

ROUNDTABLE

## On “Recognition”

Tsolin Nalbantian 

Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands  
Email: [t.nalbantian@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:t.nalbantian@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

On 29 April 2022, the editorial board of the *Harvard Crimson* published “In Support of Boycott, Divest, Sanction and a Free Palestine” in support of divestment from Israel.<sup>1</sup> In it, the editorial board cited the importance of global solidarity and charges leveled by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch against Israel, of “crimes against humanity.”<sup>2</sup> The *Crimson* clearly had changed its position from 2002, when its staff had published “Do Not Divest from Israel,” regarding the comparison between Israel and “Apartheid-era South Africa so fundamentally flawed as to be offensive.” In twenty years, the conversation on college campuses has indeed changed.<sup>3</sup>

Or has it?

Just a few weeks before the *Harvard Crimson* published its support of divestment from Israel, my own institution, Leiden University, took a different stand, actually preventing a student-organized event on racism, apartheid, and intersectionality from taking place on campus. The reasons the university gave varied; none were substantiated. It claimed it wanted to guarantee security, it was concerned that students and staff with different opinions and perspectives could not speak freely and safely, and it claimed that the chair of the event, a female Dutch-Palestinian academic, had to have a “neutral” profile.<sup>4</sup> Apparently these were issues of “house rules,” which most of my colleagues had, strangely enough, never known or heard about. I also never had been subjected to them, even after organizing numerous events in the last ten years, including on US interventionism in the Middle East, the ongoing war on Yemen, and the tenth anniversary of the US-led war on Iraq.

Which stance, Harvard’s or Leiden’s, is more representative globally? In a matter of weeks, one was reminded that the recognition of “crimes against humanity” was not universal.

What are the effects of this varied treatment of injustice? One consequence is located within the realm of authority. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International concluded that Israel’s system of domination over Palestinians was akin to apartheid. At Harvard, their assessment legitimated the *Crimson*’s call. At Leiden, the role of moderator that the Dutch-Palestinian academic was to take invalidated both HRW’s and AI’s findings. This incongruence renders recognition ambiguous, facilitating an environment that makes “Palestine”—as in the injustice leveraged against it, its history, and its people—*debatable*.

<sup>1</sup> Crimson Editorial Board, “In Support of Boycott, Divest, Sanctions and a Free Palestine,” *Harvard Crimson*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/4/29/editorial-bds>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Crimson Staff, “Do Not Divest from Israel,” *Harvard Crimson*, May 8, 2002, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2002/5/8/do-not-divest-from-israel-there>.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Dina Zbeidy’s response, see “For Leiden University, Palestinians Aren’t ‘Neutral Enough’ to Do Their Job,” 8 April 2022, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/palestinians-arent-neutral-enough-do-their-job>.

This perpetuates the injustice and inherited trauma by those who have experienced it. Because the issue is unsettled, the “fight” for universal recognition continues. Palestine has for long been the premier anti-colonial struggle in the field of Middle Eastern studies. It also continues to reflect the demand to include indigenous ethnic and religious minorities in our academic work.

And yet, Palestine’s prominence obscures other historical injustices. For this, its influence is often admired and even envied. Once “marginal,” Palestine has become the reference point for ethnic cleansing, settler colonialism, and apartheid. This very view, and the change it has caused, like at Harvard’s *Crimson*, makes Palestine a cause to emulate, and its celebrity something to desire. But what does it mean to yearn for the popularity of another’s trauma, when you are traumatized yourself? This surely isn’t solidarity, but a sickness. One begs for another’s pain, under the false presumption that it could alleviate one’s own.

Palestine is not alone here. Before deciding to pursue a PhD in Middle Eastern studies, I enrolled in a joint journalism/Near Eastern studies MA program at New York University. I had thought I would go into journalism, focusing on the Middle East. Instead of writing an MA thesis, I had to write a series of journalistic pieces and chose to focus on Armenians in the United States. I modeled those pieces after *The Decalogue* (1988), Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski’s ten episodes inspired by the Ten Commandments. In my final piece, on the tenth commandment, the prohibition of coveting thy neighbor’s goods, I reported on how Armenians craved the recognition that was granted by the general American public to the Jewish Holocaust. My sources talked about how “tired” they were of the pervasiveness of Holocaust recognition and their wish that the Armenian Genocide could have even a “small proportion” of the exposure that the Jewish Holocaust had. Although some respondents’ envy veered toward anti-Semitism, many simply expressed how much they wanted recognition for the Armenian Genocide.

At the same time, this demonstrated that, for many Armenians, recognition of the Armenian Genocide was connected to the Jewish experience. I am not entirely surprised by this. From a young age, I was made to memorize sound bites about the connection between the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, such as a saying attributed to Adolf Hitler, “After all, who today remembers the Armenians?” There also was the false notion of the Armenian Genocide being “the first genocide of the 20th century,” as if it was a point of pride!<sup>5</sup> But it also created a sense of hierarchy. Holocaust recognition was considered *the* achievement. But did Armenians ever pause to think about what they envied or what behavior they engaged in by taking part in this competition? In addition to being surreal and morbid, what does it do to the self to be struggling for recognition of one’s trauma and victimization?

This situation also was felt by Armenian studies scholars. Many attempted to connect the Armenian Genocide to works that only marginally engaged with the planned extermination of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. This move was partly defensive in nature, and an overcompensation for both the lack of universal recognition by colleagues in Middle Eastern and Ottoman studies and the official denialism perpetuated by the modern state of Turkey and until recently by other governments, including the United States.<sup>6</sup> Any opportunity to use the term “Armenian Genocide” was taken; neglecting to do so was seen to help denialism.

The unsettled recognition of the Armenian Genocide, however, had an additional effect on the field. Whereas Palestine became the premier anti-colonial struggle *and* eclipsed

<sup>5</sup> The first genocide of the 20th century was perpetrated by the German Empire against the Herero and Nama people in southwest Africa (1904–7). See Jan-Bart Gewald, “Imperial Germany and the Herero of Southern Africa: Genocide and the Quest of Recompense,” in *Genocide, War Crimes and the West: History and Complicity*, ed. Adam Jones (London: Zed Books, 2004), 59–77.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the systemic denialism in the fields of Middle Eastern and Ottoman studies see Ayda Erbal, “The Armenian Genocide, AKA the Elephant in the Room,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (2015): 783–90. See also Bedross Der Matossian’s essay for this roundtable.

other similar forms of injustices, the Armenian Genocide became the premier genocide of the field of Middle Eastern studies and suppressed other experiences of genocidal violence. Books published within the last five years on the making of the modern Middle East reckoned with the destructive aspects of the formation of modern nation-states, including the Armenian Genocide, famine, and war.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, their engagement with the role of mass violence against the Armenians in the making of the modern Middle East did not extend to the killing of Assyrians. The Armenian Genocide has become a gatekeeper of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East during World War I. In scholarship published in the United States and Europe it is no longer a “forgotten genocide,” but, as for Palestine, its recognition does not make it a settled matter.

This variability, in turn, hinders the fields of both Middle Eastern and Armenian studies. The Armenian Genocide has become a lynchpin of Armenian studies. Until recently, and some may argue, still, our work on Armenians was given value only if we were working “on the Genocide.” Implicitly there was a duty to combat denial. One of the consequences of this urgency, however, is that Armenian inhabitants of the Middle East are solely viewed as a refugee or diasporic population, and hence as eternal outsiders. This echoes Armenian and Arab nationalist readings of Armenians that link their belonging to outside of the Middle East and to the Caucasus, erecting a border between the two regions that overlooks both the historical and contemporary connections between the two.

However, the labor that made the Armenian Genocide common currency outside of the field of Armenian studies has not extended to other instances of mass violence, even in the same time period, such as the Assyrian genocide.<sup>8</sup> However unintentionally, recognition has failed to create a sustained space for non-Armenians who also were victims of extermination and genocide.<sup>9</sup>

And although Middle Eastern studies in the United States, Europe, and parts of the Middle East has largely recognized the Armenian Genocide, it has been silent on forms of violence and oppression against Armenians that have taken place outside the late 19th and the 20th

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); and Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hannibal Travis, “Constructing the ‘Armenian Genocide’: How Scholars Unremembered the Assyrian and Greek Genocides in the Ottoman Empire,” in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton, Thomas La Pointe, and Douglas Irvin-Erickson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 170–92; and Robert W. Smith, “Introduction: The Ottoman Genocides of Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks,” *Genocide Studies International* 9, no. 1 (2015): 1–9. Ronald Grigor Suny does mention the Assyrians numerous times in his important *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). Nevertheless, even when beginning the chapter on World War I, “What was then known as the ‘Great War’ was a catastrophe for all the peoples of the Ottoman Empire and most completely for the Armenians and Assyrians,” the work does not profile the extermination of the Assyrians (209). Notable other exceptions are Richard Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: Wartime Radicalization or Premeditated Continuum* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Taner Akçam, *The Young Turk’s Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Uğur Ümit Üngör, “Turkey for the Turks: Demographic Engineering in Eastern Anatolia, 1914–1945,” in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Norman Naimark, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 287–305; and George Shirinian, *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913–1923* (New York: Berghahn Books 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Aside from some important works that do engage with the simultaneity of the Armenian and Assyrian genocides, there is a lack of engagement with the state violence against Alevis and Kurds. See, for example, Bilgin Ayata, “The Kurds in the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Process: Double-Bind or Double-Blind?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (2015): 807–12. Similarly, Camilla Orjuela discusses the disproportionate attention toward the Rwandan Genocide, compared with atrocities against the Tamils in Sri Lanka; “Mobilising Diasporas for Justice: Opportunity Structures and the Presencing of a Violent Past,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 44, no. 8 (2018): 1357–73.

centuries and outside of Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Even the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) brought up the Armenian Genocide when pressed by the Society of Armenian Studies to take a stand against the war and occupation of Nagorno-Karabagh, and the destruction of Armenian heritage sites and educational institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, although Middle Eastern and Ottoman studies have finally begun to recognize genocide, there are limits. What is recognition if it still allows for injustice to be ignored or debated? Despite recognition, ongoing violence and ethnic cleansing of Armenians in regions just adjacent to the field, in the southern Caucasus, continue to be ignored. It is as if once the fields accepted the Armenian Genocide reality, everyone, including Armenian studies, moved on: Middle Eastern Studies from considering other violence targeting Armenians; Armenian studies from considering similar violence targeting non-Armenians.

In a way, this mirrors what has happened regarding Palestine. Has moving this cause from the margins to the center marginalized other cases and causes—even though some works on Palestine call for considering indigenous and religious minorities? In an effort to draw attention to the active denial campaigns of the Nakba and the Armenian Genocide, have these two “causes for justice” inadvertently worked to exclude others? And if yes, how can we stop this cycle?

The truth is, injustice isn't uniform. Or rather, even if it was, outrage is not. Living in the Netherlands, I have seen this with the Russian war in Ukraine since this past February. BDS (boycott, divest and sanction) campaigns were all the rage in March and April—the same months that our students at Leiden were fighting to have their panel on apartheid, racism, and intersectionality. MESA members adopted the resolution endorsing the 2005 call of Palestinian civil society for BDS against Israel and directed the MESA board of directors to work in consultation with the Committee on Academic Freedom to give effect to the spirit and intent of this resolution. This was indeed a victory. But I could not help but think about the silence during the 2020 Karabagh war, and ongoing Azerbaijani threats against both Armenian heritage sites and Armenian populations in the Caucasus. Students and colleagues alike explain the “differences”—quotation marks because they really are arbitrary—between Ukraine and Palestine and between the Armenian Genocide and Azerbaijani aggression against Armenians as issues of shared history and geography. Apparently the Netherlands is “closer” to the Ukraine and to potential conflict with Russia than Palestine; the Armenian Genocide is recognized injustice and the Karabagh conflict is debatable.

How close, though? Every first Monday of the month, the Netherlands tests their air sirens, put in actual practice last in 1940 to warn of the incoming German bombardment

<sup>10</sup> Jo Laycock makes a related argument, but with regard to World War I historiography, in “Beyond National Narratives? Centenary Histories, the First World War and the Armenian Genocide,” *Revolutionary Russia* 28, no. 2 (2015): 93–117. Although it is no longer a “forgotten genocide,” Laycock argues that the Armenian Genocide has not been integrated with the historiography of the period to adequately consider “the nature, conduct and consequences” of World War I. For pioneering works on the period, see Ümit Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); and Bedross Der Matossian, *The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022). For works on the roles and legacy of the Armenian Genocide in scholarship see also David Gutman, “Ottoman Historiography and the End of the Genocide Taboo: Writing the Armenian Genocide into Late Ottoman History,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 2, no. 1 (2015): 167–83; Sebouh David Aslanian, “From ‘Autonomous’ to ‘Interactive’ Histories: World History’s Challenge to Armenian Studies,” in *An Armenian Mediterranean: Words and World in Motion*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Michael Pifer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 81–125; and Bedross Der Matossian, “From Genocide to Postgenocide: Survival, Gender, and Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 1 (2019): 135–47.

<sup>11</sup> Correspondence between Society for Armenian Studies and the Middle East Studies Association, 24 May 2021, 8 June 2021, and 23 June 2021, <https://societyforarmenianstudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SAS-MESA-ARTSAKH.pdf>. I focus in particular on the sentence, “Please note that MESA has consistently advocated for the open and free discussion of the Armenian genocide and has supported vigorous scholarship on Armenian history in its publications and at its annual meetings.”

of Rotterdam. In March 2022, the Dutch government issued additional reminders that they would continue as customary despite the war in Ukraine. They warned people to stay calm, that this was still a test. Maybe this reflected that the war was indeed close; but it then became apparent that it wasn't. In the first week of the war, my students asked for class time to draw attention to organized clothing drives. Ads on the television gave instructions on how to donate money through one's phone via text message to relief agencies. But the initial outrage has abated. At first there were protesters in front of governmental buildings in The Hague demanding that the Dutch government "do more" against the aggression. A week later, they were gone.

By June, a few months after the invasion, the Ukrainian flags that hang in people's windows or flagpoles in front of their houses became normalized. Soon, they will be joined by school-backpacks on flagpoles, a Dutch custom to announce that a high school student has passed their exams. Group WhatsApp messages for my son's class have returned to seeking volunteers for class trips and outings. Gone are the solidarity messages to Ukrainian parents and solicitations for donations and help. Did it help to have been "so close" to the Dutch public that they recognized and supported Ukraine and its dominance of the news cycle for the last few months? Sure. Will it help by September? I doubt it. For all the yearning for recognition, did we ever pause to think about what it would look like?

Rather than engaging in trauma or recognition envy, I wonder if it actually is the responsibility of those who have experienced this pain to make the connections to others who have undergone a similar experience. In other words, the onus is on the victim to create a network of those who have suffered. Although many would shudder at yet another obligation conferred upon the victim, rather than the perpetrator, I wonder if there are additional ways of looking at this. Wouldn't it be empowering to connect to others to prevent solidarity from fading?

Armenians dominated the conversation about the Armenian Genocide for years. They did valuable work inserting it into Middle Eastern Studies and, most notably, Ottoman Studies. And yet, I'm not convinced it has become intrinsically part of either. Recognition does not integrate Armenians in these fields. That is evidenced by the silence that met the violence in the Caucasus in 2020. The field pushes us to "move on" since the genocide has been recognized: the basic requirement has been met; no need to push further. But that reaction only exposes the lack of integration of Armenians in these fields and reinforces a sense of marginality in its scholarship. This likewise is evidenced by the gatekeeping that Armenian Genocide scholars engage in when they do not include or expand the field to Assyrians and others. It is as if they work on the assumption that recognition is not enough *and* that it could be withdrawn at any time. This keeps everyone engaged in the tiresome, predictable, and tautological process.

Real solidarity would stop the fight. For this to happen, one would need to consider what is to come after recognition. What does recognition look like and feel like? Which new responsibilities will flow from recognition? If we continue to see recognition as its own end we risk generating the same dynamic while falsely claiming victory. A "victory" that comes at the expense of somebody else's trauma and conceals within itself the very injustice that it claims to correct.