

THE CONVERSATION

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Denial of the Armenian Genocide should concern us all

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Speaking out. EPA/Deniz Topak

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April 24 marks the anniversary of the start of the **Armenian Genocide**, during which the Ottoman state murdered 1.5m Ottoman Armenians. But while it might have begun 102 years ago, in a sense, the genocide did not end; the inheritor Turkish state then embarked on a project of denial – the **final stage of genocide**.

The Turkish state's denialism continues to subvert and undermine the memories of the survivors and the claims of their descendants, now scattered throughout the globe. This denialism is a foundation of the Turkish state and a cornerstone of its foreign policy, extending to ever-more creative and expansive international campaigns and efforts international campaigns.

That only **23 countries** currently officially recognise the genocide reflects Turkey's geopolitical importance. It's a crucial NATO ally and world player, and most of the international community is keen not to antagonise it. Each time a country acknowledges the Armenian genocide, Turkey is quick to retaliate, breaking diplomatic ties and tearing up trade deals while issuing harsh denouncements and threats.

The latest episode in the denialist game is the response to *The Promise*, the first mainstream Hollywood film about the genocide that was recently released in the US.

THE PROMISE OFFICIAL Trailer (2016) Christian Bale Armenian Genocid...



Despite only being shown to small festival audiences so far, the film has drawn vast numbers of negative online ratings, apparently thanks to an online campaign by Turkish denialists. Turkish funders, meanwhile, backed the production of *The Ottoman Lieutenant*, a film set in the same period, which critics have derided as “Turkish propaganda”.

One may legitimately wonder why recognising a genocide that took place more than a century ago remains controversial. All states are based on some history of violence, and collective amnesia; nations are understandably reluctant to face up to their violent past or acknowledge their part in crimes and injustices. It is always painful to deal with a less-than-glorious chapter of national history, whether it is done symbolically (like the US’s 2009 apology to Native Americans to Native Americans) or materially (like German reparations and restitution for the Holocaust).

But while the Turkish state’s efforts have used various tropes and approaches over the decades, its denialism remains undiluted. Under Article 301 of Turkey’s penal code, citizens and cultural luminaries are regularly prosecuted for “insulting” the Turkish nation or state or bringing “shame” on the republic by mentioning the genocide, even subtly. The narrative of denial of state genocide is pursued at all costs.

Turn for the worse

In April 2015 the centenary of the genocide was marked in Turkey by a burgeoning civil society movement, that has been bravely engaged in these issues for more than a decade. Since then the situation in Turkey has deteriorated sharply. The Turkish state’s list of “enemies” is growing every day; it includes Academics for Peace, who dared to call on the government to stop its war against the Kurds in Anatolia, and anyone suspected of links to the Islamist Gülen movement, the ruling party’s former ally. The failed coup against the government in July 2016 was followed by purges of state employees, many from the education sector.

Then a majority of the Turkish electorate voted to grant President Erdoğan vastly expanded powers, which many regard as the building blocks of authoritarianism. Erdoğan won after a contentious

campaign and by only a narrow margin, an indication of just how divided Turkish society now is, and how his government is exploiting these divisions to consolidate its power.

Erdoğan has repeatedly shown his willingness to crush anyone who opposes him, and his government is clearly closing up the space for dissent in the Turkish public sphere. Denying a historic genocide perfectly serves the interests of this regime, one that normalises state violence, relentlessly promotes its own narrative, and punishes any opposition.



A protest against genocide denial in Istanbul. EPA/Cem Turkel

It is crucial to remember that this phenomenon is far from confined to Turkey. Societies around the world witness it on a daily basis: state-sponsored genocide is repackaged as civil war, victims are recast as instigators, state violence is sold as national security, and fabrications or “alternative facts” are presented as news. If this is allowed to stand, this will not just be a post-truth world, but one without a moral compass.

Too often, the powerful are unrestricted and unaccountable for their actions, while weak are rendered invisible and irrelevant. For the sake of all victims of state violence all over the world, past and present, speaking truth to power has never had greater urgency.

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