington and threatened to withdraw critical logistical support for the Iraq war.

For Patrick Mehr, a Lexington resident who spoke at the meeting Monday, the overriding priority is condemning the killings, regardless of Turkey’s response.

The next day at his home, Mr. Mehr, the son of a Holocaust survivor, voiced the anger many Jews and Armenians feel toward [Abraham H. Foxman](#), the Anti-Defamation League’s national director. “Abe Foxman, like [George W. Bush](#), is mumbling that it may not have been genocide,” Mr. Mehr said. “Foxman talks about

commissions of scholars who should study this. That, to me, rang exactly like Ahmadinejad saying, 'Let's have a committee to study the Holocaust.' Give me a break."

Jewish leaders have long sought to focus attention on the killings of Armenians, starting with the American ambassador to Turkey in 1915, Henry Morgenthau Sr., who wrote in a cable that the Turkish violence against Armenians was "an effort to exterminate the race." Several members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who voted for the resolution, including a key sponsor, Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of California, are Jewish.

Several major Jewish groups, like the [American Jewish Committee](#), oppose the resolution, arguing that it is not the best way to persuade the Turks to examine their past.

Mr. Foxman argues that Turkey is the only friend Israel has in the Muslim world, and it has been hospitable to Jews since giving them refuge after they were driven from Europe during the Inquisition.

"Israel's relationship with Turkey is the second most important, after its relationship with the United States," Mr. Foxman said. "All this in a world that isolates Israel, and all this can't simply be waved away."

Widespread attention to the Anti-Defamation League's opposition to the resolution came in July, when David Boyajian, an Armenian-American resident of Newton, Mass., wrote to a local newspaper saying that the town's anti-bigotry program, known as No Place for Hate, was tarnished because of its sponsorship by the Anti-Defamation League.

He wrote that the A.D.L. "has made the Holocaust and its denial key pieces" of the program, "while at the same time hypocritically working with Turkey to oppose recognition of the [Armenian genocide](#) of 1915-23."

The news shocked most local Jews, many of whom have long been active in campaigns against killings in Bosnia, Rwanda and, most recently, Sudan. By mid-August, Watertown, Mass., had decided to end its affiliation with the Anti-Defamation League's program. On Aug. 17, the board of the New England Anti-Defamation League passed a resolution calling for the national organization to recognize the Armenian genocide. Its regional director, Andrew Tarsy, was fired by the national group the next day.

The clampdown on the local chapter infuriated many Jews in the Boston area. Two members of the New England board resigned, although one has since returned, and many local leaders criticized Mr. Foxman. Newton, whose population is heavily Jewish, voted to sever ties with the Anti-Defamation League unless it changed its position on the resolution.

Mr. Foxman quickly rehired Mr. Tarsy and issued a statement intended to heal what he said were dangerous rifts in the Boston Jewish community at a time when Jewish unity was crucial. The statement did not support the House resolution. The killings of Armenians, Mr. Foxman wrote, were "tantamount to genocide."

He added, "If the word genocide had existed then, they would have called it genocide."

Some Jews praised Mr. Foxman, whose reappraisal, they said, was uncharacteristic. But other Jews and Armenians said he did not go far enough.

“It denies the intentionality of genocide,” said Joey Kurtzman, executive editor of the online magazine Jewcy.com. Janet Tassel, a congregant at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, said she did not like Mr. Foxman but could not understand how Jews could be fighting over the word genocide when Israeli and American interests are at stake.

“If this resolution goes through, it’s goodbye Charlie for Israel, for U.S. troops in Iraq,” Ms. Tassel said. “It will lead to more anti-Semitism. I’m conflicted about what’s right.”

Dr. Porter, the genocide scholar, said the differing views among Jews on the resolution stemmed in part from whether they saw Israel as particularly vulnerable. “I see Israel as a strong nation,” Dr. Porter said, after speaking for cutting ties to the Anti-Defamation League at the Lexington meeting. “Jews are strong. They don’t have to be intimidated by politics.”

The complex of considerations weighed heavily on Rabbi Howard L. Jaffe of Temple Isaiah, who after weeks of thought decided to back the genocide resolution. “It’s very hard for me to support a position that could be detrimental to Israel,” he said. “But for me as a Jew, I have to take seriously Jewish values, and they require us to do what is right and righteous.”

At the Lexington meeting, nearly everyone praised the No Place for Hate program, which has worked with hundreds of residents in the past seven years.

Some Jewish residents pointed out that the local Anti-Defamation League chapter took a stand for the resolution and should not be punished for the national leadership’s policy; but Vicki Blier, another member of Temple Isaiah, said in a phone interview that the Anti-Defamation League had to be held accountable for its views.

“If this were an organization that were denying the Holocaust, would they be allowed to do anything in town, even if what they are doing is the most beneficial of programs?” Ms. Blier said. “In my experience, Jews are at the forefront in the recognition of injustice. Jews have always stuck their neck out for others.”

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