

Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman Wicker, and Commissioners, thank you for organizing today's Helsinki Commission hearing and for your invitation to share our views on the ongoing costs and consequences of the Republic of Turkey's denial of the truth and obstruction of justice regarding the Armenian Genocide.

It is a tribute to the Commission that its leaders have chosen to title today's hearing: "A Century of Denial: The Armenian Genocide and the Ongoing Quest for Justice." For that is the essential matter at hand.

Far too often, over the past several decades, under Turkey's arm-twisting here in Washington, DC, official discussions of the Armenian Genocide were framed in denialist terms, on the basis of Ankara's artificially contrived "debate" about whether there was an Armenian Genocide. Of course we all know that the Armenian Genocide is settled history.

We have also seen debate around the false choices presented by Ankara's apologists, calling into question whether America can afford to speak the truth, as if we could ever advance our international interests by compromising our national values. Of course, we know that no foreign country deserves a veto over our human rights policy, a gag-rule against our stand against genocide. We must never, ever outsource our nation's moral voice.

Most recently, we have seen a cynical campaign by Turkey to silence America's moral voice by arguing - against all evidence - that the recognition of the Armenian Genocide represents an obstacle to improved Armenian-Turkish relations. That position is akin to saying that post-war Germany's establishment of relations with Israel would have been somehow better served by the world's silence about the Holocaust. Or that the path to Hutu-Tutsi reconciliation rests upon a refusal to speak forthrightly about the realities of the Rwandan Genocide.

The real open questions - the ones deserving of our attention - are whether the direct consequences of this genocide, which have to date all fallen upon the Armenian nation, will - as they should - also be shared by the state and society that have benefited so greatly from the fruits of this crime; and, whether the rightful resolution of this wrong can - as it must - serve as the fundamental basis for a true Armenian-Turkish reconciliation and an enduring regional peace. These are the real questions.

The fact is that, a century after 1915, Turkey's denial of truth and justice for the Armenian Genocide remains the central issue between Turks and Armenians, the one that must be openly acknowledged, honestly discussed, and fairly resolved for there to be real, sustained progress in relations between these two nations.

There are many aspects to the costs of Armenian Genocide denial - costs to both U.S. interests and American values as well as to international norms. I would like to address just a few of them today.

There is, of course, first and foremost, the moral cost.

No one has spoken more powerfully to this aspect than Pope Francis. Earlier this month, he offered a sermon during an Armenian Catholic rite in St. Peter's Basilica. The Pontiff, consistent with the Vatican's long standing principled tradition of Armenian Genocide recognition, spoke honestly about this atrocity, telling the world that "Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it."

These powerful words by Pope Francis reflect the values of every faith's tradition, every nation's code of morality, every civilized culture's concept of justice. These principles are manifested in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, the life's work of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish lawyer who cited the Armenian massacres as a primary driver of his coining of the term "genocide" and his efforts to build a global consensus around this landmark international treaty.

The cause of genocide prevention, a core moral imperative of our age, requires, as the Pope so powerfully stated, that we not engage in "concealing or denying evil."

A second cost of Armenian Genocide denial is the danger to at-risk populations around the world created by Turkey's precedent of a genocide openly committed and unapologetically denied. Perpetrators of subsequent crimes - from Hitler to Al-Bashir - have been emboldened by the international community's failure to confront genocide. Our United Nation's Ambassador, Samantha Power, has properly called this phenomenon the "Problem from Hell."

If we are to end the cycle of genocide - and no one is more committed to this cause than our community - we must elevate America's and all the world's response to genocide from a political calculation to a moral imperative.

A third cost of Armenian Genocide denial is the threat it represents to Armenians, a Christian nation with deep connections to the Western tradition and a long history of friendship with the American people. Very simply, Armenia cannot be safe as long as it is bordered by an over-armed and unrepentant perpetrator of genocide. Armenians cannot be secure as long as Turkish schoolchildren are taught that Armenians were traitors, the perpetrators were heroes, and the victims deserving of their fate.

A fourth cost is the price the Turkish people pay, in terms of their own nation's progress toward greater tolerance and pluralism. A Turkey that fully accepts responsibility for the Armenian Genocide would very likely be one that is on the road to rehabilitation into a post-genocidal state. Sadly, we have seen few official signs of progress on this front. President Erdogan has doubled down on denial while Armenians in Turkey are regularly threatened with renewed deportations. The vast majority of the remaining Christian heritage of Anatolia is being systematically erased. While many of Turkey's most popular films and books scapegoat and celebrate the destruction of "treasonous" minorities, there are encouraging signs of a small but growing civil society movement in favor of ending Turkey's denials. In fact, tomorrow, groups of brave Turkish citizens will be joined by Armenians from around the world - at the risk of prosecution or worse - to call for a just resolution of the Armenian Genocide. We should encourage and stand with these principled voices.

And finally, a fifth cost is the destruction of the rich religious heritage of Anatolia, a cradle of the early Christian faith.

As the esteemed leaders and members of the Commission know, Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Pontians, and Arameans (Syriacs) long lived in what is present-day Turkey. It is in appreciation of your understanding of this rich history - and an awareness of the vast desecration being visited today upon Christian holy sites by violent extremists - that I would like to close with a brief review of how this aspect relates to Turkey's denials.

Thousands of years before the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, these nations gave birth to great civilizations and established a rich civic, religious, and cultural heritage. They were, upon these biblical lands, among the first Christians, dating back to the travels through Anatolia of the Apostles, Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Armenia, in 301 A.D., became the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion.

Present-day Turkey is home to many of the most important centers of early Christianity - most notably Nicaea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople, containing a rich legacy of Christian heritage, including thousands of religious sites and properties.

Ottoman Turkey's campaign of genocide against its Armenian and other Christian subjects, in addition to murdering over 2,000,000 Christians and exiling of hundreds of thousands of others from their homelands of thousands of years, also involved the systematic destruction of churches and religious sites, illegal expropriation of properties, discriminatory policies, restrictions on worship, and other efforts to suppress and ultimately erase the Christian heritage of these lands.

As a result of these crimes - and Ankara's continued obstruction of justice - only a small fraction of the historic Christian presence in Anatolia remains today in modern Turkey. Estimates are that of the well over 2,000 Armenian churches, which existed in the early 1900's, far fewer than 50 are functioning today. Perhaps as few as 200 even remain standing today. The rest have been ground into dust with the properties illegally confiscated by the government. And, only a small fraction of the historic Christian population that once populated Anatolia remains today in modern Turkey to care for their cultural heritage.

As an initial step, Turkey's return of the thousands of church properties it outright stole from Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, Syriacs, and other Christians prior to, during, and after the Armenian Genocide era, would represent a meaningful move by the Turkish government toward accepting its responsibility for a truthful and just resolution of this still unpunished crime against humanity. It would, as well, mark progress for the cause of international religious freedom, in a corner of the world sadly known not for its pluralism, but rather for the depths of its intolerance.

Ending Turkey's denials can contribute to the reversal of this destruction, the return of churches, the restoration of Christian heritage, and the re-emergence of the Christian faithful upon these sacred lands.

It is time for the United States and the rest of the world to stand up to Turkey's shameless blackmail and demand justice not just for the Armenians, but for all of civilized mankind.