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# Why did President Obama not recognize the Armenian Genocide?

## Hints from the Obama administration memoirs – and other sources

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This paper discusses the reasons and processes that led the Obama administration to not recognize the Armenian Genocide. Although Barack Obama had promised he would do so during his presidential campaign of 2008, he never did once in office, despite many of his administration members, including Vice-President Joe Biden and Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, having strong records in support of such a recognition. To investigate this hitherto poorly explored question, this paper uses primarily – although not exclusively – memoirs written by Barack Obama and members his administration, some of them addressing the issue directly, others dealing with it indirectly. This study focuses on President Obama's personal choice, and therefore responsibility, to not recognize the genocide, but also expands on the geopolitical determinants of this non-recognition (related mostly to the geostrategic importance of Turkey) as well as on its diplomatic aspects (involving particularly the argument that US recognition would hamper a hypothetical Turkey-Armenia rapprochement). Two episodes of possible presidential recognition of the genocide will be particularly discussed; one in April 2009 (three months after Obama became president of the United States and coinciding with April 24, the anniversary of the genocide), and the other in 2015 (corresponding to its centenary). Finally, stress will be placed on the positions and role of the president's entourage at the White House, and on his State and Defense Secretaries.

**Key words:** Armenian Genocide; United States; Genocide Recognition; Memory Politics; Genocide Denial

## Introduction

In October and December 2019, the two chambers of the US Congress voted on resolutions to recognize the Armenian Genocide, perpetrated in 1915 by the Ottoman Empire and vehemently denied by its successor state, Turkey. These votes were immediately and rightly considered historic, as the US federal authorities had been particularly ambivalent on this issue for decades. The fruit of considerable efforts by the Armenian-American community<sup>1</sup> and its allies in Congress, and further secured despite substantial Turkish lobbying, these votes were nevertheless mostly symbolic. Indeed, on the one hand, the voted resolutions were non-binding, while on the other, the Trump administration, which fiercely opposed them, announced soon thereafter that its positions on this question had not varied. The stance of the Trump administration was expressed in a statement released in April for the annual commemoration of the genocide.<sup>2</sup> Similar to his predecessors, President Trump had then avoided to use the term genocide and spoke of “mass atrocities”. This reaction of the Trump administration did not really come as a surprise, as it had actively opposed this congressional recognition in the months prior to the annual commemoration and President Trump had never made a case for the affirmation of the Armenian Genocide during his campaign nor showed any special interest in memory and human rights-related issues.

On the contrary, the fact that the US under President Barack Obama did not recognize the Armenian Genocide remains quite surprising to many observers. As a Senator of Illinois between 2004 and 2008, Barack Obama clearly supported its recognition. During his senatorial tenure, he even signed a letter addressed to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urging the Bush Administration to change its stance on the issue. While a presidential candidate, Obama also championed this cause and gained the support of many Armenian-Americans,<sup>3</sup> by saying, for example, in January 2008, that “America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about

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<sup>1</sup> Although only about 450,000 according to the US census of 2010 (between one and two million according to other estimates), Armenian-Americans are well integrated into US society and very present and visible in some regions of the country such as the Los Angeles, Boston, Detroit, and New York areas. The Armenian-American community is particularly diverse with regards to the socio-economic level of its members and their relationship with their Armenian identity, but one of its cementing factors is the genocide and its proper recognition and memorialization.

<sup>2</sup> The Armenian Genocide is commemorated worldwide every year on April 24, as April 24, 1915 symbolizes the beginning of the deportation of Armenian intellectuals of Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Probably since the early 1980s, US presidents have issued a statement commemorating the genocide every year in April, but systematically avoiding using the term genocide. Among the many expressions used instead, one could mention: “massacres”, “crime against humanity”, “mass atrocities”, “devastating event”, “great tragedy”, “mass killings”, and “forced exile and annihilation of approximately 1.5 million Armenians”.

<sup>3</sup> According to pre-election polls conducted by the ANCA, 80-85 per cent of the Armenian-American community supported presidential candidate Barack Obama in his race with Republican John McCain (“Armenian American”).

the Armenian Genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that President" ("Obama Refuses"). Many of the top members of his administration(s) were also staunch and well-known supporters of recognition, at least before they took office. To such a point that Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* presented the Obama administration as the "most pro-Armenian in history" (Gannon). Yet, neither the president nor any high-ranking official of his administration formally or in public recognized the Armenian Genocide during their period in office.<sup>4</sup> For some of them, that includes the year 2015, centenary of the Armenian Genocide. Admittedly, President Obama went further than any other US president, by explaining on several occasions that his views on the question had not changed, implying that he, as when he was senator, still acknowledged the reality of the Armenian Genocide. He also repeatedly used the term "Meds Yeghern", meaning "Great Crime" in Armenian and sometimes used by Armenians to refer to the Genocide of 1915. Admittedly too, formal recognition did not rely only on the Executive Branch. As proven by what transpired in the later months of 2019, Congress also could have addressed it. Still, given that the Obama administration, and Barack Obama himself, did not recognize the Armenian Genocide – and sometimes went as far as pressuring Congress not to do so – this position has confounded many and continues to raise questions.

The main goal of this paper is to bring possible answers for this reversal. While this subject remains poorly explored in academic terms, this study concentrates, albeit not exclusively, on the many books published these past few years by members of the Obama administration, and that includes the president himself. These books, most often memoirs, are quite remarkable in their number – in June 2018, a *New York Times* article talked of "roughly two dozen" of them (Baker) – and for the insights and details they provide about the functioning of the Obama administration. Although these sources present obvious limits,<sup>5</sup> and the genre they belong to, political memoirs, is not uncriticized by scholars,<sup>6</sup> they, taken together, constitute a unique blend of primary sources for studying the Obama presidency.<sup>7</sup> They do not always

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<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Samantha Power, who mentioned the Armenian Genocide once, at the very end of Obama's second mandate, in December 2016, when she was the US ambassador to the United Nations (2013-2017). In a speech honoring Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel, she referred to "genocide denial against the Armenians". However, it is interesting to note that after the speech, her spokesman Kurtis Cooper found it opportune to explain that "the genocide reference came in the context of honoring Wiesel's life and meant to 'convince others to stand up, rather than stand by, in the face of systemic injustice, mass atrocities, and genocide like the one he was forced to endure'. He said they don't reflect a change in administration policy" (Klapper).

<sup>5</sup> Among these limits we can mention the fact that all members and officials of the administration have not published books about their experience (and that, therefore, the picture cannot be global and exhaustive); that books published express the point of view and perspective of the author only; and that information and analyses provided in these books, may be – and most of the time necessarily are – selective.

<sup>6</sup> Some would argue that the authors' primary goal is not to produce scientific knowledge but, consciously or less consciously, to justify their actions (Egerton xii).

<sup>7</sup> These memoirs, along with a few interviews collected by journalists, are also particularly precious because it is very likely that few archival documents regarding the Obama administration's position on the Armenian Genocide recognition exist, and when they possibly do, one may assume that they are still classified and not available to the public.

discuss or even mention the question of the Armenian Genocide but when they do, they provide particularly insightful new information and backdrops. Moreover, the way they deal with the issue, the words they choose, the things they say and those they omit, often raise interesting and original questions. When they do not mention the Armenian Genocide, it is interesting to note and worth studying *per se* (especially when, meanwhile, they discuss related topics, such as Turkey, Armenia, or other instances of genocides and massacres).

This study focuses on ten memoirs in particular. These memoirs were chosen either because they deal directly with the Armenian Genocide or because they omit it whereas it is common knowledge that their authors were in direct contact with the issue and in a position to play a role in shaping the Executive's position on it. The three books that clearly mention the Armenian Genocide recognition are NSC member (2009-2013) and US ambassador to the United Nations (2013-2017) Samantha Power's<sup>8</sup> *The Education of an Idealist, A Memoir* (Dey Street Books, 2019) – praised by Obama as a “[...] highly personal and reflective memoir [and] a must-read for anyone who cares about our role in a changing world [...]”<sup>9</sup> and the one that addresses the question the most substantially – President Obama's *A Promised Land* (Crown, 2020)<sup>10</sup> – although it discusses the issue in a succinct way and in a section focusing on the author's relationship with Samantha Power, and speechwriter and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes' *The World As It Is. A Memoir of the Obama White House* (Random House, 2018). The seven other books under scrutiny that do not mention the question or mention it indirectly are: Vice-President (and future 46<sup>th</sup> president) Joe Biden's *Promise Me Dad. A Year of Hope, Hardship, And Purpose* (Flatiron Books, 2017); Defense Secretary (2015-2017) Ash Carter's *Inside the Five-Sided Box. Lessons from a Lifetime of Leadership in the Pentagon* (Dutton, 2019); State Secretary (2009-2013) Hillary Clinton's *Hard Choices. A Memoir* (Simon & Schuster 2014); Defense Secretary (2006-2011) Robert Gates's *Duty. Memoirs of A Secretary At War* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); State Secretary (2013-2017) John Kerry's *Every Day Is Extra* (Simon & Schuster, 2018); CIA Director (2009-2011) and Defense Secretary (2011-2013) Leon Panetta's *Worthy Fights. A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (Penguin, 2014, authored with Jim Newton); and US ambassador to the UN (2009-2013) and National Security Advisor (2013-2017) Susan Rice's *Tough Love. My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (Simon & Schuster, 2019).

Using memoirs to investigate such questions is not incompatible with mobilizing other sources, such as government, congressional, and journalistic ones. On the contrary, it seems rather indispensable to contrast and confront memoirs with other material. Although some official sources are not available, some interviews and statements by members of the Obama administration are indeed, as well as many secondary sources. They will be used, in addition to memoirs, to investigate the way the recognition of the Armenian Genocide was handled, as well as the reasons and processes that led President Obama not to reverse his stance on this sensitive question.

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<sup>8</sup> In January 2021, Samantha Power was nominated to lead the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) by President Joe Biden.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted on the back cover of the book and in its presentation by the publisher.

<sup>10</sup> The presidential memoirs of Barack Obama are planned to be published in two volumes. *A Promised Land* is the first volume and covers most of Obama's first mandate (it ends with the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011).

## The Background. Obama, the United States, and the (Non-) Recognition of the Armenian Genocide

Barack Obama is not the first US president who pledged that he would recognize the Armenian Genocide, only later to refrain from doing so once in office. Every president since Ronald Reagan (even though President Reagan mentioned the “genocide” once, in a statement)<sup>11</sup> has made similar decisions, making the non-acknowledgment of this genocide an interesting case of political continuity in Washington, DC, at the intersection of foreign and domestic policy. However, there are a few reasons that make Obama’s case special. First, he supported recognition in quite an adamant and emphatic way when he was a US senator. Second, during his 2008 presidential campaign, he repeated several times that he would recognize the genocide as president, and – contrary to some candidates who, for example, only sent a letter stating their commitment to Armenian-American organizations or individuals<sup>12</sup> – did it in a particularly visible and unambiguous way. Barack Obama further broadcast his intent by posting his pledge on his campaign website (Power, *The Education* 236). His commitment was so clear that it allowed him to get very early and firm support from Armenian-Americans, who created the campaign group “Armenians for Obama” as early as June 2008 (Sanamyan), and who then voted massively for him during the November election. Third, Obama had chosen a Vice-President, Joe Biden, whose record on the Armenian Genocide was strong and unequivocal, as well as a Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who had promised she would recognize the genocide when she was running for the Democratic primaries. Finally, within Obama’s close circle, Samantha Power, a journalist and scholar, as well as the future US ambassador to the United Nations, was famous for her strong and enthusiastic commitment in favor of recognizing the genocide.<sup>13</sup> As one Armenian-American activist stated in January 2009, “The Obama-Biden ticket is probably the most pro-Armenian ticket to win the presidential race since Woodrow Wilson. With the help of key advisors such as Samantha Power, Obama started paying attention to Armenian issues from the very beginning and stuck with his commitment throughout the campaign [...]” (“Armenians for Obama”). So, with the election of Barack Obama, it seemed that the stars were aligned for a US president to keep his campaign promise and to affirm the reality of the Armenian Genocide.

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that, although Gerald Ford did not pledge to recognize the Armenian Genocide before holding office, he discussed it in an outspoken way in Congress, when he was Representative of the 5<sup>th</sup> congressional district of Michigan, home to many Armenian-Americans. He did it in 1965 for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide. Then, while president in 1974, he opposed a congressional resolution recognizing it. In his 1965 speech before the House, he used the interesting expression “Turkish genocide of the Armenian people”, no longer used nowadays (Congressional Record 8890).

<sup>12</sup> That was the case of candidate George W. Bush in 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Although we know that Barack Obama was first familiarized with the question of the Armenian Genocide earlier – during his student years at Harvard – Samantha Power probably contributed towards raising Obama’s awareness of this issue when she worked with him as part of his team as a senator. She explains in her memoirs that she, along with Mark Lippert, another adviser of Obama, helped him draft the above-mentioned letter he sent to Condoleezza Rice, criticizing the Bush Administration’s position on the Armenian Genocide (Power, *The Education* 235).

However, the record of the issue over the past few decades had demonstrated how thorny recognition was for the US government. Qualified as “[o]ne of the greatest taboos of US foreign policy” by John Evans (xxi), a US ambassador to Armenia who was forced into an early retirement because he used the “G Word” in 2005, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide had been blocked by the Executive at least since the late 1960s, when it started to become a fundamental issue, a matter of principle, for Armenian-Americans. Throughout the years, the latter, organized through two active lobbying groups, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA)<sup>14</sup> and the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA)<sup>15</sup> and their supporters, mobilized for recognition as they could not accept that their country gives in to Turkey’s pressure on this issue, so central to the experience of the families and their identity. They succeeded in obtaining many positive results, especially from Congress and at the state and local levels. Yet, they could not fully reverse the trend. On the legislative side, a few pieces of legislation recognizing the genocide were voted on but only by the House of Representatives (in 1975, 1984, and 1996 as well as in 2007, 2010, and 2012, analogous resolutions were also voted by House committees). The Senate, prior to the historical 2019 vote, never passed such a text, despite several attempts. At the state and local levels, many institutions took clear positions. At the beginning of Obama’s second term, 43 out of the 50 states of the Union had recognized the Armenian Genocide – today, all of the 50 states have formally recognized the genocide, except Mississippi. At the local level, many counties and municipalities have also affirmed the reality of the genocide and, “[i]n some cases, the recognition has been accompanied by the erection of monuments and memorials commemorating the events, such as in Boston, where a small park, called ‘Armenian Heritage Park’ was inaugurated in 2010, with its own genocide monument” (Zarifian, “The United States” 81). Even at the federal level, where opposition has always been strongest, some record of recognition exists. A serving president, Ronald Reagan, used the phrase “the genocide of the Armenians” once, in a statement delivered for the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide, in April 1981. As mentioned above, an American ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, also publicly did so in 2005. In 2008, Professor of International Law William Schabas (who was the president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars between 2009 and 2011) further discovered the existence of a 1951 document emanating from the Executive, intended for the International Court of Justice of the UN, which formally recognized the genocide of 1915 (Sassounian).

This was achieved despite opposition and continued lobbying by Turkey and its allies in Washington, DC. Indeed, a major singularity of the Armenian Genocide is that it has been actively and systematically denied by Turkey, the successor state of the Ottoman Empire that committed the massacres. Although refuting and/or minimizing the crime was part of the massacres themselves (Smith 32-33), Turkish denial

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<sup>14</sup> The ANCA is a grassroots political organization. It is an offshoot of the Dashnaksutiun or FRA (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), a historical political party of socialist inspiration. The ANCA has been part of the American militant and political landscape for a long time as it took over from the American Committee for the Independence of Armenia (ACIA) created in 1918.

<sup>15</sup> The AAA is an organization created in 1972, mostly by non-FRA leaders.

of the massacres' genocidal character has been particularly vehement and politically organized since the 1960s. One of its main goals has been to oppose the international recognition of the genocide, which has been fervently sought, especially from 1965,<sup>16</sup> by the survivors' children and grandchildren, as they could not obtain any type of acknowledgment, repentance, or reparation from Turkey. Turkish efforts to oppose US recognition of the genocide have taken, since the late 1960s and early 1970s, different forms, such as (but not limited to): diplomatic pressure (either through the media or direct contacts between Turkish and US officials); lobbying through professional lobbyists hired by the Turkish authorities; pressure on journalists and academics; creation and funding of research centers, etc. The time, energy, and money deployed by Turkey to prevent the genocide's recognition, have been considerable,<sup>17</sup> and the lobbying effort has proved effective. It contributed towards shaping, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, a global political environment in Washington, DC, clearly unfavorable to the official recognition of the Armenian Genocide. When Obama came to power, he inherited this political environment.<sup>18</sup> This, Obama nonetheless knew during his campaign, and was positive that he would be able to overcome it.

## Geopolitics and Issues of Timing. President Obama's Trip to Turkey in April 2009

According to some, and that includes Samantha Power, Ben Rhodes, and, in a less explicit way, Barack Obama himself, timing did not work in favor of an early presidential recognition of the genocide. First, for Obama's first trip overseas, a rather long (two days) and strategic stay had been planned in Turkey for the beginning of April 2009. The choice of Turkey for a first trip overseas fulfilled Obama's campaign pledge to visit a Muslim country within his first hundred days in office (Chipman) and revealed, *per se*, the significance of Turkey in Obama's agenda. It further tends to reveal that Obama, despite pledging to recognize the Armenian Genocide during his campaign, considered recognition of secondary importance to diplomatic relations with the Turkish State. This decision also probably reflected the consideration that Barack Obama developed for Turkey and for its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although he

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<sup>16</sup> The year 1965 corresponds to the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide. It was actively and massively commemorated in all diaspora communities as well as in the Soviet Republic of Armenia itself.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview on Turkish lobbying, see: Zarifian "The Armenian".

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that, simultaneously to Obama's election, in November 2008, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* was published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The American Academy of Diplomacy, and the Endowment of the United States Institute of Peace. It was co-edited by Madeleine Albright and William Cohen, respectively Secretary of State and of Defense of President Clinton, who opposed recognition. As noted by Henry Theriault: "Reflecting their activities against recognition of the Armenian Genocide is the fact that the report contains no explicit reference to an 'Armenian Genocide': what happened to Armenians is mentioned in only three places in the report, where it is characterized as a 'mass atrocity' (19, 94), 'forced exile' (19), and an 'atrocity' (56) [...]" (Theriault 203).

is much more nuanced in his memoirs<sup>19</sup>, the fact that he named, in 2012, Erdoğan as one of the few world leaders he had been able to forge “[...] friendships and bonds of trust [...]” with, is particularly telling (Zakaria). The presidential visit was announced by Secretary Clinton, from Ankara, where she was in early March 2009, for a visit to her counterpart Ali Babacan (which also included meetings with Turkey’s Prime Minister and President). She indicated that the decision of Obama’s visit was taken on March 6, in Washington, DC, and that its exact dates were not yet established. The words Hillary Clinton used during her visit, particularly during her press interactions, did not suggest that the Armenian Genocide issue had any significant place in the bilateral talks. She started her official remarks after her meeting with Ali Babacan by explaining, “I have a special place in my heart for your country”, and continued, “The relationship between our two countries is one of alliance, partnership, and friendship. [...] We share a commitment to democracy, a secular constitution, respect for religious freedom, a belief in free markets, and a sense of global responsibility”. She concluded by saying: “When I return home, I will tell President Obama he will find a warm welcome when he comes here to Turkey, and he will find, as I have always found, not only a partner for the challenges and opportunities that we face together, but a friend for all times and all challenges that lie ahead” (Clinton, “Remarks”). We also know, from her own words, that she “[...] spent hours talking with Erdoğan, often accompanied only by [Erdoğan’s advisor and future Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet] Davutoğlu, [with whom she] developed a productive and friendly working relationship [...]” (Clinton, *Hard Choices* 345). In a more concrete and strategic vein, many important points were discussed during her visit, and that included the major question of US troop withdrawal from Iraq, for the concrete management of which the US absolutely needed Turkey. This point is confirmed by Barack Obama. In his memoirs, he establishes an explicit link between his reluctance of using the “G Word” in spring 2009 and the sensitive question of US troops withdrawal from Iraq (Obama 621). More than ever – or, maybe more accurately, *once again* – geopolitics and the centrality of Turkey appeared as pivotal arguments to curb the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. From that very point, it became clear that recognition from Obama before or during his trip to Turkey would be complicated to achieve.

Samantha Power, who was with the National Security Council as a Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, explained in her memoirs that, in the weeks preceding Obama’s trip to Turkey, she tried to include the recognition of the Armenian Genocide in the discussions regarding the political messages he would deliver once there, but failed. She was convinced that recognizing the Armenian Genocide *in* Turkey would be remarkable and would be “classic Obama” (Power, *The Education* 238) and, as she had no direct access to the president, tried to push this idea through two of Obama’s advisers who could agree with her on this issue and had senior roles among the president’s entourage, Denis McDonough and Ben Rhodes, but with no success. These efforts by Samantha Power are confirmed by Rhodes (who explains in his book that she had been emailing him

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<sup>19</sup> In his memoirs, Obama explains: “Personally, I found the prime minister to be cordial and generally responsive to my requests. But whenever I listened to him speak [...], I got the strong impression that his commitment to democracy and the rule of law might last only as long as it preserved his own power” (Obama 346).



“steadily” to push for a reference to the genocide to be included in Obama’s speech planned before the Turkish parliament in Ankara) (Rhodes 43). Meanwhile, probably understanding that the issue would not be raised in Turkey, she also urged Rhodes and McDonough to “[...] at least ensure that Obama would leave open the question of recognition so we could discuss it upon his return” (Power, *The Education* 238). When Obama departed for Europe, Power had no idea on how he would handle the issue once in Turkey. Probably torn between his commitment to respect his campaign pledge and his will to not jeopardize his relationship with the Turkish authorities, Obama, who discusses this 2009 visit to Turkey in his memoirs but does not broach the Armenian issue, opted for a compromise: alluding to the genocide, explaining that his views on the issue had not changed, but never mentioning it. However, until the very last moment prior to his speech before the Turkish Parliament, his exact words were not precisely established. Ben Rhodes explains that, in the plane bound for Turkey, a day prior to the speech, they were still discussing the “[...] question of how far to lean in on the genocide [...]”, to which Obama finally answered: “I don’t think I should stand there and do that in their parliament” (Rhodes 43). The day after, in front of the assembly in question, Obama stated: “Human endeavor is by its nature imperfect. History is often tragic, but unresolved, it can be a heavy weight. Each country must work through its past. And reckoning with the past can help us seize a better future. I know there’s strong views in this chamber about the terrible events of 1915. And while there has been a good deal of commentary about my views, it’s really about how the Turkish and Armenian people deal with the past. And the best way forward for the Turkish and Armenian people is a process that works through the past in a way that is honest, open and constructive” (Obama “Remarks”). Here Obama clearly refers to the Armenian Genocide, which could already be viewed as audacious and as a step forward but did not mention it by name. He, therefore, did not differ in substance from his predecessors and contributed, in his own way, to the historical circumlocution strategy of the Executive. In the end, this position displeased many people in Turkey, as well as Armenian-Americans. However, the reactions of Armenian-American organizations remained nuanced, imbued with uncertainty and some hope. ANCA’s executive director Aram Hamparian stated that the president had “[...] missed a valuable opportunity to honor his public pledge to recognize the Armenian Genocide”. He continued: “We expect that the president will, during Genocide Prevention Month this April, stand by his word, signaling to the world that America’s commitment to the cause of genocide prevention will never again be held hostage to pressures from a foreign government” (Johnson 17). The AAA, through the voice of their executive director Bryan Ardouny, was somewhat more positive, but it conveyed the same message pointing out that, “[f]or the first time, a US President has delivered a direct message to Turkish officials in their own country that he stands behind his steadfast support and strong record of affirmation of the Armenian Genocide”, and that, “[o]n April 24, the Assembly looks forward to President Obama’s statement reaffirming the Armenian Genocide” (Garret). That was also, ultimately, the point of Samantha Power and of Ben Rhodes, who expressed it exactly this way when, in the plane to Ankara, Rhodes answered Obama’s comment on the fact that it would not be appropriate to mention the Armenian Genocide before the Turkish parliament. He said, “You’ll have another chance when you make a statement on the anniversary in April” (Rhodes 43).

## Diplomacy and Issues of Timing. April 24, 2009 and the Turkish-Armenian Protocols

Later in April, when the moment came for Obama to publish a statement for April 24, the day of remembrance of the genocide, another issue interfered and eventually played a central role in preventing him from using the “G Word”. These were the rapprochement attempts between the Republics of Turkey and Armenia. The deep historical dispute between Turkey and the Armenians (both Armenians of the diaspora and the Republic of Armenia) has troubled international relations for decades. The origin of the problem dates to the Armenian Genocide, but it was then fueled by Turkey’s refusal to recognize and possibly repair it, and, with the independence of the Republic of Armenia in 1991, geopolitical tensions between the two countries have not since eased. Indeed, the neighboring Turkish and Armenian states have never established normal diplomatic relations. In support of its ally Azerbaijan which has been, since the end of the Soviet era, in conflict with Armenia for the Nagorno Karabakh region, and also to mark its opposition to Armenia’s backing of the international recognition of the genocide, Turkey has maintained a closed border with Armenia despite regular complaints from the international community. To try to solve this problem, the US has actively supported several attempts to diplomatically reconcile the two parties. The last attempt by the US was undertaken in 2009 and concerned discussions on protocols of normalization between Armenia and Turkey. They resulted in the signing of a formal agreement in October 2009, although these were never ratified. Secretary Clinton was very much involved in this question and deployed considerable efforts to bring the two parties to an agreement. In her memoirs, Clinton mentions these protocols and her personal involvement to get them signed.<sup>20</sup> However, she never mentions the issue of the Armenian Genocide and of its Turkish and international recognition—although it is broadly acknowledged as being a central theme. The discussions leading to the protocols probably started as early as 2007 and the United States was informed about them in December of that same year (Phillips 30-31). After 2007, Armenia and Turkey engaged in what was called the “football diplomacy”. This began when the Turkish President went to Yerevan, for a historic visit, to attend a soccer match between Armenia and Turkey in September 2008, followed by a visit from the President of Armenia in October 2009 for a return match.

In early 2009, discussions between both countries to reach an agreement, accompanied by the US and other countries, such as Switzerland, were very active, and the US Foreign Service even believed that such an agreement could be signed in April 2009 (Nixey 134). In this context, the idea that US recognition of the Armenian Genocide on April 24, 2009 could interfere with – and eventually derail – the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement process, gained ground in Washington, DC, especially in the State Department and among the Obama team at the White House. This trend reached the Oval office and as reported by Samantha Power, it largely contributed to Obama’s decision not to use the “G Word” in his statement of April

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<sup>20</sup> Approximately two pages of the book are fully dedicated to this normalization process (Clinton, *Hard Choices* 218-220).

24. Power pushed energetically to get it included to the statement but other NSC officials would systematically drop references to the genocide that she tried to insert in the draft. In a last move, she “[...] decided to offer a formulation that would at least break new ground. [Power] inserted Raphael Lemkin and the fact that the Armenian massacres had motivated him to invent the word ‘genocide.’ But the Senior Director for European Affairs told [her] that this approach would be ‘the worst of both worlds – destined to disappoint the Armenians and enrage the Turks’” (Power, *The Education* 240). Samantha Power was nonetheless persistent and on April 23, the day before Obama published his statement in which he circumvented use the word genocide and used instead the Armenian term “Meds Yeghern”, she had the opportunity to discuss the issue with him. These opportunities were rare. In Obama’s own words, Samantha Power was one of his “[...] closest friends in the White House [...]” but he “[...] didn’t actually see her much from day to day [...]” (Obama 620). The President was then scheduled to speak on Capitol Hill for the Holocaust Days of Remembrance, falling that year at exactly the same time as the Armenian Genocide commemoration. While Power was once again unsuccessful in her attempts to include a mention of the genocide – and even of the expression “slaughter of the Armenians” – in Obama’s speech, she recounts having haphazardly bumped into the president a few minutes before he delivered his speech, and decided to raise the issue of the Armenian Genocide and of the deception of Armenian-Americans when they would realize that the president would not honor his word. Obama explains in his memoirs how Samantha Power’s insistence on ideals and the need for the White House to not betray them made him feel both thankful to her (as she played a role of “temperature check on [his] conscience”), but also irritated. As he puts it: “[...] whenever Samantha got time on my calendar, she felt obliged to remind me of every wrong I hadn’t yet righted” (Obama 620). So when she told him, on this day of remembrance of the Holocaust: “I’m really worried about the Armenians, [...] they really counted on us”, Obama replied: “I’m worried about the Armenians too. But I am worried about the living Armenians. Not the ones we can’t bring back. I am living in the present, Samantha, trying to help the Armenians of today”. He was making a reference to the rapprochement attempts between Turkey and Armenia, and the US support to this process. Samantha Power then asserted: “Mr. President, the talks are not going to work, [w]e know that the Turks are engaging in the normalization process precisely in order to convince you not to recognize the genocide. But they aren’t serious beyond that. As soon as they get through April 24, they’ll refuse any compromise”. To which Obama answered: “I don’t have the luxury of not trying for peace” (Power, *The Education* 243). In a 2018 podcast, Samantha Power explained that Obama was a consequentialist, which means, as analyzed by Ryan Lizza in *The New Yorker*, “[...] an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works” (Lizza). She explained that President Obama really believed that recognizing the Armenian Genocide could have a “perverse effect” and compromise the inception of normalization between Armenia and Turkey (“Discussion”) – normalization that, as Power predicted, never really took place. However, this normalization argument was used for a long time to justify the Executive’s position towards recognition. In a 2013 interview, then-US ambassador to Armenia, John Heffern, explained: “The policy decision about how the US government characterizes this period is a policy decision, and it takes into account a number of legal and political

factors, one of which is reconciliation. [...] The President and Secretary of State – Secretaries Clinton and now Kerry – select and use words that they believe will promote that reconciliation, and that is why they have chosen the words they used” (O’Connell).

### **The last (or lost) opportunity. The 2015 centenary of the Armenian Genocide**

After these failures to formally recognize the Armenian Genocide, the future US ambassador to the UN understood that President Obama would never recognize the Armenian Genocide. She explains: “If the President wouldn’t follow through on his promise in 2009, when he had the most leeway and political capital to take a risk, I knew we would not recognize the genocide during his presidency” (Power, *The Education* 244). Ben Rhodes concurs and notes that every year there was a reason not to recognize the Armenian Genocide (“Discussion”). This “good reason” concept is also raised by Barack Obama himself to justify his renouncement to recognize the genocide. Expanding on his failure to recognize it in 2009, he states in his memoirs: “I had good reason for not making a statement at the time – the Turks were deeply touchy about the issue, and I was in delicate negotiations with President Erdogan on managing America’s withdrawal from Iraq [...]” (Obama 621). In any case, the line was now established and in 2010, the Obama administration even forcefully opposed, particularly through the voice of Hillary Clinton, the vote of a resolution recognizing the genocide in Congress (“Officials”). It was not the first time that the Executive formally opposed congressional moves towards the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. This pattern was set decades ago, to such an extent that the question of officially acknowledging, or not, the genocide is quite illustrative of the rivalry that sometimes happens between the Executive and Congress on foreign policy issues but, which rarely turns in favor of the later (Hamilton 269). However, it is interesting to note here that, a few months after opposing the recognition in Congress, Secretary Clinton visited Yerevan and decided to visit the Genocide Memorial, Dzidzernagapert. The State Department insisted on the fact that this visit to the memorial was a private one, but she laid a wreath of flowers with her position inscribed on it, in front of the memorial’s main monument (“US Secretary”). In 2012, the ANCA, which had strongly supported Obama in 2008, did not call to vote for him. President-candidate Obama did not talk about Armenian issues during his campaign and did not seem to seek to renew contacts with the Armenian-American community. As Samantha Power underlined it, after 2009 “[t]he debate over US recognition was over” (Power, *The Education* 244). However, as she also admitted, the last major missed opportunity was 2015 (“Discussion”).

In 2015, the centenary of the genocide was widely commemorated all over the world and placed it in the international spotlight. The Republic of Armenia organized a grand commemoration in Yerevan in late April, and many world leaders, including heads of state, parliament speakers, foreign ministers, and religious leaders, attended the events to commemorate the genocide on Armenian soil. Others, such as the German president Joachim Gauck and Pope Francis, chose this special year to publicly refer to the Armenian *Genocide* for the first time. While this centenary was

a symbolic opportunity for Barack Obama to keep his promise and show his support to the Armenians, the US President decided not to change anything in the political stance he established on the issue in 2009. Neither did he join François Hollande of France and Vladimir Putin of Russia, amongst other heads of state or government in Yerevan, nor did he imitate his counterparts of the Vatican or Germany in using the term genocide for the first time to characterize the massacres in 1915. He “only” sent a “relatively low-visibility delegation” (“Century”), as described by the *Los Angeles Times*, composed of Secretary of Treasury Jacob Lew, the US ambassador to Armenia, and four lawmakers, to represent their country in Yerevan. Barack Obama’s *A Promised Land* does not cover this event, as the president’s memoirs ends in 2011, and not many official comments are available, but it seems clear that this decision symbolized another victory of the many administration officials favorable to placate Turkey. As reported by an *AP* article (used then by other media), a senior official indicated on condition of anonymity that there was an internal rift on the issue within the administration, mostly between officials at the State and Defense Departments who deal directly with Turkey and the Middle East, and others in the White House and the State Department who deal more directly with human rights issues (Lee). Interestingly enough, these tensions are not mentioned at all neither in Samantha Power and Ben Rhodes’s memoirs, nor in other books written by other stakeholders from the administration. However, several of these books insist on the importance of Turkey in the fight against ISIS in 2015, as well as in the conflict in Syria against the regime of Bashar el Assad. Indeed, the memoirs published by the highest ranked officials of the Obama administration in 2015 – Joe Biden (Vice-President), John Kerry (Secretary of State), Ash Carter (Secretary of Defense), and Susan Rice (NSA) – do not mention the Armenian Genocide or the question of recognizing it at all. Instead, these memoirs systematically focus on Turkey and its significance in Middle Eastern and Eurasian geopolitics particularly between 2014 and 2016. Its importance in the fight against ISIS – one of the stormiest foreign policy issues at that time – is predominantly highlighted. This importance is particularly stressed upon in Joe Biden’s book, *Promise Me Dad*, when he explains that in January 2015, one of his major tasks was to try to convince the Turkish authorities to become more involved in the fight against ISIS in Syria (Biden 76-77)<sup>21</sup>. Ash Carter further pressed the point, presenting Turkey as a coalition partner in the fight against ISIS (Carter 251). John Kerry’s memoirs also mention the significant role of Ankara in dealing with Hamas, during episodes of tensions between Israel and the Palestinians in 2014 (Kerry 472). It is also interesting to note that Turkey is sometimes criticized by US officials for its anti-Kurdish stance too, whereas “[...] the Kurds formed the backbone of our Syrian force fighting ISIS [...]”, as presented by Susan Rice (Rice 423). However, the Turkish position on Syria and on the Kurds does not seem to alter its diplomatic significance from the point of view of Washington. On the contrary, we

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Vice-President Biden was not only concerned by geopolitics and was also mindful, at least at a personal level, of the issue of genocides and how to prevent them. In February, during an official trip to Europe where he was accompanied by his granddaughter Finnegan, he insisted on visiting the concentration camp of Dachau with her, and raised her awareness on the crime of genocide and on the importance of not silencing it. He told her: “This can happen again. This is happening in other parts of the world now. And you have to speak out. You can’t remain silent. Silence is complicity” (Biden 111).

learn from these memoirs, and other journalistic sources, that the US administration mobilized considerably to modify Turkey's position and to make sure it maintained its contribution on the ISIS front. Susan Rice colorfully describes these US efforts (and their results) stating, "This tension was extremely difficult to manage, but President Obama was able to massage Turkish president Erdoğan enough to keep the campaign on track" (Rice 423). The strategic importance of Turkey at a geopolitically tense moment was also relayed by the media and the link between this strategic importance and the executive branch's position with regard to the 2015 centenary of the Armenian Genocide was clearly established. According to the above-mentioned AP article, dated April 22, 2015: "Some at the State Department [...], as well as at the Pentagon, argued against using the word [genocide] [...]. They said the damage it would cause to US-Turkey relations at a critical time, notably when Washington needs Ankara's help in fighting the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq, would far outweigh the immediate benefits" (Lee). Once more, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, this time for its centenary in 2015, was pushed into the background due to geopolitics. The geopolitical context made the US administration consider Turkey as an indispensable partner. This centrality was also evidenced by the visit of Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to Washington a mere two days before April 24, where he met with John Kerry and Susan Rice. Nonetheless, neither of them mentions this meeting in their memoirs. We do not know whether John Kerry raised the question of the Armenian Genocide with his Turkish counterpart, whereas "[t]he White House said Rice encouraged Çavuşoğlu to take 'concrete steps to improve relations with Armenia and to facilitate an open and frank dialogue in Turkey about the 1915 atrocities'" ("White House").

## The role of Obama's advisors and key officials from various departments

From Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power's books, as well as from several press articles, we understand that if Barack Obama did not recognize the Armenian Genocide while in office it is, to a great extent, because a large number of his aides in the White House and key administration members (probably themselves influenced by their staff and subordinates) were not in favor of doing so. Consequently, if Obama did show some interest in recognizing the Armenian Genocide, he would have had to overcome significant opposition from his own staff. And it seems that the camp embodying this opposition within his administration ended up being too strong and diversified and *convinced* him, as stated by Samantha Power in her book (*The Education* 242), in 2009 and 2015 in particular that it would not be smart to recognize the genocide. The divisions within the administration on this issue and the tensions it systematically generated when it was evoked also complicated any significant change. The Armenian Genocide was a troublesome issue and therefore it became very difficult to raise it in the White House, and to make the case evolve. As explained by Samantha Power, "In government, because there is so much going on, it is especially easy to escape unappealing conversations. Indeed, even when people fully intend to make time to debate a vexing issue, they often get consumed by the crises of the day. On the Armenian genocide, the key players had little incentive

to schedule a meeting since any White House deliberation would be both unpleasant *and* jeopardize the status quo. Given Obama's plan to remove US troops from Iraq, and Turkey's importance to regional stability, they were extremely reluctant to upset business as usual" (Power, *The Education* 239). In other words, Obama's aides – and presumably many State and Defense Department officials – did not radically oppose the recognition of the Armenian Genocide but considered it too complex and controversial an issue, with the potential to generate too much geopolitical trouble, while also interrupting and complicating their everyday professional life. The administration, therefore, preferred either setting it aside or maintaining the status quo.

In the end, Rhodes' and Power's books show that the real supporters of recognition among the Obama White House team were few. It is very difficult to establish who was pro-recognition and who was against it as both authors do not give any names but Ben Rhodes goes as far as stating that the entire Obama team apart from Samantha Power was against recognition. Regarding the 2009 non-recognition by Obama, he explained: "All of the other advisors [except Power], less invested in the purity of our campaign positions and more focused on the need for Turkish cooperation, wanted to avoid it altogether" (Rhodes 43). Samantha Power concurs and also points out that it was the Senior Director for European Affairs of the NSC, Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall in 2009, who blocked her proposal to add a reference to "[...] Raphael Lemkin and the fact that the Armenian massacres had motivated him to invent the word 'genocide' [...]" in Obama's April 24 speech. Although it is difficult to be assertive, as we lack information, it can be assumed that the question of personal positioning on the issue of the formal recognition of the Armenian Genocide is a complex one, potentially nuanced and evolving. It is, however, quite safe to consider that the NSA in 2009, Jim Jones, as well as his deputy (and future NSA) Tom Donilon, were not in favor of recognition. With much caution too, we can assume, from Samantha Power's book, that besides her and Ben Rhodes, whom Barack Obama both liked very much but associated strongly with idealism and, therefore, perhaps not with the restraint and prudence often considered as the basic requirements to conduct foreign policy<sup>22</sup>, Denis McDonough, then NSC's head of strategic communication and NSC Chief of Staff, may have been in favor of recognition, or at least not opposed to it directly. Much less information regarding the White House's position in the following years and particularly during the 2015 episode is available. Neither Samantha Power nor Ben Rhodes did provide any clue on the issue. It is reasonable to assume that Susan Rice, US ambassador to the United Nations between 2009 and 2013, and NSA to President Obama in 2015 (in replacement of Tom Donilon), was not fundamentally opposed to formally recognizing the genocide. She had a complex record concerning the Rwandan Genocide. Indeed, although she was at that time a junior adviser to Bill Clinton on the NSC (as a director of international organizations and peacekeeping), she was among those who tried "[...] to limit a robust UN peacekeeping operation before and during the 1994 Rwanda genocide" (Lynch). Samantha Power, who got along very well with Rice when they

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<sup>22</sup> In his memoirs, Barack Obama explains about Samantha Power: "Much like Ben [Rhodes], she evoked my own youthful idealism, the part of me still untouched by cynicism, cold calculation, or caution dressed up as wisdom" (Obama 620).

worked in the Obama administration (Power, *The Education* 205-206), also points out in *A Problem From Hell* – a previous and famous book she published in 2003 on the United States and genocides – that Susan Rice was reluctant, for political reasons, to use the term genocide to characterize the massacres of the Tutsi in Rwanda.<sup>23</sup> Yet, according to Barack Obama, she “[...] remained haunted by the lack of action [...]” of the Clinton administration during the Rwanda Genocide (Obama 637) and, during her time at the White House with President Obama, Susan Rice was also often presented as very concerned about human rights. It is also noticeable that Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* presented her in a 2014 article as having a “[...] track record of supporting pro-Armenian bills” (Tanış). Likewise, as mentioned before, when she met with Turkish Minister of Foreign affairs Çavuşoğlu in 2015 she, according to the White House, mentioned the “1915 atrocity”, which may seem – and technically is – euphemistic but is quite a strong position for a White House official addressing a Turkish Foreign Minister. In any case, whatever may or may not have been Susan Rice’s exact positions on the issue, it is clear that the White House was not in favor of recognizing the genocide when she was the NSA. Rice, however, does not mention the Armenian Genocide a single time in her 541-page memoir, whereas diplomatic and geopolitical relations with Turkey are discussed several times in several chapters.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Susan Rice, does not mention the Armenian Genocide in her book does not necessarily mean that she was not in favor of its recognition but, *a minima*, it means that she either considered it too minor an issue to be alluded to or she preferred keeping her decisions and opinions about it quiet.

The White House and the NSC were not the only ones involved in defining and embodying the position of the Executive branch concerning the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The State and Defense Department also played a major role. Indeed, their historical opposition to any recognition is eminent, as it has been often reported in the media and discussed by pundits – although not studied much by academia. There is either no information or only very little available concerning the many State and Defense Department officials and advisors involved, and their subsequent positions on the issue. It is regrettable, as they probably played a major role in convincing Secretaries within the Executive and in maintaining the “non-recognition” line. However, there is more information available with regard to Obama’s Secretaries of State (Hillary Clinton and John Kerry) and Defense (Robert Gates, Leon Panetta, Chuck Hagel, and Ash Carter), and the way their positions evolved on the recognition issue. Although the result was the same, as none of them recognized the Armenian Genocide in office, two cases can be distinguished: those who did not recognize the genocide prior to taking office (mostly in the Pentagon, with the exception of Leon Panetta) and the ones who did (Hillary Clinton and John Kerry).

In the Pentagon, only Leon Panetta – whose tenure was less than 18 months – had clear records on the Armenian Genocide. He supported several resolutions of recognition when he was a Representative of California, and even made commemorative

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Rice said that she did not recall having held such a position in meetings at the NSC, but affirmed that if she had, “it was completely inappropriate, as well as irrelevant” (Power, *A Problem* 359).

<sup>24</sup> She discusses Turkey’s role in trying to find a solution to the Iran nuclear issue in 2010 (p. 268) and in the war in Syria in 2013 (p. 367) and 2015 (p. 423).



statements before the House (“Armenians in US”). However, it is important to note that this record was established quite some time ago. Panetta was in Congress between 1977 and 1993, and afterwards he worked with the Clinton White House, which did not recognize the genocide. Robert Gates, who kept his duty as Defense Secretary from the preceding administration, fiercely opposed recognizing the genocide when he was George W. Bush’s Defense Secretary. Along with State Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Gates strongly opposed an important congressional vote on the question in 2007. To justify his opposition, he put forward security and geopolitical arguments explaining: “I will say again [the resolution] has potential to do real harm to our troops in Iraq and would strain – perhaps beyond repair – our relationship with a key ally in a vital region and in the wider war on terror” (“Gates Against”). It is, therefore, not a surprise that Gates opposed recognition during his tenure in the Obama administration too, as in 2010, when he publicly and in very explicit terms opposed another resolution recognizing the genocide (“Gates Says”). Chuck Hagel’s case was different, as he was a Congressman and then Chair of the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board before being appointed by Barack Obama as Defense Secretary. However, similar to Robert Gates, Hagel had clear records against the formal recognition of the genocide. He publicly opposed it when he was a Congressman, especially in 2005 – and notably did it on Armenian soil, while visiting Armenia – as detailed by the *Washington Free Beacon* in an article entitled “Chuck Hagel Has an Armenian Problem” (Kredo). Ash Carter’s profile is quite different from the one of his predecessors as he started his career at the Defense Department in 1993 and climbed the ladder until he was nominated Defense Secretary at the end of Obama’s second mandate. His positions on recognition were not made public prior to or during his term, but there is no reason to think that they differed from the ones of his predecessors. In the end, we can conclude with Samantha Power that, no matter the precise position of the different Secretaries of Defense, “[...] virtually the entire national security establishment [...] dedicate[d] itself to persuading Obama to avoid using the ‘g-word’ [...]”.<sup>25</sup> This trend is also confirmed by the fact that none of the memoirs published by the four Defense Secretaries of the Obama era<sup>26</sup> mention the Armenian Genocide, despite dealing with Turkey. Its geostrategic significance, its importance in fighting ISIS, and its difficult relations with Israel (and the need to restore them) are especially highlighted. For example, Leon Panetta mentions his visit to Turkey in December 2011, and the fact that he discussed there “[...] the Arab Spring and forward deployment of radar to support NATO’s missile defense system [...]” (Panetta 399-400). Ash Carter insists on the importance of the military base of Incirlik (on Turkish soil, used by the US army) in the US fight against ISIS (Carter 240) and insists on the US government’s fear when Turkey, whose policy vis-à-vis ISIS had been quite ambivalent, threatened to “[...] withhold support from the counter-ISIS campaign or to align more closely with Russia” (Carter 254). In his book, Robert Gates, who was in office in 2009, makes similar comments, but also expands in an interesting way on

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<sup>25</sup> This assertion by Samantha Power refers to Obama’s trip to Turkey in April 2009 (Power, *The Education* 239).

<sup>26</sup> Chuck Hagel has not published such a book yet. In 2014, after he left office, he re-edited his 2008 book *America, Our Next Chapter. Tough Questions, Straight Answers* (Harper Collins, 2014, with Peter Kaminsky), but adding only or mostly a new introduction to it.

the Turkey-Armenia tensions. He explains that “[...] the two countries have one of the world’s most bitter, intractable, and long-standing adversarial relationships [...]” (Gates 291). This short analysis shows that the Pentagon perceived tensions between Turkey and Armenia as particularly terrible and extreme, but also as very complex and unmanageable. Moreover, it is interesting to note that whereas he states that the Turkey-Armenia relationship has been adversarial for a long time (even though the current Republic of Armenia gained its independence from the USSR only in 1991), Secretary Gates does not try to explain why. We can deduce that what mattered to him is not the problem in itself and its origins (and how, from this point, it could possibly be solved in a just way), but how it can be contained or even shunned.

The situation at the State Department was a bit different. When Obama took office in 2009, the “non-recognition” policy was well and deeply established within the State Department. Samantha Power presents it – rightfully – as the institution emblematic of this policy and that has established the trend of referring to the Armenian Genocide through figurative terms (*The Education* 239). However, what is interesting and unique with the Obama administration is that the two Secretaries of State, Hillary Clinton (2009-2013) and John Kerry (2013-2017) had – as did Barack Obama – very strong and well-known records of support for recognition of the Armenian Genocide prior to taking office. As a Senator of New York, Hillary Clinton co-sponsored a congressional resolution of recognition. Then, as a candidate to win the Democratic Nomination for President in 2008, she explained: “I believe the horrible events perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire against Armenians constitute a clear case of genocide. I have twice written to President Bush calling on him to refer to the Armenian Genocide in his annual commemorative statement and, as President, I will recognize the Armenian Genocide” (Mahdesian). As a senator, she was financially supported in 2002, 2004, and 2006 by an Armenian-American Political Action Committee (PAC),<sup>27</sup> Armenpac, which then endorsed her in the Democratic Primaries of 2008 (Sanamyan). The case of John Kerry is even more characteristic. A Senator of Massachusetts since 1985, he had close relations with the Armenian community of his home-state prior to his nomination as Secretary of State. Indeed, Massachusetts has been home to many Armenian-Americans and Kerry’s involvement in both State and local politics garnered him support from several Armenian-American voters. During his presidential campaign against George W. Bush in 2004, an “Armenians for Kerry” organization was founded, giving Kerry the opportunity to expand on his Armenian engagement and to promise that he would recognize the Armenian Genocide if elected. Presented as an “outspoken advocate of US recognition of the Armenian Genocide” by the ANCA because he had supported several resolutions for recognition, he stated for the 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide in April 2004: “I join Armenian Americans and Armenians worldwide in mourning the victims of the Armenian Genocide and I call on governments and people everywhere to formally recognize this tragedy. Only by learning from this dark period of history and working to prevent future genocides can we truly honor the memories of those Armenians who suffered so unjustly”. He also further elaborated on his abiding support not only for recognition of

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<sup>27</sup> The amount of money given in 2002 was symbolic (\$250) but then reached \$1,000 in 2004 and 2006. Data available on OpenSecrets.org: <http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/pacgot.php?cmte=C00352054&cycle=2004>. Last accessed May 24, 2020.

the genocide, but also for other Armenian-American concerns, explaining: "In 1992, I authored an amendment to the Freedom Support Act making US aid to Azerbaijan conditional on it taking steps to end its blockades against Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. I supported the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act in 1996, which prohibits US assistance to any country that restricts the delivery of US humanitarian aid to another country. In 2003, I cosponsored legislation to extend 'permanent normal trade relations' (PNTR) to Armenia. This January, I joined Senators Barbara Boxer, George Allen, Paul Sarbanes, Russ Feingold, and Jon Corzine in asking the President to urge Turkey to lift its embargo of Armenia" ("Sen Kerry"). This impressive commitment in favor of and proximity with the Armenian community raises even more questions about why Kerry did not recognize the Armenian Genocide when he was Secretary of State and did not do anything visible to change the shape of things on this issue. No trace of any comment was found on these questions after Kerry and Clinton left office, but the fact that the Armenian Genocide is not mentioned in their memoirs (of more than 600 pages each) leads us to believe that they were probably uncomfortable with their choices and the positions they held during their tenure within the State Department. John Kerry's book is striking for that matter: in 640 pages, the words "Armenian(s)" or "Armenia" are not used a single time, despite Kerry's decades-long proximity and interactions with Armenian-Americans.

## Conclusions

As Samantha Power highlights, President Obama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, did not confront the taboo of the Armenian Genocide, while he confronted many others related to foreign policy (particularly on Iran and Cuba) ("Discussion"). This issue remained, during his two terms, "[o]ne of the greatest taboos of US foreign policy", to use Ambassador Evans' expression again. In a presidential system, the responsibility for decisions that involve a national and governmental stand, is that of the president. It seems clear that President Obama could have decided to overcome or circumvent opposition to the recognition of the genocide. He could have decided to use the "G Word" to characterize the Armenian massacres of 1915-1917 (as he had promised to do) – but that would have been tantamount to a total shift on the issue, as the rest of the Executive would have had to do the same – or, at least, he could have decided not to pressure Congress, traditionally more favorable to the recognition, letting it decide whether to legislate on the question or not. He opted for none of these two options and maintained the official and traditional line of the Executive branch, the one he had firmly criticized and opposed when he was senator. He did it in a way slightly different than his predecessors, using the Armenian term "Meds Yeghern," but nonetheless contributed to the US strategy of non-recognition and to "silencing the past", to paraphrase the title of the book by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot), whereas he is a man who has expressed openly his interest and concerns about memory and the importance of acknowledging the dark pages of history.<sup>28</sup> Obama, in his memoirs, does not expand

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<sup>28</sup> In a November 2020 interview with the French television network France 2, Barack Obama explained: "I don't think you solve the problem by pretending that it did not exist. One of the debates that sometimes takes place in America is how do we move forward around

much on his non-recognition of the Armenian Genocide, and does not express any regret about it. On the contrary, he tends to justify his choices on that matter by insisting on the fact that, in 2009, he had “good reason” to avoid using the “G Word”.

Moreover, what is interesting and unique with the Obama presidency is that it ended up not recognizing the genocide even though, during its first term, when Leon Panetta was at the Pentagon (2011-2013), it could have relied on all the senior members of its administration, at least on paper. Indeed, the Obama presidency finds itself in the unprecedented and truly remarkable situation of having simultaneously the vice-president, the secretary of State, and the secretary of Defense who had all strong records on the issue. Clearly, all political conditions were met in favor of a recognition. Therefore, if the US of President Obama did not recognize the Armenian Genocide, it is first and foremost because its leader did not.

However, as these memoirs from senior staff often show, other determinants played a major role in determining the Executive’s position. One can argue that timing often comes up as an excuse not to recognize the Armenian Genocide, and that, since the 1980s, there has never been a good moment for doing so. Yet, it seems that in 2009 the timing was really not in favor of recognition, at least from the administration’s point of view. In April 2009, which should have been the expected juncture for Obama and his administration to speak of the Armenian Genocide, a two-day presidential visit to Turkey was planned and fragile Turkey-Armenia reconciliation discussions were on the verge of possibly coming to a positive end. “Consequentialist” Obama did not want to take the risk to miss what he believed could be a reconciliation opportunity. Then, in the years that followed, and that includes 2015, it seems that the political dynamic was triggered and that, from the administration’s point of view, it would have been awkward, and even possibly perceived as incoherent, to opt for a policy that it had rejected in the past. It would have been tantamount to disavowing its own choices.

Meanwhile, we observe that geopolitics plays a central role in the Executive’s failure to recognize the Armenian Genocide or, at least, a role that is presented as such.<sup>29</sup> This centrality is very much highlighted in the memoirs – including Barack Obama’s, although he addresses Turkey only once, and does not develop much on geopolitics<sup>30</sup> – and the links between Turkey’s geostrategic importance and the US

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our racial divide. And there are those who say just forget the past, let’s just look forward. The problem of course is that slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, those aren’t things you can simply pretend never happen because they continue to have enormous influence on today”. He also added: “I think that in the same way that Germany could not be as successful as it is, until it looked squarely at what happened during the Nazi era, and there was a reckoning there, in the same way that South Africa had to go through a reconciliation and truth process, America still has to do more work around those issues” (“REPLAY”).

<sup>29</sup> It shall be noted that Turkey’s ability in promoting its geopolitical centrality in Washington, and Turkish lobbying in general, also play a central role (whereas they are not really mentioned in the administration memoirs).

<sup>30</sup> This may be partially explained by the fact that *A Promised Land* ends before ISIS gained prominence in Iraq and Syria, and this prominence and the Syrian war were factors that enhanced Turkey’s geostrategic importance in the mid-2010s. The “only” clear and specific reference Barack Obama makes regarding Turkish geopolitical significance in his book is the following one: “We, meanwhile, needed Turkey’s cooperation to combat terrorism and stabilize Iraq” (Obama 346).

stance regarding the Armenian Genocide is often established. Moreover, it shall be noted that this geopolitical importance is in fact a complex, multifaceted, and evolving argument: sometimes Turkey's role in the fight against ISIS is outlined, sometimes the focus is on its NATO and Eurasian centrality, while other times its relationship with Israel is singled out, etc. In other words, as there were always "good reasons" not to recognize the Armenian Genocide (to paraphrase both Barack Obama and Ben Rhodes), it seems that there were always good geopolitical reasons to accommodate Turkey. This was true when the US-Turkish relationship was good and constructive (the goal was then to maintain and possibly even to strengthen it), but this was also true when disagreements emerged (the goal was then either to make sure that the bond would not deteriorate or to reconcile disagreements).

Finally, if President Obama and the Obama administration did not recognize the Armenian Genocide, it is also because many advisors and officials of the White House and the State and Defense Departments – many of whom, especially in the two aforementioned Departments being career officials, involved with their bureau or agency for years – were against recognition. This point is probably the most difficult to verify and study, and neither the memoirs nor any other available documents provide significant and precise information on the topic. However, from what we understand from the few pieces of information given by Samantha Power in particular, but also from the very fact that leaders like Hillary Clinton or John Kerry changed their minds on the issue once they took office, we may conclude that people who surrounded and advised these officials, convinced them. The non-recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Obama administration would, therefore, confirm Tufts Professor Michael Glennon's thesis, exposed in his 2014 book *National Security and Double Government*, according to which "[...] several hundred executive officials [...] manage the military, intelligence, diplomatic, and law enforcement agencies responsible for protecting the nation's security. These officials are as little disposed to stake out new policies as they are to abandon old ones" (Glennon 113). In any event, the way the Obama administration handled the question of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide shows how sensitive, complex, and multifaceted the issue is, and that it would need a profound change and, above all, a determined leadership in the White House to modify the Executive's position.

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