

Remembering the first genocide of the 20th century

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The first genocide of the 20th century took place between 1915 and 1919 in Turkey. About two million people lost their lives in that mass-scale massacre which had been planned by the “Young Turks”, Enver Bey and Minister of Interior Talat Pasha. Most of the victims were Armenian Christians. That was why this event was named the Armenian genocide. However, other Christian groups were forgotten in that tragedy: Assyrians, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldeans. It was also forgotten that the killings against Christian minorities had already started decades earlier and that nobody had cared.

This first genocide was announcing the Holocaust that was perpetrated on the occasion of WW II. In 1940-1945, a specific group was also targeted all over Europe under nazi yoke, the Jews, but everybody seemed to forget that other minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Romas, homosexuals and others had shared also the tragic fate. Before WW II, the persecution of these minority groups had already started in the general international indifference and passivity. That page of the WW II is now being rewritten. The page on the so-called Armenian genocide should therefore also be rewritten.

Two wars, two genocides but one and the same pattern. Ignoring the first genocide paved the way for the second one because no lesson had been drawn from history. Before planning the Holocaust, Hitler said to the leaders of his party “Who still remembers now the Armenian genocide?”

In Turkey, the genocide is still a taboo issue almost a century after it took place and there is no sign of change in sight. Those who want to combat revisionist and negationist theses and who want to rewrite history risk to lose their freedom and even their lives in Turkey.

In 2000, Father Yusuf Akbulut, a Syriac Orthodox priest, was arrested, jailed and prosecuted on the grounds of treason because he had said to a journalist that the “Armenian genocide” was a reality and that other Christian minorities had been massacred during that genocide. On 4 October 2000, the newspaper “Hurriyet” entitled the interview “A traitor among us”. Two days later, Turkish military security agents arrested the priest.

The Turkish government position is that during WW I Armenians and Assyrians were displaced because they were traitors who had taken sides with the enemies of the Ottoman Empire: Russia, France and UK.

The Armenian thesis shared and supported by many independent historians and academics is that the so-called war deportations were only a pretext for some nationalistic masterminds in Istanbul to plan the extermination and the systematic execution of the Armenian people, and more widely of the Christian populations living in the eastern provinces, so as to achieve an ethnically homogeneous Turkish state.

The word genocide is sometimes abused in media language and does not always correspond to the reality of the facts. So, what is a genocide? The United Nations answered that question in 1948 in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide:

“Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, such as:

- (a) Killing members of the group;*
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.*

The previous speakers have abundantly illustrated the aforementioned criteria with concrete examples. There is no doubt that the mass-scale massacre of Armenians and Assyrians was a genocide.

Of course, the U.N. Convention cannot be applied retroactively although Turkey has signed it and ratified it. But Turkey could recognize the genocide, point at the masterminds of it, condemn them morally at least, apologize for it and pay damages under one form or another to the minority groups that have been exterminated. One form of compensation could be to recognize those groups as national minorities and to grant them rights that are enshrined in the Framework Convention on National Minorities which Turkey has failed to sign and to ratify up to now.

Unfortunately, in the last decades, Turkey has chosen another way and has pursued its policy of extinction of the Assyrians through a cultural genocide. The war against the Kurds was a good pretext to put the Christian minorities under pressure, make their lives unbearable and push them to emigration. In the last 20 years, 90% of the Assyrians have emigrated from Turkey. All the methods listed in the U.N. definition of the genocide were used against them. Villages were burnt down and evacuated. Fields and vineyards were burnt. Graveyards and houses were destroyed. A number of Assyrians were deprived of the Turkish citizenship. Young girls were abducted and forcibly married to Muslims while others were released in exchange of a ransom. Assyrians were arrested on the ground of alleged collaboration with the Kurdish fighters; others disappeared, were killed or are still missing. Churches and monasteries got derelict and could not be repaired. Everything was done to prevent the survival of their language and their culture.

The Turkish state either carried out that cultural genocide or turned a blind eye to the exactions committed by the Kurdish Muslims against the Assyrians.

The only way the Turkish state can prove that these accusations are now inappropriate is to sign, ratify and implement the Framework Convention on National Minorities and to implement it without any restrictions.

Considering the aforementioned facts, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* recommends to the Turkish state

- to recognize the genocide perpetrated against the Armenians and the Assyrians in 1915 and in the subsequent years
- to set up an international enquiry commission on the 1915 mass killings which would comprise independent academics from various countries
- to revise the history of Turkey in schoolbooks
- to sign and ratify international instruments protecting national minorities such as the Framework Convention on national minorities drafted by the Council of Europe

- to correct the mistakes of the past and to guarantee the present and the future of the Assyrians and other ethnic or religious groups by recognizing them as national minorities
- to authorize the Assyrians and other national minorities to protect, use and promote their respective languages and religions to build new churches and monasteries to restore architectural monuments and various places of worship to open schools, social institutions and cultural associations to restore the names of villages, towns and places in their original language
- to allow the Assyrians and other members of religious or ethnic minorities in exile to go back to Turkey and to get back their property
- to guarantee the economic development of the areas where those ethnic and religious minorities are rooted
- to guarantee the life and property of people belonging to ethnic and religious minorities
- to promote tolerance
- to prosecute any individual or organisation which would spread ethnic or religious hatred

By doing this, the Turkish state would show its willingness to make up for the damages and losses inflicted to a number of its minorities under previous rules and would improve its moral profile on the international scene.

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