it may be ascertained: a competent international tribunal can determine if an event is genocide. Such a court decision exists for the Holocaust, for Rwanda and for Srebrenica. But no such decision exists for 1915. So **nothing close to a legal consensus exists on the issue.**

Rebuilding historical friendship and cooperation

Turks and Armenians should work to rebuild their historical friendship without forgetting the difficult periods in their common past. It needs to be remembered that, despite the events of World War I, until the Armenian assassination and PR campaigns began in the early 1970s, Armenians and Turks were very close to each other at the social level and that indeed they still are today in some expatriate communities. Individual Turks and Armenians share a common Anatolian and Ottoman heritage and most aspects of its culture, even language. This may be the reason why today's Armenian radical opponents of Turkey insist on not having contacts of any sort with Turks or Turkey: they are trying to sever this heritage of mutual acceptance and shared heritage.

But in the endeavor to overcome historical and political bitterness, all sides must be honest and open-minded. A process of true dialogue, learning to respect the other side's truths, gradually building up respect through familiarity and empathy may well be possible. Could that not help Turkish and Armenian narratives to come closer together around a "just memory"? Believing that this is possible, Turkey proposed the establishment of a joint commission composed of Turkish and Armenian historians, and other international experts, to study the events of 1915 in the archives of Turkey, Armenia and third countries. The findings of the commission might bring about a fuller and fairer understanding of this tragic period on both sides and hopefully contribute to normalization between Turks and Armenians.

Picture showing Muslim, Armenian and Greek representatives at the 1908 Constitution Declaration

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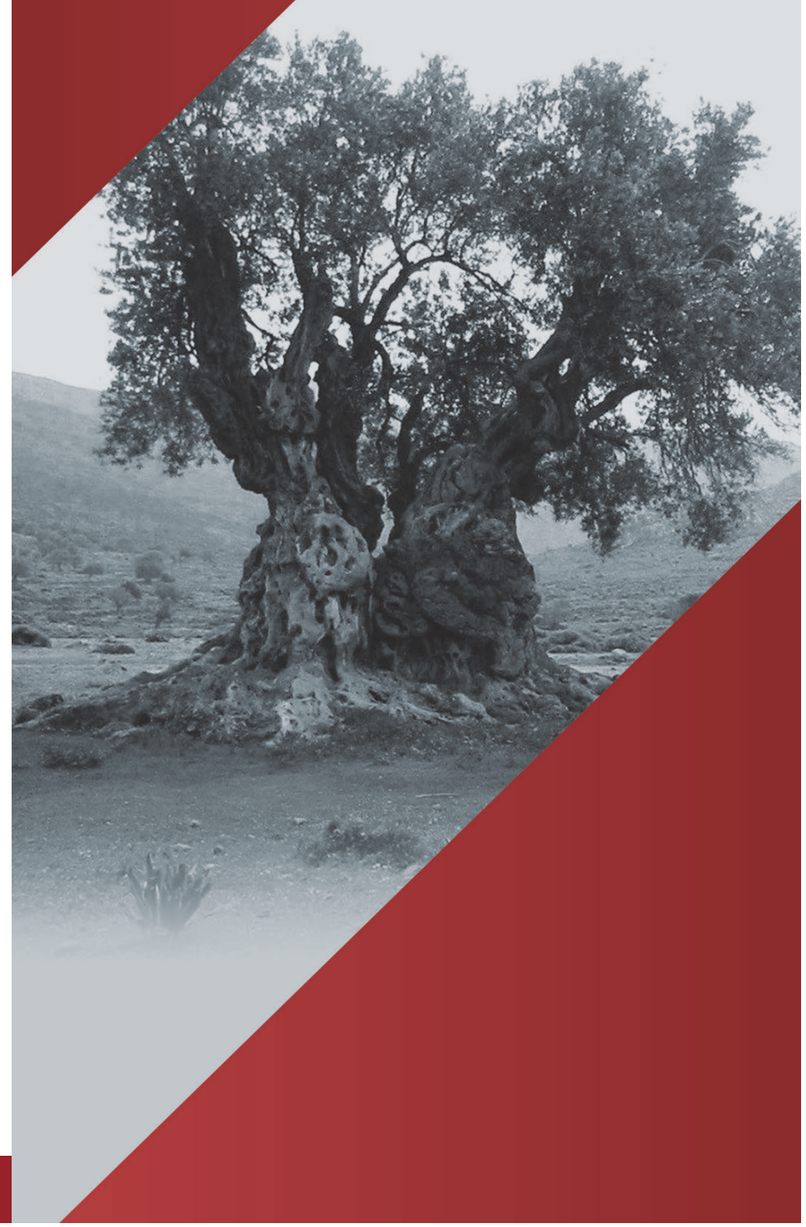
The events of 1915 and the Turkish-Armenian controversy over history



Background

The First World War was a calamity of unprecedented proportions. At least 16 million people lost their lives and another 20 million were wounded. Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires collapsed, boundaries changed dramatically and large scale human migrations occurred.

Even before the War the Ottoman Empire had begun to decline continuously as a result of the penetration of European colonialism, nationalism and corresponding warfare. The Russian expansionism and the winds of nationalism that blew from the West resulted in the disintegration of the Western provinces of the Empire and led to the inevitable weakening of the ailing Ottoman State structure. Nearly 4.5 million Ottoman Muslims perished from 1864 to 1922 and many more dead were never counted. Moreover, around 5 million Ottoman citizens were driven away from their ancestral homes in the Balkans and the Caucasus during the period of the Empire's disintegration and found shelter in Anatolia and Istanbul. Armenians, as all the other people that made up the Empire, also suffered immensely. The loss of so many innocent lives and departure from ancestral lands was a common fate.

Ottoman refugees from the Balkans entering to Istanbul (1913)

Even today traumatic consequences of the 1915 events continue to distress Turks and Armenians. Competing and hitherto irreconcilable narratives on the 1915 events erode the mutual empathy and self-critical assessment that is needed for reconciliation. What is required is to try to examine objectively how this tragedy happened and reveal its true historical context, including the dynamics of cause and effect, so as to reconcile Turkish and Armenians views of history.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, Czarist Russia aimed to weaken and divide the Ottoman Empire and so supported Armenian separatist activities and revolts. This led to the further radicalization and militarization of nationalistic Armenian groups in the territories where Ottoman Muslims constituted the majority. Consequently, significant numbers of armed Armenian groups joined forces with the invading Russian army to create an ethnically homogenous Armenian homeland.

Armenian units fighting along with Russian army to capture the Turkish city of Van (1915)

In response, in 1915 the Ottoman Government ordered that the Armenian population residing in or near the war zone should be relocated to the southern Ottoman provinces away from the supply routes and army transport lines on the way of the advancing Russian army. Some Armenians living away from the front who were nevertheless reported or suspected of being involved in collaboration, were also included in the compulsory transfer.

While the Ottoman Government clearly planned that those who had to be moved should be cared for, protected, and fed adequately, most of the Armenians suffered immensely. War-time conditions, exacerbated by internal strife; local groups seeking revenge; banditry; famine; epidemics and the general lawlessness of a collapsing state apparatus all combined to produce a painful tragedy that was beyond any contingency expectation. There were also some unruly Ottoman officials who committed offences against Armenian convoys. Yet, historical documents prove that the Ottoman Government not only did not intend these outrages to take place but that on the contrary it prosecuted the perpetrators. Officials/civilians who disobeyed the instructions of the Government to carry out the relocation in an orderly and secure way were court-martialed and those found guilty were sentenced to capital punishment by the Government in 1916, long before the end of the First World War.

Despite the tragedy of 1915 and the wars between Turkish and Armenian armies between 1918-1920, relations between the two people continued without any significant problems until the 1960s. However, the dynamics of cold war politics exploited bitter memories and grievances on the Armenian side. This fuelled the radicalism of certain nationalist Armenian groups, resulting in violent anti-Turkish activities. Painful for all Turks to remember, terrorism became a tool to get the attention of world public to the Armenian claims. Over 30 Turkish diplomats and their relatives were killed in terrorist attacks from 1975 onwards by Armenian militants.

During this period, the Armenian view and the genocide thesis started to be widely disseminated, at times using forged documents/photographs. Significant parts of the pro-Armenian literature rested upon a highly questionable methodology for explaining population figures. Some dubious memoirs were used and repeatedly cross-referenced in order to build up a case for genocide recognition. On the other hand, pointing to the serious shortcomings of the genocide claim does not mean that the Armenians did not suffer terribly and in great numbers. In fact, numbers are not the primary issue; even smallest number of innocent deaths is tragic. Nor does the death of millions of Ottoman Muslims in the same era, so often ignored in Western historiography, constitute a reason for condoning or belittling the deaths of so many Armenians. But insisting on genocide as the only way to describe the Armenian experience, while ignoring Turkish losses, is not a proper way to honour the memory of those who lost their lives, nor does it correctly reflect the historical record.

No political, scientific or legal consensus to describe the events of 1915

The fact remains that **the issue is a matter of legitimate scholarly debate**, with reputable historians on both sides. Giving absolute priority to uncompromising Armenian anti-Turkish views, even when reflecting well-intended attitudes to show solidarity with a group that has experienced past suffering, does not do justice to the grievances that were experienced by so many different populations. Compassion becomes problematic if it is selective.

Armenian communities living in Western countries are often represented by well-organized nationalist associations that have chosen to build Armenian identity fixated on having the events of 1915 internationally recognized as genocide. Consequently, the Armenian national narrative has been widely circulated in series of aggressive public relations campaigns, creating the impression that there is widespread acceptance and even a consensus on the Armenian view of history. **It is misleading to believe that there is a "political consensus" on this issue.** In fact, in a limited number of countries, only around 20 out of 200 countries, have parliaments made declarations, mostly of a non-binding nature, supporting the Armenian view of history. Not surprisingly, these are all countries where the Armenian diaspora is very active. And there were always numerous parliamentarians who voted against these pro-Armenian bills.

There certainly is no "scholarly consensus" either. Alongside many scholars who lean towards the Armenian view, there are quite a few non-Turkish historians who disagree with the genocide thesis. They do not deny the Armenian suffering. But they just do not think genocide is a correct description of the events of 1915.

It is often forgotten that genocide is a specific crime which is defined by the international law. The 1948 Convention specifies what genocide is and how