Israeli Policy and the Israeli-Armenian Minority: A Study of Realpolitik, Cultural Bias, and National Hypocrisy

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The Israeli-Armenian Identity in Creating the Sociopolitical Attitude

From the very founding of Israel in 1948, Jewish foreign policy was of utmost importance, radically shaping the political system. The Holocaust was such a traumatic element in Jewish society and culture that its influence has naturally been pervasive. Israel in its early years struggled to create a new Jewish nation, including an open immigration policy, responsibility for the security and well-being of Jewish communities worldwide, undertaking the rescue of distressed Jews from foreign countries, and attempting to capture Nazi war-criminals. All of these policies were designed to ensure a continuous struggle against anti-Semitism and to refute the Holocaust deniers. Overall, Israel as a Jewish state has emerged from the ruins of the Holocaust, using recent history (as well as the events and inspiration of the preceding 3,000 years) to build a nation. As a result, a distinct Jewish-Israeli identity has been developed – an identity that attempts to achieve equilibrium within the constraints of a democratic, yet non-secular, regime.

While the Jewish Holocaust is the most well-known genocide, the Armenian slaughter is considered by most historians to be one of the first modern genocides. With such a comparable past shared between the Jews and the Armenians, there should be a strong sense of solidarity and kinship between the two groups of people. In fact, there is primarily one demand that the Armenian population has consistently made to the Israeli government – official recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Yet Israel has consistently refused to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, claiming that “ historians, not politicians, should discuss the issue.” The suggestion that genocide should be reserved strictly for historians is hypocritical relative to Israel’s intense response to the Jewish genocide – the Holocaust directly and perversely influenced the formation of modern Israel.

The education policy in Israel mandates a specific curriculum in the teaching of the Holocaust, promoting a “bemegonic version of Holocaust experience,” becoming the central educative apparatus. A cohesive historical memory is vital in creating a Jewish-Israeli ethnocentric identity – a unifying factor in the Jewish-Israeli identity. While the memory of the Holocaust is central to this Israeli collective identity, “the formal curriculum is accompanied by stressing the linkage between the Holocaust, the existence and the moral justifications of Zionism, and the State of Israel.” The recognition of the Armenian genocide is seen as a direct threat to this collective identity, with the fear that it could diminish the significance of the Jewish Holocaust. The ultra-Orthodox community is a great deterrent of the Armenian Genocide, as there seems to be a “competition of victims.” Consequently, several very influential and conservative Jewish-Israeli groups lobby to actively oppose recognition. In Israel, there is a persistent fear for the safety of Turkish Jews as well as Jews in other Arab nations motivates the evasive Israeli position regarding the Armenian genocide. The Turkish government commonly exploits any involvement in the campaign, claiming that any documented Armenian deaths were the result of war, not specific ethnic persecution. If Israel were to anger Turkey by such recognition, there could be anti-Semitic repercussions. In addition, the Arab world, protection of Jews worldwide has been a central theme of Israeli foreign policy since the foundation of the state. This principle suggests that Israel is willing to compromise its democratic system to preserve this aspect of Jewish foreign policy and to protect the “uniqueness” of the Jewish Holocaust – two themes central in defining Israeli sociopolitical attitudes.

The blatant denial of recognition for the Armenian victims is essentially uprooted in Israel’s domestic policy. The Knesset has consistently rejected bills that recognize the Armenian genocide. This issue has been introduced in the Knesset several times (with persistent opposition from the members of parliament), all of the bills have subsequently failed to pass. In response to the most recent Armenian genocide recognition bill of 2007, a Member of Parliament (MP) of the Meretz party strongly condemned denial of the genocide, ready for real reasons, but also because of strong Jewish empathy. The MP proclaimed that the Israeli government “[w]e yet this vote not only to the Armenian people, who are struggling to prolong the memory” of the Nazi Holocaust. Nevertheless, the significance of the Jewish-Israeli sociopolitical attitude outweighed the immoral implications of implicitly denying the Armenian Genocide.

Further, by disregarding memorial assemblies held every year on April 24th by Israeli-Armenians, the Israeli government systematically avoids this issue. Government officials have never participated in such assemblies, apart from two exceptions. Israel has also controlled and pressured its own media. Specifically, in 1978 Israeli authorities demanded that the Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA) cancel presentation of a film about the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem, which had several references to the genocide. Again in 1990, the IBA canceled another movie screening; the American film, “Journey to Armenia” also referenced this genocide, and so it too was cancelled. The IBA managing director did not even attempt to discreetly specify the reasons for cancellation, admitting that “they had received request from the Turkish embassy, from the association of Turkish Immigrants in Israel, and from other Turkish-Israeli immigrant groups.” This direct manipulation and interference of the media as an egregious violation of a democratic system and principles.

There are various causal mechanisms which should protect minority rights in a democracy, regardless of the sociopolitical factors. Across governments, the protection of minorities within a regime – economic development encourages citizens to be more active in politics through participation and, various institutions. Consequently, mobilization and coordination of activities is strengthened, and thus higher levels of participation are evident. The creation of a strong civil society also derives from the diversity and density of the population. These factors spawn more interest groups and policymaking, which serve to promote accountability and equality within society. All of these elements support minority rights and civil liberties. However, Israel is a unique system which does not fit traditional models of democracy. Lijphart’s consensus model of democracy most closely fits the Israeli system. The method of proportional election, with formation of coalitions in a multi-party system, maximizes the representation of citizens. There are also organized corporatist interest groups which help promote the inclusion of minorities. Inclusion of minorities in political institutions would mitigate the effects of a sociopolitical culture. However, there is no written constitution, and to date no minority party has served in any government coalition. An emphasis on consensus within a democracy serves to promote inclusion. Yet, the Israeli government’s agenda maintains the specific goals of catering to the Jewish majority.
ISRAEL-TURKEY RELATIONS AND THE SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

The Armenian minority in Israel is extremely underrepresented in political life. In fact, Israel's Jewish nationalists, who form the majority of the Jewish population, largely ignore the Armenian minority. While Turkey firmly denies the Armenian Genocide, and the differento Turkish governments have exerted a constant pressure on other nations, including Israel, to do the same. The pressure on Israel began when the nation was founded and it is a constant aspect of Turkish foreign relations. At Turkey's urging, Israel has altered its domestic and foreign policies, using its own political influence to perpetuate the denial of the Armenian Genocide. Nevertheless, there has been an outcry from the worldwide Jewish community, condemning the denial and the Israeli government's submission to Turkish pressure. Despite this resistance, and, although the official Israeli position conceals that what happened to the Armenians was a “tragedy,” Israel continues to avoid the term “genocide.” In order to placate the Turkish government, which is resolute in denying its involvement in the Armenian genocide, Israel is apparently willing to promulgate what it is best a historical misrepresentation.

The Holocaust resonates so deeply in the minds of every Jew worldwide, that it would seem impossible that a Jewish state could actively choose to ignore the Armenian genocide, regardless of the potentially negative impact on Israel's relationship with Turkey. While Israel's relationship with Turkey is clearly a very strategic partnership for security and economic reasons, perpetuating Armenian Genocide denial is inexcusable. Such recognition of the genocide, and thus, the recognition of its consequences, would have no tangible effect on Turkey. As a democracy, Israel's regime should be antithetical to such mistreatment of a minority group for a seemingly symbolic cause. Consequently, the question arises: how can Israel place the security of its citizens above the recognition that they can induce Israel's political system, instrumentally and hypocritically, to ignore the demands of its own Armenian citizens?

In 1948, Israel formally recognized the Armenian genocide as a fact. But while the official position of Israel, foreign trade, with export to larger markets serving as the primary aspect is obvious. With liberal sharing of military systems and technology, Turkey is now a valuable customer for Israeli arms. The military connection with Turkey also helps Israel augment its security. In 1992, a document for military collaboration was signed, developing a “concrete protocol...designating specific areas of military co-operation.” Both the Israeli and Turkish Air Forces were then able to train together. With open airspace and exposure to new terrain, the Israeli military gained significant experience, thus increasing its military strength. Intelligence ties were also strengthened in the 1993 Memorandum of Understanding, providing Israel with additional military information. In 1983, Israel, Turkey and Iran signed the Baghdad Protocol, which establishes relations specifically with Turkey were not a new concept – military development was the main focus of policy from Israel's inception, and regional security connections were the ultimate goal. For decades, Iran and Ethiopia played a role in securing the Middle East, yet in the 1970s, with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Marxist takeover in Ethiopia, the mantle of leadership in regional security was placed firmly on Turkey.

CONCLUSION

The highest diplomatic, economic, and military ties between Israel and Turkey are based on mutual interest. Given the current potential for political and military volatility in the Middle East, it is exceedingly apparent that maintaining good relations with Turkey is in Israel's national security interest. Throughout the past decades, Israel and Turkey have mutually contributed to large volumetric strategic growth in both nations. With a bilateral Free Trade Agreement fully operational by the year 2000, financial ties continued to strengthen. Specifically, in February of 2000, Israeli companies were contracted for work in Turkey for development projects (e.g., dams, hydro-electric plants, and irrigation systems) and the total value of these contracts grossed $600m. In addition, the overall annual trade has increased, with Turkey being Israel's fourth largest trading partner. According to the State of Israel, more than $1 billion in imports, to and from Turkey. It is obvious then, that a change in diplomatic policies could have significant implications for both nations. Throughout the past decades, Israel and Turkey have mutually contributed to large volumetric strategic growth in both nations. With a bilateral Free Trade Agreement fully operational by the year 2000, financial ties continued to strengthen. Specifically, in February of 2000, Israeli companies were contracted for work in Turkey for development projects (e.g., dams, hydro-electric plants, and irrigation systems) and the total value of these contracts grossed $600m. In addition, the overall annual trade has increased, with Turkey being Israel’s fourth largest trading partner. According to the State of Israel, more than $1 billion in imports, to and from Turkey. It is obvious then, that a change in diplomatic policies could have significant implications for both nations. Throughout the past decades, Israel and Turkey have mutually contributed to large volumetric strategic growth in both nations. With a bilateral Free Trade Agreement fully operational by the year 2000, financial ties continued to strengthen. Specifically, in February of 2000, Israeli companies were contracted for work in Turkey for development projects (e.g., dams, hydro-electric plants, and irrigation systems) and the total value of these contracts grossed $600m. In addition, the overall annual trade has increased, with Turkey being Israel’s fourth largest trading partner. According to the State of Israel, more than $1 billion in imports, to and from Turkey. It is obvious then, that a change in diplomatic policies could have significant implications for both nations.

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The import of the Turkish-Israeli relationship and the constant security threat that Israel faces certainly cannot be underestimated, but the Armenian minority is able to maintain basic rights within this political system, even though they struggle to gain significant control and political representation. Israel is a strong, democratic regime, so the question arises as to whether it is capable of offering the Armenians a full-fledged government. While the Armenians take a relatively passive stance in their role in government, Israel's minority policies in many cases seem to be ill-conceived, prohibiting any real influence of the Armenian population. Israel is in a constant state of alert, and as a result, military considerations are a key element in Israeli policy; the relationship with Turkey is considered to be the cornerstone of regional stability. With such turmoil in the Middle East, it is to be expected that citizens may lose individual rights in a nation in a constant state of alert. However, Armenians seem to consistently experience inequality, regardless of the changing levels of the security threat over the decades. While one theory expects minority populations to be well treated in a democratic regime, the other theory maintains that security threats can constrain the civil rights of the population. Nonetheless, there seem to be several variables which serve as causal mechanisms for the mistreatment of the Armenian population. The strong Jewish-Israeli identity can certainly explain Israel's extreme reluctance to integrate other ethnic groups fully into society. This sociopolitical factor skews the results of the anticipated theoretical outcome, while subjecting Israel to the strong effects of two conflicting theories.

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