

# How Israel Quashed Efforts to Recognize the Armenian Genocide - to Please Turkey

Decades before the U.S. president formally recognized the horrors of 1915, Israel's Foreign Ministry sought to foil an academic conference on the subject, fearing reprisal from Turkey. 'We continue to act to reduce and diminish the Armenian issue to the extent of our ability by every possible means'

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In the summer of 1982, Israel's Foreign Ministry set to work on a special mission. "We continue to spare no effort on this issue, which is currently a central one on our agenda," an internal ministry document says of the mission. "We shall leave no stone unturned, whether or not this thing succeeds," another document says. "Intensive treatment that encompasses both institutions and public figures in Israel and abroad... feverish and tireless efforts... at the highest diplomatic levels," other documents add.

The mission that so occupied the Foreign Ministry personnel 40 years ago had nothing to do with the First Lebanon War, which had just begun, but with another much larger and deadlier war: the Armenian genocide in 1915, during which an estimated 1.5 million people were killed by the forces of the Ottoman Empire.



Armenian leader Vahan Papazian viewing the aftermath of murders that took place in a Syrian concentration camp for Armenians, 1915-1916. Credit: Bodil Katharine Birn / National Archives of Norway

An Armenian refugee from genocide in Syria mourns her dead child, in a photo taken between 1915 and 1919. Credit: American Committee for Relief in the Near East

Following U.S. [President Joe Biden's formal recognition](#) on April 24 of the genocide, it's particularly interesting to see how Israel not only denied the horrific mass murders – [a policy to which it still adheres](#) – but also tried to influence others to act in the same manner.

A recently released file from the National Archives reveals Israeli efforts during that summer four decades ago to thwart an academic conference due to be held in the country, focusing both on the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide. The documents in question offer a lesson in realpolitik and the willingness to sacrifice fundamental values of the type that any democratic society – especially one established after the calamity of the [Holocaust](#) – is supposed to hold dear, on the alter of political and security-related interests, among other reasons.

Beginning in April 1982, from the day the conference was first announced, the Foreign Ministry's efforts to sabotage it never ceased. These efforts, which went on for two months, bore fruit.

**'We continue with intensive and comprehensive efforts to get the conference canceled or to at least have the Armenian section removed from the agenda'**



A man holds a placard as members of the Armenian diaspora in the U.S. rally to mark the anniversary of the 1915 genocide, in Los Angeles, last week. Credit: DAVID SWANSON/ REUTERS

The [Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Center](#) in Jerusalem withdrew its initial sponsorship of the event, Tel Aviv University declined to take part, the Henrietta Szold Institute pledged not to provide funding for it, Holocaust survivor and then-future Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Elie Wiesel](#) resigned his post as conference chairman, and a number of prominent historians, including Prof. Yehuda Bauer, said they would not to attend. The conference did ultimately take place, but in a much watered-down and unofficial framework.

"We continue to act to reduce and diminish the Armenian issue to the extent of our ability by every possible means," according to one Foreign Ministry document from the summer of 1982.

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“Reduce and diminish” – as if this was not about the murder of well over a million people that also involved uprooting, plunder, expulsion and death marches. “We continue with intensive and comprehensive efforts to get the conference canceled or to at least have the Armenian section removed from the agenda,” the document adds. The “Armenian section” – two simple words that stand for a huge genocide.

Aside from the successful attempts to damage the prestige of the event by making the list of participants shrink significantly, the Foreign Ministry also tried to get it canceled outright. This is evident from the negotiations conducted by ministry personnel with the conference organizers, headed by Israel Charny, an American-Israeli psychologist. The talks were an attempt to reach a compromise whereby the event would be canceled, but the Foreign Ministry would provide organizers with “compensation for the actual damage – on the basis of receipts.” But the proposal didn’t go very far.



Holocaust survivor, author and Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel. Backed down under pressure as chairman of the conference in 1982, and also discussed ways “to cancel the Armenian section” of it. Credit: Michal Fattal

**'I propose that we instruct the general consul to contact Wiesel and request that he disassociate himself from the conference,' wrote Elyakim Rubinstein**

Meanwhile, the ministry enlisted embassies around the world to help persuade potential participants to cancel their attendance in the conference, as one document states: “We are currently trying to dissuade the invitees from taking part.” The most important guest was Elie Wiesel, who was supposed to chair the event. “I propose that we instruct the general consul to contact Wiesel and request that he disassociate himself from the conference,” wrote [Elyakim Rubinstein](#), the legal adviser of the Foreign Ministry at the time, and the future attorney general, cabinet secretary and Supreme Court justice.

After Wiesel agreed to pull out, he shared internal information about the conference with Foreign Ministry personnel, and even took part in the effort to foil it. For one thing, Wiesel met with [Naphtali Lau-Lavie](#), Israel’s general consul in New York and a Holocaust survivor himself, and discussed ways “to cancel the Armenian section” of the confab. One idea proposed was “to prevent such a discussion in the plenum” and to transfer it to “workshops” on the sidelines, so it would not be given publicity. “We could say that the conference did not designate the Armenian issue as a subject for discussion,” Lau-Lavie suggested.

Israeli ambassadors around the world were called upon by the ministry in Jerusalem to use their ties to keep the conference organizers from finding a replacement for Wiesel. “We request that you call [Lewis] Samuel Feuer and convince him not to accept the presidency of the conference,” Ambassador to France Meir Rosenne was told. Feuer, an American sociologist, has “an international reputation and broad personal authority and his non-participation in the conference will lower the level of the conference and reduce its dimensions to the minimum,” Rosenne was informed.

**'Our first objective is to neutralize Yad Vashem as an official national body from taking part in including the Armenians in the conference'**

For his part, Lau-Lavie reported to the ministry that he had spoken with Jack P. Eisner, who fought in the [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#) and was actively involved in Holocaust commemoration. Eisner had received an offer to chair the conference but Lau-Lavie said he turned down the offer, “ceased funding the conference and had just halted a transfer of money for the event.”

The Israeli consulate in Stockholm was asked, meanwhile, to contact Per Ahlmark, a renowned Swedish writer and politician, and to let him know that Wiesel “would be greatly appreciate it if he did not attend the conference.”



Prof. Israel Charny. Argues in his new book that the Turkish threat to holding the 1982 conference in Israel on the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide was “an invention.” Credit: Emil Salman

### Targeting Yad Vashem

The list of people whom Foreign Ministry emissaries contacted to persuade them not to participate included local officials such as Yad Vashem chairman Yitzhak Arad and Yad Vashem council chairman Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial two decades earlier. The idea was to try to persuade the Holocaust remembrance center of the problematic nature of the conference, which, in dealing with both with the Shoah and the Armenian genocide, would detract from the uniqueness of the former.

### 'Turkey cannot conceive of a conference being held in Israel in which it will be presented in the same category with Nazi Germany'

“Our first objective is to neutralize Yad Vashem as an official national body from taking part in including the Armenians in the conference,” one of the newly publicized documents says. “This should be possible because the inclusion of other peoples in the same line with the Jewish Holocaust would place Yad Vashem in a controversial position in the world and in terms of international public opinion. If we succeed in getting Yad Vashem out of the conference in which Armenian issues will be discussed, it will be an important and significant achievement since no official public government body will then be standing behind it.”

The next target was Tel Aviv University rector and future president Prof. Yoram Dinstein. Moshe Gilboa, director of the Foreign Ministry's Diaspora Department, reported that he met with Dinstein and explained to him “the background for our objection to the inclusion of the Armenian issue.” The meeting was a success, and yielded a letter from Dinstein's office detailing concerns about the event.

Behind the scenes, Israel boasted to [Turkey](#) about its activities, according to one archival document: “We put an emphasis on our efforts to cancel the conference completely or to at least remove the Armenian issue from it... It was explained to the Turkish representative in Israel that, in the present circumstances, the



conference has shrunk to tiny proportions and will be run by a small group of private individuals, without any official government or public support."

Ministry officials also instructed Israel's representatives in Turkey to inform their local counterparts about the efforts being made and to add – perhaps apologetically – that "in a democratic regime, as we have here [i.e., in Israel], we cannot prevent private individuals from holding conferences and discussing any subject they wish."

To assuage the Turks, the Foreign Ministry also proposed to plant articles in the press that would be critical of Israel's attempts to prevent the conference from taking place. These articles would "serve as our alibi, in the Turks' eyes," ministry officials hoped.

Eventually, as in a military operation, the Foreign Ministry even "spied on" the event that was held: "No Armenian clergy were spotted... A certain Armenian speaker gave a talk about the Armenian issue. A film on the subject that was supposed to be screened was not shown because the projector didn't work. No more than six or seven people were seen in the conference rooms. The [Armenian] Patriarch was seen walking around," according to a report.

There is no one clear answer as to what was behind the Foreign Ministry's obsession with foiling this academic conference. Officially, ministerial representatives told people that Turkey could potentially harm Jews from Iran and Syria who would try to immigrate to Israel via Turkey.

"All of the Foreign Ministry's activity to prevent the holding of the conference is intended solely to save Jews from lands where they are in distress," one of the archival documents says. That account is supported by another source, describing how a Foreign Ministry representative in Turkey, Alon Liel, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry in Ankara, in April 1982.



A report in Haaretz on the low number of participants at the conference. Credit: Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Archival



Elyakim Rubinstein, Foreign Ministry counsel in 1982. "There was a constraint here, a concrete interest, that we had to pay attention to, because the Turks could be tough," he says today. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

"Turkey cannot conceive of a conference being held in Israel in which it will be presented in the same category with Nazi Germany," Liel was told.

"The Turkish people find this especially surprising given the fact that Turkey aided Jewish refugees who managed to escape the arms of the Nazis in World War II," the summary of the meeting says. "The Turks display extreme sensitivity, bordering on irrationality, regarding the Armenian issue, and are unwilling to admit that the events of 1915 constitutes the Armenian genocide."

The bottom line, as Liel warned in his report to Jerusalem, was that "if the Armenian section is included in the conference, it will have grave implications for Israeli-Turkish relations."

### 'An invention'

Last week, Elyakim Rubinstein recalled his involvement on behalf of the Foreign Ministry in preventing the event from taking place. "I would have been much more comfortable, as a proponent of academic freedom, to sit on the other side of the barricade. But there was a constraint here, a concrete interest, that we had to pay attention to, because the Turks could be tough," he told Haaretz. "I think we acted correctly. Israel has responsibility vis-a-vis the Jewish issue everywhere."

But where did the threat to hurt would-be Jewish immigrants passing through Turkey come from? Prof. Charny, the organizer of the 1982 conference, has just published a new book entitled "Israel's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide: Denial, State Deception, Truth Versus Politicization of History." In it, Charny argues that the Turkish threat was "an invention." He bases this view on a 1982 document in which Israel's general consul in Istanbul at the time, Avner Arazi, wrote that the fear of a severe Turkish reaction to the conference was highly exaggerated.



Yitzhak Arad, Yad Vashem chairman at the time. He was among the list of people Foreign Ministry emissaries contacted to persuade them not to participate in the 1982 conference. Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

"I would like to touch on a point that I believe served as the basis for our concerted efforts to get the conference canceled, i.e., the hints about the passage of Iranian and Syrian Jews via Turkey," Arazi wrote. "I was not aware of this issue. Here in Turkey, there were no signs of a connection between this issue and the conference. Anyone familiar with Turkey's dedication to its tradition and its principles, which include not extraditing refugees, would never imagine that it could endanger Jews' lives by turning them over to the Syrians and Iranians... At a time when Turkey is making every effort to improve its image in the world, it is not reasonable to think it would commit such an injustice and thereby also invite harsh criticism from the Free World," he added.

Other evidence shows that the Israeli "handling" of the confab was just one front where Israel was active on the subject of the genocide: Michael Birnbaum, one of the founders of the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, writes in Charny's new book that people at the Israeli Embassy tried to convince him "not to include the Armenians in the museum."

Charny, who is today 90, told Haaretz that the Foreign Ministry's conduct in the episode made him "put an end to the naivete with which we ascribe good intentions to our leadership," and that "seeing the dirt, the contemptible behavior, the manipulations, the wickedness and destructiveness of a key division of government – it's just astounding."

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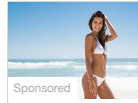
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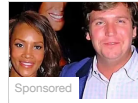


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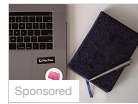


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