

Turkey, Armenia and Denial

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Editorial

Turkey's self-destructive obsession with denying the Armenian genocide seems to have no limits. The Turks pulled out of a NATO exercise this week because the Canadian prime minister used the term "genocide" in reference to the mass killings of Armenians in Turkey during and after World War I. Before that, the Turkish ambassador to France was temporarily recalled to protest a French bill that would make it illegal to deny that the Armenian genocide occurred. And before that, a leading Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk, was charged with "insulting Turkish identity" for referring to the genocide (the charges were dropped after an international outcry).

Turkey's stance is hard to fathom. Each time the Turks lash out, new questions arise about Turkey's claim to a place in the European Union, and the Armenian diaspora becomes even more adamant in demanding a public reckoning over what happened.

Granted, genocide is a difficult crime for any nation to acknowledge. But it is absurd to treat any reference to the issue within Turkey as a crime and to scream "lie!" every time someone mentions genocide. By the same token, we do not see the point of the French law to ban genocide denial. Historical truths must be established through dispassionate research and debate, not legislation, even if some of those who question the evidence do so for insidious motives.

But the Turkish government considers even discussion of the issue to be a grave national insult, and reacts to it with hysteria. Five journalists who criticized a court's decision to shut down an Istanbul conference on the massacre of Armenians were arrested for insulting the courts. Charges against four were subsequently dropped, but a fifth remains on trial.

The preponderance of serious scholarship outside Turkey accepts that more than a million Armenians perished between 1914 and 1923 in a regime-sponsored campaign. Turkey's continued refusal to countenance even a discussion of the issue stands as a major obstacle to restoring relations with neighboring Armenia and to claiming Turkey's rightful place in Europe and the West. It is time for the Turks to realize that the greater danger to them is denying history.

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