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It's time the world recognised the Armenian genocide

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Tsitsernakaberd Genocide memorial in Yerevan, Armenia. Stefan Fotos, CC BY-SA

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Even now, 100 years on, the slaughter of 1.5m Ottoman Armenians which began in April 1915 has two of the world's most powerful people at loggerheads. While Pope Francis recently referred to “the first genocide of the 20th century”, Barack Obama has made it known he will once again break a campaign pledge by stopping short of using what has become a politically loaded term to mark the centenary of one of the darkest episodes in modern history.

On April 24 1915, 250 Armenian community leaders and intellectuals were rounded up in Istanbul, marking the start of an Ottoman Empire policy to annihilate the Armenian population, either through murder or deportation in death marches across the Syrian desert.

The contemporary Armenian diaspora, dispersed throughout the world, was born in this genocide. Its descendants have grown up with grandparents and great-grandparents who experienced it firsthand. The continuing potency of the genocide as the unifying thread of the complex, scattered and multi-layered Armenian diaspora is largely due to the fact that it has never been recognised by Turkey.

A hundred years have passed since the Medz Yeghern (the Great Calamity) yet it remains an emotive political issue. The Turkish Republic, which was founded in the ashes of Ottoman Christians – and benefited from the usurping of their assets and properties – denies it was a genocide. Official Turkish historiography considers the Ottoman Armenians to be traitors who collaborated with the Russians, thereby justifying their fate. The official position is that Armenians and Turks died in the context of a civil war – a similar narrative to the one employed by comparative cases such as the Rwandan genocide.

In denial

While the language of denial, methodologies and nuances have shifted over the past century, in essence the formal stance remains unwavering. The Turkish state has invested a great deal of money and effort to maintain and spread its narrative, co-opting scholars, endowing universities, hiring PR companies and lobbyists.

It has punished countries that have recognised the genocide, most memorably its aggressive rhetoric and policies against France. It has also found ever more creative ways to divert attention from its commemoration. This year Turkey has chosen to mark the centenary of the Allied landings at Gallipoli on April 24 – as opposed to April 25 which the rest of the world recognises as the anniversary. This can only be seen as a blatant move to deflect focus from the genocide commemorations in Armenia, putting world leaders in the position of having to choose which to attend.

Turkey's strategic importance means it has steadfast allies like the UK, where Prince Charles is expected to attend the Gallipoli celebrations. It is not in any state's interest to challenge Turkey on this issue or its poor human rights record, the increasing numbers of journalists languishing in its jails, its treatment of minorities, its deteriorating commitment to democratic freedoms, or the normalisation of state violence as evident in the squashing of the Gezi Park protests two years ago.



More than 1.5m Armenians perished in the conflict and the diaspora that followed.

Young Shanahan, CC BY-SA

Western allies, including the UK and the US, are still wedded to the fairy tale of Turkey as a “model” for the Arab states, combining democracy, a booming neo-liberal economy, state secularism, Islamic roots and culture.

Insulting Turkishness

One may wonder why the Turkish state is obsessed with denying something that happened 100 years ago, in the face of mounting international consensus. Despite greater openness in Turkish society over the past decade or so,

discussing the fate of the Ottoman Armenians is still an act that can land you in prison or worse. The murder of Armenian-Turkish newspaper editor and public intellectual **Hrant Dink** in 2007 serves as a recent reminder. The infamous **Article 301 of the Turkish penal code** makes “insulting Turkishness” a crime, as writers Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak and many other individuals have found.

The Armenian genocide lies at the very foundation of the Republic of Turkey and as such is viewed as a threat to the integrity and unity of the national narrative that the Kemalists worked so hard to craft. It is not so much the fear of reparations or compensation that account for the intransigent Turkish position – though these certainly play a part – but the perceived denigration to the honour and (self)image of the Turkish state.

All this is in stark contrast to a small but growing movement within Turkish civil society. Liberal Turks and Kurds have come together in the past decade to confront and deconstruct the complexities

of Turkish national identity, and with it, the “Armenian issue”. This transnational movement of Turks, Kurds, Armenians and others, is rooted in a vibrant Turkish civil society and based on sincere and committed (political) friendships, connections and networks. Although it is limited in size, its transformative potential in society is huge, and offers real hope in contrast to the position of the state.

Activists of Turkish or Kurdish origin are among those leading the way, painstakingly carving out a small but widening alternative space from which to speak and act. This space harks back to a buried, but retrievable shared historical memory, when many Ottoman Armenians, Greeks, Turks and Kurds (and others) lived peacefully alongside each other. Many Armenian families have a personal story of Kurds or Turks protecting or attempting to save their Armenian neighbours during the massacres.

There is also a growing movement of “hidden” or “Islamised” Armenians in Turkey now claiming Armenian roots through their grandmothers, who were taken in as children by Muslim families. All these developments challenge the founding tenets of the Turkish nation and present a poignant human face to a history that have become bitterly politicised.

International recognition and solidarity

Days after Pope Francis’ intervention on the genocide, the European Parliament adopted a resolution commemorating the genocide and urging Turkey to acknowledge it. Germany is expected to do the same, joining 23 states that have passed resolutions recognising the genocide. In the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have done so. However, not upsetting Turkey is now more important than ever, due to the key role it plays in the battle against Islamic State and the desperate situation in the Middle East.

Many states – including Britain – are built on violent and imperial pasts and revisionist narratives. Whether the tragic plight of the Native Americans, the Palestinian Nakba and countless others, the attempted obliteration of people’s historical presence, their suffering and their memories, is a matter of grave concern. By choosing to deny the genocide of the Armenians, the Turkish state seeks to continue to invalidate their very existence; indeed many have called denial the final stage of genocide.

By attempting to silence the escalating numbers of historians, academics, intellectuals, journalists, activists and ordinary folk who contradict Turkey’s official stance, both within and outside its borders, Turkey remains entrenched in a 100-year-old conflict. The lack of recognition means the Armenian diaspora remains debilitated by “too much memory”.

Yet, the remembrance and recognition of the Armenian genocide is not just an issue for Armenians and Turks. What it represents speaks to our shared humanity – the fragility of our daily lives, but also the potential and transcendence of the human spirit. This is why, in my view, the centenary has captured so much popular attention, with the number of global advocates increasing on a daily basis. Its commemoration is a symbol of our collective pain, our commitment to atonement and to the restoration of human dignity where it has been violently breached – in every context and every epoch.

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