



“A Century of Denial: Armenian Genocide and the Ongoing Quest for Justice”
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
April 23, 2015

Good afternoon and welcome to our witnesses and everyone joining us for today’s hearing marking 100 years since the start of the Armenian genocide – one of the most terrible crimes of the twentieth century.

The Armenian genocide is the only one of the genocides of the twentieth century in which the nation that was decimated by genocide has been subject to the ongoing outrage of a massive campaign of genocide denial, openly sustained by state authority. This campaign of genocide denial is a slap in the face to the Armenian people, preventing reconciliation and healing. As Pope Francis said at his Mass marking the centenary of the genocide, “Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it.”

In September 2000 I chaired the first Congressional hearing on the Armenian genocide. It was a four-hour hearing and the testimony I heard that day, and many accounts of the atrocities I have read in the articles and books over the years, including the eyewitness account *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, have shocked me deeply.

The facts were reported throughout the world as they were happening, corroborated immediately afterward by survivors and even some perpetrators, and have been amply documented by historians, including in a number of recent books.

In 1915, there were about 2 million Armenians living in what was then the Ottoman Empire. They were living in a region that they inhabited for 2,500 years. By 1923, well over 90 percent of these Armenians had disappeared. Most of them, as many as 1.5 million, were dead – most of them death-marched into the desert or shot, and subject in some cases to rape or other unbelievable cruelties. The remainder had been forced into exile.

When the term genocide was invented in 1944 to describe the systematic destruction of an entire people, its author Raphael Lemkin explained the term by saying it was “the sort of thing Hitler did to the Jews and the Turks did to the Armenians.”

Since the facts are so well-established, this is not a hearing only to inquire into the events of 1915. Rather it is also a hearing on what has happened since then, and is still happening today – genocide denial.

Sadly, the Turkish government has driven this campaign of denial, and has done so over a course of decades, using a variety of means to punish Turkish citizens who dared to acknowledge the crimes committed by the Ottoman government in 1915. The Turkish government has also threatened other countries to keep them

from acknowledging the genocide – ironically, it is only the Turkish government’s campaign of denial that obliges other countries to recognize the genocide. And the Turkish government underwrites a disinformation campaign to confuse the historical record. It also tries to relativize the Ottoman government’s crimes, sometimes by changing the subject to the wartime sufferings of Turks, or crimes committed by individual Armenians.

This is in no sense a hearing against Turkey – rather I consider it a hearing that supports the Turkish people. Today many people in Turkey are in the process of freeing themselves from the effects of decades of denialist propaganda by their government. Many already see through the official denialism, and some oppose it openly.

I want to support and express my admiration for these people – for their courage, for their Turkish patriotism. They act, sometimes at personal risk to themselves, for the good of their country and out of love of their country. They are ‘thought-leaders’ – and there are many signs of this. In recent weeks, in the lead up to the centenary of the genocide, there have been many deeply moving feature stories in the world press about Turks discovering their families’ secret Armenian heritage, or seeking to connect with the Armenian aspects of Turkish history, or supporting efforts to rebuild Armenian churches. I’d like to insert one of these articles, “Remembering the Armenian Genocide,” by Victor Gaetan, into the hearing record.

No country is immune from evil, all governments have been complicit at some point in their histories in terrible crimes – and this certainly includes the United States. It includes Germany. I want to urge the Turkish government – the path taken by Germany after World War II was the right one. Germany started with open acknowledgment of the crimes of the Holocaust, and it built from there, over a course of decades establishing relationships with Jewish groups and Israel, in which it demonstrated remorse and a commitment to righting its wrongs, as far as it could. Now there is a strong German-Israeli friendship – and today Germany is one of the most respected countries in the world.

That path is still open to the Turkish government, and working to put Turkey on it will be the truest, deepest expression of Turkish patriotism.

Finally, I must respond to President Obama. On Tuesday his aides met with Armenian leaders and made it clear that once again he will not recognize the Armenian genocide – he will not use the word “genocide” tomorrow. This is in direct contradiction to the promises that he made before becoming president – and in order to become president.

While a candidate, in 2008 the President made passionate statements in support of genocide recognition.

I also share with Armenian Americans – so many of whom are descended from genocide survivors – a principled commitment to commemorating and ending genocide. That starts with acknowledging the tragic instances of genocide in world history. As a U.S. Senator, I have stood with the Armenian American community in calling for Turkey’s acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide. Two years ago, I criticized the Secretary of State for the firing of U.S. Ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, after he properly used the term “genocide” to describe Turkey’s slaughter of thousands of Armenians starting in 1915. I shared with Secretary Rice my firmly held conviction that the Armenian Genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence. The facts are undeniable. An official policy that calls on diplomats to distort the historical facts is an untenable policy. As a senator, I strongly support passage of the Armenian Genocide Resolution (H.Res.106 and S.Res.106), and as President I will recognize the Armenian Genocide.

These are beautiful words which echo hollowly today. The president’s abandonment of this commitment is unconscionable and cynical.

With Germany and the EU lining up to do the right thing, our government needs to do likewise. At this point, according the Congressional Research Service, the EU states listed as having recognized a genocide are France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Greece, and Cyprus, and the Holy See. The European Parliament has also referred to the deaths as genocide. The non-EU states are Argentina, Canada, Chile, Lebanon, Russia, Switzerland, Uruguay, Vatican City, and Venezuela. Sadly, after the President's powerful promise, he is following, not leading – or rather, we are not even following.

As mass atrocities unfold in Syria and Iraq, the U.S. needs the Turkish government to engage constructively with its neighbors. The Turkish government can do this much more effectively after it honestly faces its own past – the President is missing an opportunity to move Turkey toward this path.

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