

DEBATE ON THE QUEEN'S SPEECH

COUNTRY/ISSUE

ARMENIA: "GENOCIDE" RECOGNITION

KEY MESSAGES

- **The massacres and crimes inflicted on hundreds of thousands of Armenians at the beginning of the last century were rightly condemned by the British Government of the time.**
- **However it is not appropriate for the British Government of today to take a formal position on whether or not this constituted genocide.**
- **Instead our priority should be to promote reconciliation between the peoples and Governments of Turkey and Armenia. That is the best way to ensure a peaceful and secure future for everyone living in the region.**

ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND

1. Between 1915 and 1916, an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire were killed. Many were massacred; others were victims of civil strife, starvation and disease; or died during deportation (to the Syrian desert). A number of other minorities also suffered. The Turkish government accepts some atrocities were committed but disputes the scale of the deaths and argues that they took place in the context of a war in which many Turks also died.
2. Expatriate Armenians, including diaspora in France and the US, lobby hard for recognition of these events as genocide. Turkey bitterly disputes this accusation and devotes major diplomatic resources to preventing recognitions, although a

number of countries, including France, Canada, Russia and Switzerland, have done so at either Parliamentary or governmental level. During his election campaign, President Obama committed himself to US recognition. However, in both 2009 and 2010 his 24 April Genocide Memorial Day statements have stopped short of referring explicitly to genocide.

3. [redacted]

4. In October 2009 Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols aimed at normalising diplomatic relations and reopening their border (closed as a result of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict). However the Armenian decision in April 2010 to suspend ratification of the protocols may be seen by some as a reason to reopen the UK position on genocide recognition.

MOST LIKELY QUESTIONS TO ARISE

Will the new Government reverse the previous government's position of denial of the Armenian genocide?

- Like my predecessors, I deeply regret the terrible suffering and loss of life inflicted on Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the 20th century, but it would not be appropriate for the British Government to take a formal position on whether or not this constituted genocide.
- While we remember the victims of the past, our priority today should be to promote reconciliation between the peoples and Governments of Turkey and Armenia.

The "normalisation" protocols between Turkey-Armenia are suspended with little prospect of early progress, so do you agree that this should not be a reason for refusing to recognise 1915-16 as genocide?

- Despite the suspension of the protocols, Turkey and Armenia have taken significant steps in recent years. We encourage both sides to continue to work towards normalisation.
- It is first and foremost for the Turkish and Armenian people to address their common history. We will support any process

which helps them do so in an open, honest and constructive manner.

What is the Minister's analysis of the recent legal opinion by Geoffrey Robertson QC which found that the Armenian massacres of 1915 met the legal definition of genocide?

- Genocide is a precise term and its use is best assessed by a competent court. It is inappropriate for the British government to apply the term to events on which no legal judgement can be made.

Does the Minister agree with Geoffrey Robertson QC that FCO officials have misled Ministers on the issue of the Armenian genocide, causing Ministers in turn to mislead Parliament?

- Ministers, not officials are responsible for the statements that they make to Parliament.
- I disagree with Mr Robertson's suggestion that Parliament has been misled on this issue.

Parliamentary Background

(Debates, Statements, Select Committees, Legislation, White/Green Papers etc)

The main interest from Parliamentarians comes in the form of MPs letters, forwarding letters from constituents advocating genocide recognition. Most (but not all) of these originate from UK members of the Armenian diaspora. In the last Parliament there was both a Private Members Bill (tabled by Andrew Dismore, Lab, no longer in Parliament) and an Early Day Motion on genocide recognition.

In the Lords, Baroness Cox, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Armenia, has been particularly active on this issue. She tabled a debate on genocide recognition on 29 March 2010, in which Baroness Kinnock spoke for the then government. The majority of peers who participated in the debate expressed sympathy for the position of non-recognition, including Baroness Rawlings, Lord Wallace and Lord Hylton.

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