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POLITICIZATION OF THE CONCEPT OF GENOCIDE AND LEMKIN'S LEGACY

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Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term genocide, has recently been at the center of a highly ironic debate. The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security, based in Philadelphia, issued statements characterizing Israels actions in Gaza as genocide following October 7.[1] In response, some of Lemkins relatives argue that the organization is using Lemkins name and legacy without their permission and is instrumentalizing his legacy for political purposes through genocide allegations against Israel. Meanwhile, the Institute rejects these allegations and cites Lemkins work as one of the foundational references for its human rights activities.[2]

Some concepts in international politics do not merely carry legal significance; they also generate political legitimacy. The concept of genocide is at the forefront of these. Characterizing an event as genocide affects not only how past events are interpreted but also how a state is positioned in the eyes of the international public today. Therefore, this debate goes far beyond a simple disagreement over terminology; it raises the question of whether the concept of genocide is used as a universal and objective legal standard or as an accusation tool that is occasionally imbued with different meanings based on political motives.

In this context, particularly the fact that the Ottoman Statess Relocation and Resettlement Law has been raised over the years as a tool for international political pressure against Türkiye necessitates an examination of the relationship between legal concepts and political discourse. Indeed, the fact that debates regarding the Relocation and Resettlement Law are not merely historical and legal matters but are also addressed within the context of political relations between states serves as an important example of the politicization of the issue. One of the remarkable examples of this is that Armenian genocide claims in Israel are brought to the agenda from time to time. In the periods when relations between Israel and Türkiye are tense, the emergence of attempts to recognize the "Armenian Genocide" in the Knesset shows that this issue is not only a matter of historical or legal assessment.

This is where the true irony of the Raphael Lemkin debate emerges. The name of the lawyer who developed the concept of genocide is today used as a source of legitimacy by opposing political camps. On one side, some members of the Lemkin family, highlighting his Jewish identity and support for Israel, find the approach of the current Lemkin Institute contrary to his legacy. On the other, the Institute argues that Lemkins real legacy is not to protect any state or community politically, but to protect groups in danger of mass destruction.

If the concept of genocide is truly a universal legal standard today, the identity of the victim, whether the perpetrator is an ally, whose states interests the accusation serves, or the identity of the person who coined the term should not alter the legal criteria. Otherwise, the debate that claims to defend Lemkins legacy will, ironically, lead to the very thing he opposed, that is, the crime of genocide being overshadowed by political conflicts.

Ultimately, the real test of Raphael Lemkins legacy is not who uses his name, but the extent to which the concept he developed is applied consistently in todays world. When the word genocide becomes a political slogan, it risks losing its legal meaning. If the effort of his relatives is to truly protect Lemkins heritage, the same legal measure should be applied to the same act regardless of the support shown for the political thesis of any state or people. If this can be achieved, genocide will cease to be a political argument used between parties and can finally be regarded as part of the common legal framework that humanity has developed to prevent genocide. Otherwise, the never again principle will become a political tool that varies depending on which victim is involved.

[1] Statement on Why We Call the Israeli Attack on Gaza Genocide, *Lemkin Institute*, December 29, 2023, https://www.lemkininstitute.com/statements-new-page/statement-on-why-we-call-the-israeli-attack-on-gaza-genocide.

[2] Larry Luxner, Lemkin Family Fights to stop Pa. charity From Using Name in anti-genocide Campaign, *The Times of Israel,* August 9, 2026, https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/lemkin-family-fights-to-stop-pa-charity-from-using-name-in-anti-genocide-campaign/

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