

Background Briefing

Armenian Massacres 1915-1916

Between 1915 and 1916, an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire were killed (following earlier pogroms and massacres in the 1870s and 1890s). Many were massacred; others were victims of civil strife, starvation and disease which ravaged the whole population of Eastern Anatolia during the First World War. Others died during deportation (relocation) from their towns and villages (to the Syrian desert), allegedly for reasons of national security. 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.

It is generally accepted that there were significant and systematic massacres of Armenians in 1915 - 1916, but there is some disagreement among historians about the precise numbers and whether the massacres constituted genocide as defined by the UN Convention on Genocide of 1948. Expatriate Armenians, including diaspora in France and the US, lobby hard for recognition of these events as genocide.

[redacted]

although a small number of countries, including France, Canada, Russia and Switzerland, have done so. In some cases this has taken the form of official governmental recognition while in others Parliaments have passed resolutions without government support. During his election campaign, President Obama committed himself to US recognition, as have other senior Democrats. However, in his 24 April 2009 Genocide Memorial Day statement, he stopped short of referring explicitly to genocide instead using an Armenian term meaning 'Great Calamity' to describe the events. He also reiterated that his own previously expressed views had not changed. Given the current lack of progress in Turkey – Armenian relations (see below for more details) **[redacted]**

We believe that it is very important that Turkey and Armenia address these historical issues together and that this process is owned by them. It would be unhelpful if we or other external parties were pressed to adopt public positions on these issues or attempted to pre-empt the outcome of the reconciliation process.

Robertson Report

In 2009 the Armenian Centre instructed Geoffrey Robertson QC to review all legal and factual issues surrounding the events of 1915-16 to assess whether they amounted to genocide. In his report, which was published in October 2009, he gave the opinion that while the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide could not be applied retrospectively to the Armenian massacres it was possible to apply the legal term genocide to what occurred.

The report also examined the UK government's position on this issue, using documents obtained from the FCO under the Freedom of Information Act. The Report stated that "[FCO officials] advice reflects neither the law on genocide nor the

demonstrable facts of the massacres in 1915-16, and has been calculated to mislead parliament into believing that there has been an assessment of evidence and an exercise of judgement on that evidence.”

We do not agree with Geoffrey Robertson’s assessment. We do not believe it is appropriate to apply the term to events that predate the Convention and where no legal judgement can be made. Nor do we accept that there has been any attempt to mislead Parliament in the way ministers have answered questions on UK government policy with regard to these events.

Recent issues

Swedish and US votes on recognition

On 4 March a resolution recognising the Armenian Genocide was passed by the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs. This is the third time such a resolution has passed the Committee stage but, as on previous occasions, it is unlikely to be tabled for debate and vote on the floor of the House. The resolution was opposed by the US government. Nevertheless, Turkey has recalled its Ambassador to the US.

On 11 March the Swedish parliament voted to recognise the Armenian Genocide by 131 – 130. The Swedish government has made clear it does not feel the vote was appropriate and that it does not intend to change official Swedish policy. Again, Turkey recalled its Ambassador and cancelled a planned March visit to Stockholm by President Erdogan.

On 16 March in an interview with the BBC Turkish service in London about the recent resolutions in the US and Sweden, the Turkish Prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, suggested Turkey could expel up to 100,000 illegal Armenian migrants if genocide recognition efforts continued. This sparked considerable press in Armenia and Turkey as well as UK press coverage. Both PM Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu have now clarified that there are no immediate plans to deport illegal Armenian immigrants from Turkey, and President Gul has also clarified that Turkey does not discriminate against Armenians working in Turkey.

Turkey’s threat to expel illegal Armenians

On 16 March in an Interview with the BBC in London about the recent resolutions in the US and Sweden, the Turkish Prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, threatened to expel 100,000 illegal Armenian’s from Turkey, sparking considerable press in Armenia and Turkey and some in the UK. Both PM Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu have now clarified that there are no immediate plans to deport illegal Armenian immigrants from Turkey, and President Gul has also clarified that Turkey does not discriminate against Armenians working in Turkey.

Parliamentary Interest

This is not an issue which attracts frequent Parliamentary attention. 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 and the volume tends to increase following an event such as the release of the Robertson report or the US and Swedish votes. There is currently also both a Private Members Bill and an Early Day Motion on genocide recognition.

Private Members Bill – Andrew Dismore MP

Andrew Dismore MP (Labour) has presented a private members bill (PMB) which seeks to introduce a national day to remember and learn about the Armenian genocide. It is supported by Labour MPs John Austin, Viendra Sharma, Clive Efford, Karen Buck and Rob Marris. This PMB was due to have its second reading on 16 October but was not reached in the allotted time. It has been put back on the Order Paper for 30 April 2010 however the upcoming general election means parliament may have dissolved by then and there is certainly no prospect of the Bill completing the legislative process. The government does not support the bill.

Early Day Motion 357 – Bob Spink MP

Early Day Motion (EDM) 357 was tabled by Bob Spink MP (independent) on 29 November 2006. The EDM states “That this House believes that the killing of over a million Armenians in 1915 was an act of genocide; calls upon the UK Government to recognise it as such; and believes that it would be in Turkey's long-term interests to do the same.” To date it has 182 signatures, including the current Minister for Europe, Chris Bryant. The Minister's signature predates his appointment to his current job and he has made clear that he supports the current government position.

Turkey-Armenia Relations:

Relations between Armenia and Turkey have been historically poor. The Armenian Massacres of 1915-16 are still a major source of tension between the two countries. Turkey's close ties with Azerbaijan add further strain to the relationship. Turkey broke off moves to establish diplomatic relations and open the border with Armenia following the 1991-93 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The war left the enclave of Nagorno Karabakh (NK) as a self-declared independent republic, which no country, including Armenia, has recognised. Seven other districts of Azerbaijan remain occupied by Armenia (together with NK, around 14% of Azerbaijan's territory).

Turkey and Armenia have recently taken significant steps towards normalising their relations. Two protocols were signed on 10 October 2009 setting out the basis for establishing diplomatic relations and developing their bilateral relationship. The signing followed, after some delay, the April 2009 announcement of a road map to normalising relations. This rapprochement was initiated by President Sargsyan of Armenia, who invited Turkish President Gül to visit Armenia in September 2008 to watch the first leg of Turkey and Armenia's 2010 World Cup Qualifying match, the

first visit by a Turkish Head of State to Armenia. President Sargsyan made the return journey in October 2008 to watch the second leg of the football match in Turkey..

The protocols need to be ratified by the parliaments in each country, a process which is expected to be protracted. **[redacted]**

There have been fears that without progress before the end of April both the protocols and the wider normalisation process would be abandoned. A total collapse now seems unlikely, but so too does ratification in the near future. The continuing stalemate denies Armenia the opportunities for economic and political development offered by border opening, as well as harming Turkey's EU accession prospects and relations with the West. We are therefore continuing to urge both governments to move forward. **[redacted]**

Baroness Caroline Cox

Baroness Cox of Queensbury is a cross bench member, founder and CEO of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust and Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Armenia. She is a staunch supporter of the Armenian lobby to recognise the 1915/1917 massacres as genocide, a regular visitor to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh and an advocate of NK's right to self determination. She previously asked the Government in 2005 to reconsider the Armenian massacre. Her statement below underlines her general position:

"As Armenians worldwide commemorate this year the 90th anniversary of the start of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, I add my voice to those of others and call upon Her Majesty's Government to recognise this historical injustice against Armenians that resulted in the deaths of one-and-a-half million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during World War I.

In so doing, the United Kingdom would join other nations who have already recognised the Genocide and become one of the leaders of the world in ensuring that 'Never Again' retains its full meaning and significance. This would help to ensure that any nation would think again before committing any future acts of genocide or crimes against humanity. It could also ensure that other countries such as the USA, Germany and Israel would follow suit and recognise this painful chapter in 20th-century history."