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The Diplomacy of Genocide



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President Biden's Recognition of the Armenian Genocide

On the 106th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, April 24, 2021, President Biden issued a statement honoring the memory of Armenians who perished. His words were carefully chosen, mentioning Ottoman rather than Turkish authorities and referring to their imperial capital with the Byzantine name of Constantinople to distinguish it from Turkish Istanbul. But there was no

sugarcoating the bitter pill that the U.S. president was calling the Ottoman treatment of Armenian subjects the “crime of crimes”: genocide.

This language is not as new as many suppose. President Reagan used it in 1981, even if his successors declined to follow him – until now. And it was not unexpected in view of Congressional genocide recognition in 2019 and poor diplomatic relations between the United States and Turkey. Even so, his statement was hailed by Armenian Americans and condemned by Turkey. This pattern, too, was not unprecedented. It matches the reaction to the German Bundestag recognition of the genocide in 2016. The ensuing denunciation by Turkish leaders and diplomats is almost word-for-word the same, as are the empty threats and taunts about the genocidal pasts of Germany and the United States.

Those points are legitimate. The German government has still not settled the issue of the actual first genocide of the twentieth century: the colonial war against the Herero and Nama people in German Southwest Africa (today’s Namibia) in 1904-05. And no U.S. president has made such a heartfelt statement about Native Americans. But mud flung by Turkish President Erdogan did not stick because it does not vitiate Ottoman responsibility for the genocide. Moreover, his tendency to rhetorical exaggeration does not lend credibility to his accusations: for example, in condemning Israel for genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and in defending former Sudanese president Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir against an International Criminal Court indictment by claiming that Muslims cannot commit genocide. Erdogan’s alienation of American Jewish groups with his outlandish statements cost him friends in Washington, DC, when it came to the constant lobbying campaigns in which all states engage to win U.S. favor.

And yet, the issue of “clean hands” raises key issues in what I called the “diplomacy of genocide,” namely the mobilization and rejection of genocide claims in international relations and domestic politics. Turkish authorities were anticipating Biden’s statement and planned accordingly: Erdogan made indignant noises for his domestic constituency while ensuring that no action would imperil the country’s fragile economy. For their part, the Americans could claim that once again foreign policy was animated by the noble ideals of human rights rather than *Realpolitik*.

However, this claim that genocide recognition is a human rights rather than a political issue is hard to credit when it is patently obvious that stigmatizing other countries is a move in a game

of diplomatic chess. Human rights *are* politics. Biden was signaling the U.S. government's dissatisfaction with Turkish policy in a number of domains, like its conduct in Syria and the purchase of Russian military hardware.

At the same time, proclaiming human rights can blow back on its wielders. The U.S. commitment to a human rights-informed diplomacy proclaimed is hard to square with the U.S. dismissal of the Human Rights Watch report on Israel and the crime of apartheid and persecution against Palestinians released a few days after Biden's genocide recognition statement. Crediting the Human Rights Watch report about China's criminal treatment of Uyghurs while discounting its report on Palestine does not look consistent. But if the focus is genocide rather than "lesser crimes," the U.S. position is not only consistent but diplomatically cunning: having finally recognized the Armenian genocide, the United States can more easily accuse the Myanmar military and Chinese state of genocide.

Hypocrisy cannot be avoided by non-recognition either. Each year, Israel is criticized for not recognizing the Armenian genocide. How could the country that represents the Holocaust's survivors fail to honor the genocide of Armenians, they say? It is not difficult to understand, observe commentators. They note that Israel sells arms to Armenian rival Azerbaijan and has a longstanding strategic relationship with Turkey that Israeli security elites hope to revive after Erdogan departs the scene. They also note that Israel regards the Holocaust as unique, virtually the only genocide in history, meaning it is difficult to recognize the Armenian one, especially as its anniversary falls so close to Holocaust Memorial Day.

Israeli and Turkish elites both benefit from this tacit assumption, with the Turkish state brandishing its credentials as an upstanding international citizen that recognizes the Holocaust's special status while boasting about its generous treatment of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Unsaid so far is that recognizing mass population expulsion, accompanied by massacres, in the context of a military campaign – i.e., the elements of the Armenian genocide – as genocide could open a Pandora's box of uncomfortable historical comparison.

Rare are the politicians who face up to the problem of clean hands. One of them is the German Green Party politician, Cem Özdemir. In the 2016 Bundestag debate, he reminded all that Imperial Germany had backed the Ottoman state and covered up the genocide. "They knew exactly what was going on," he said. "In this respect we're guilty of complicity and have to

admit this.” He also called on the Bundestag to address the genocidal campaign in German Southwest Africa.

So far it has been challenging for the German political class to acknowledge this genocide and to pay reparations because in their minds the crime of genocide is linked to the Holocaust, which they too believe to be unique. This uniquely high threshold also provides Myanmar and China with a convenient loophole to claim their treatment of Rohingyas and Uyghurs respectively is not genocidal.

The international consensus on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, embodied in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, makes the diplomacy of genocide a fraught game of analogizing and dis-analogizing. At stake are not only archaic notions of “national honor” but also prosaic ones of lawsuits for reparations. While in Europe, genocide recognition is more symbolic, recognition of a historic wrong by the United States enables lawsuits against companies and states that operate there. With presidential recognition of the Armenian genocide, all branches of the government are aligned, removing the lack of federal affirmation from the path of complainants. In California, cases are pending against Turkey, including the land of Incirlik airbase and one of the central banks. Several courts have referred these matters to federal jurisdiction, and these cases will certainly proceed.

Whether morality or power, or morality wielded by power, drive the diplomacy of genocide, the combination of powerful emotions and the prospects of material gain (and loss) makes it intensely contested and observed.

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