



## COMMENTARY



My Turn

By Harut Sassounian

## Congress May Cut off Aid to Turkey For Hosting Sudan's Genocidal President

A congressional committee adopted an amendment last month that would suspend US foreign aid to any country hosting a visit by Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir. Members of Congress intend to isolate this brutal leader and help bring him to court for his crimes in Darfur.

Congress decided to take this action after several countries, including Turkey and Egypt, ignored the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court in March 2009, charging the Sudanese President with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in Darfur. In contravention of their international obligations, these countries hosted visits by al-Bashir, instead of capturing him and dispatching him to the ICC for prosecution.

In November 2009, when the President of Sudan was about to visit Ankara, Amnesty International warned: "It would be a disgrace for Turkey to offer him safe haven. If the Turkish authorities fail to arrest President Omar al-Bashir and hand him over to the ICC, this would be inconsistent with Turkey's international obligations. It would not

only amount to obstruction of justice, but just as offering shelter to a fleeing bank robber constitutes a crime under national law, so, too, would sheltering a fugitive from international justice be complicity in crime."

Four US non-governmental organizations issued a joint statement in November 2009, criticizing the Obama administration for refusing to protest the Sudanese President's visit to Turkey. The NGO's sought to ensure that "a wanted war criminal does not continue to travel with impunity."

Meanwhile, the Turkish prime minister not only allowed the Sudanese President to visit Turkey, but tried to absolve him of any wrongdoing by claiming that "Muslims don't commit genocide!" Making matters worse, Turkey continues to sell lethal weapons to Sudan, helping al-Bashir kill more innocent people!

To put an end to such irresponsible behavior by Turkey and many other countries, the House Appropriations Committee adopted on May 17, 2012, an amendment to a State Department funding bill that would cut off non-humanitarian aid to countries that do not comply with ICC's directive. The amendment sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) states that no economic assistance would be provided by the United States "to any country that admits President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan."

After reports began circulating that the Obama administration is trying to block this proposed law, 70 leading Holocaust and genocide scholars signed a joint letter on June 14, urging the White House to support the congressional amendment that would stop providing assistance to countries hosting Sudan's President. Among the signatories of the letter are Dr. Israel Charny of Jerusalem, Dr. Irving Greenberg, former chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Dr. Deborah Dwork of Clark University.

The scholars' letter, organized by the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies in Washington, DC, was sent to presidential advisor Dr. Samantha Power, who heads the recently-established Atrocities Prevention Board. The scholars reminded Power that in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, she had urged the US government to adopt "economic sanctions" to counter genocidal actions. Since the proposed bill "does exactly that," the 70 signatories expressed the hope that Power and the White House would support Wolf's amendment, particularly when it is brought up for reconciliation between the House and Senate.

It is doubtful, however, that Samantha Power would speak out in favor of this amendment. Since joining the White House staff, she has distanced herself from the issues she had boldly advocated in her book. She has also remained eerily silent on President Obama's unfulfilled pledges regarding the Armenian Genocide. Power had issued several appeals during the last presidential campaign, seeking the Armenian-American community's support for Barack Obama's candidacy. She had solemnly pledged that as president, Obama would acknowledge the Armenian Genocide after the election.

So far, Armenian-Americans have not gotten involved in lobbying for the adoption of this important bill, most probably because they were unaware of its introduction in Congress. Armenian scholars were also left out of this issue, since no one had approached them to obtain their support.

An aide to Wolf advised this writer that the Congressman would appreciate the Armenian-American community's support for this bill which would discourage Turkey and other countries from wining and dining al-Bashir and would help bring this indicted criminal to justice.

## New Perspectives for Armenian Genocide Studies in Germany

On June 6, two important cultural institutions in Germany signed an agreement that may break new ground in research on the 1915 Genocide against the Armenians. The contract signed by University of Potsdam's Philosophy Department and the Lepsiushaus for enhanced cooperation was anything but a bureaucratic act. If the two partners fully exploit the potential in the deal, they could create the conditions for significantly enhancing Genocide studies, which would include the Armenian case. The Lepsiushaus ("House of Lepsius") in Potsdam is a museum and research center located in the former home of Dr. Johannes Lepsius, the renowned theologian and scholar who documented the 1915 Armenian Genocide. It was there that Prof. Johann Hafner, dean of the philosophy faculty and Dr. Rolf Hosfeld, scientific managing director of the Lepsius House, held the official signing ceremony.

Professor Hafner, speaking for the university, said, "With cooperation in 'Genocide Studies,' the Philosophy Department is making its mark with a further special feature (or selling point) on the German research and landscape."

He went on to explain that students will be able to make use of the Lepsiushaus facilities, including rooms, archives and library. In addition, they "will be able to complete scientific internships there, receive assistance with their thesis work and participate in research projects, conferences and publications." Finally, there are plans for the Human Rights Center, also located at the Philosophy Faculty, to gain new momentum as a result of this cooperation, with a chair from "Cultural History of Violence." This is the new name for a chair instituted by the Military Historical Research Office, formerly known as the Chair for Military History. When a professor is named to occupy the newly-named chair next year, it is expected to work together with the Lepsiushaus and the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies, for example, in comparative studies of the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. This is not a chair for Armenian Genocide studies as such, but the subject will be a point of emphasis in research.

When Dr. Hafner spoke of a "special feature" he was referring to the new focus that the Philosophy Department in Potsdam will place on research on the Armenian Genocide. The Halle-Wittenberg University, which has

By Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

hosted the MESROP Center since 1998, also established a chair for Armenian studies (Armenologie), which deals with the Armenian history, culture and philosophy. And, the Ruhr University in Bochum also has an Institute for Diaspora and Genocide Research, headed by Prof. Mihran Dabag. For the Lepsiushaus, as Dr. Hosfeld declared, the new level of cooperation will contribute to "anchoring [it] in the scientific landscape." The institutions plan to expand research on Lepsius's work and more broadly the history of the 1915 genocide.

The Lepsiushaus already has a working agreement with Moses Mendelssohn Center, also located in Potsdam. This fall, they plan a conference dedicated to Franz Werfel, the Jewish writer who in 1933 published *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a renowned saga on the genocide. Now, with the new arrangement such activities will multiply. As Dr. Hosfeld put it, "We have achieved a lot, but we are not yet what we can be." There is already a full calendar of seminars, workshops, conferences, political podium discussions, lectures and book presentations prepared for the next three years.

Prof. Hafner said the university was "extraordinarily delighted that the house will be full of life." The university, for its part, lends professional and institutional support to the work of the Lepsiushaus, cooperates on projects and makes available rooms for conferences. At the end of September 2012, a joint

scientific conference with international participation is planned on the subject, "Johannes Lepsius, a German Exception."

Dr. Johannes Lepsius, as the university's press release notes, was a "German Protestant theologian, Orientalist, philosopher, mathematician and historian" who lived from 1908 to 1926 in the house, which is now a museum and research center. It was in Potsdam in 1916 that he wrote his Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey. He was co-founder in 1914 of the German-Armenian Society. Lepsius had founded a relief organization in Urfa to aid Armenian victims of the 1890s Hamidian massacres, and he tried to travel to Anatolia again in 1915 upon learning of the renewed persecutions. He was prevented from traveling inland by the Young Turk leadership, but did manage to collect hundreds of eyewitness accounts in Constantinople from Armenian survivors, diplomats and humanitarian aid workers. The Report, though banned by the censors and partially suppressed, was distributed to political, ecclesiastical and media circles in Germany and became a cause-celebre.

The Lepsiushaus was officially opened in May of last year, despite longstanding resistance of the part of certain Turkish circles in Germany. State and city funds as well as private contributions served to finance the complete restoration of the magnificent building, which had fallen into decay under the East German regime. It should be added that

Brandenburg, where Potsdam is located, is the only federal state where the historic curriculum and textbooks at schools include the Armenian Genocide among state-organized mass murders.

Dr. Hosfeld, who succeeded Prof. Hermann Goltz after his death, studied German literature, history, political science and philosophy in Frankfurt and Berlin. As editor and author he has published numerous articles and more than 20 books. Among them is *Operation Nemesis: Die Türkei, Deutschland und der Völkermord an den Armeiern* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2005/2009), whose title refers to the Armenian underground organization which pursued and executed Turkish leaders responsible for the mass murder. As the *California Courier* wrote, "Hosfeld painstakingly describes the emergence of an aggressive Turkish nationalism and its systematic annihilation policies against the Armenians, which were protected under Turkey's alliance with Germany during World War I."

Professor Hafner studied theology and philosophy in Augsburg, Munich and in the Philippines. From 1998 to 2001 he was visiting lecturer at the University of Dayton in Ohio, and has been professor of religion at Potsdam since 2004. In 2010 he became dean of the Philosophy Department.

(Muriel Mirak-Weissbach is the author of *Through the Wall of Fire: Armenia-Iraq-Palestine: From Wrath to Reconciliation*.)

Her new book, *Madness at the Helm: Pathology and Politics in the Arab Spring*, should appear soon.)

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