

# Human Rights Without Frontiers

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## Turkey's Candidacy for EU Membership and the Genocide Issue

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For years, Turkey has been knocking at the door of the European Union. Negotiations with regard to Turkey's accession to the EU might soon be opened although a major prerequisite has not been fulfilled: Turkey's recognition of the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire against Armenians, Pontiac Greeks and various Syriac-speaking Christian denominations of the Assyrian ethnic group.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.*, the organisation I am chairing, has repeatedly asked Turkey to recognize that genocide. Never would Germany have been welcome in the European family if it had not recognised the Holocaust and repented for it. If the European Union wants to be consistent with the ideals of its founding fathers, it must not accept Turkey in its midst as long as this country has not repented openly for the ethnic and religious cleansing perpetrated during WW I.

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.

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. On the contrary. On 14 April 2003, the Turkish Ministry of Education issued a circular organising a competition of essays to be drafted by students on the so-called lies circulated about the genocide. School programs were consequently modified. Such a measure is inconsistent with the Final Document of the U.N. Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination which took place in Madrid in fall 2001.

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. On 30 May 2003, teachers protesting against the circular were accused of "inciting social disorder" by the public prosecutor. One of them was temporarily imprisoned and later released on bail. 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.

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

The Armenian thesis which is even shared and supported by a number of courageous Turkish 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.

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 mass-scale massacre of Armenians, Pontiac Greeks and Assyrians WAS a genocide.

To qualify for EU membership, Turkey should recognize it, point at its masterminds, condemn them morally at least and in compensation accommodate the various minority groups in the new Turkey. This could for example take the form of the ratification of the Framework Convention on National Minorities.

Considering the aforementioned facts and considerations, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* recommends to the European Union, before its taking any decision on Turkey's accession, to claim from the Turkish state

- that it recognizes the genocide and the extermination of the Armenians, the Pontiac Greeks and the Assyrians;
- that it shows its political will to respect the rights of its ethnic and religious minorities as set out in the Copenhagen criteria;
- that it implements the Final Document of the U.N. Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination by revising the contents of its schoolbooks.

By doing this, the European Union would help the Turkish state improve its moral profile on the international scene and be in a better position to qualify for EU accession.

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