

## 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide: Building bridges in Turkish-Armenian relations

A day of remembrance is held every year on 24 April, to mark the Armenian genocide. The relocation of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915, now a century ago, remains one of the most significant and controversial issues in Turkish-Armenian relations. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were relocated under extremely harsh conditions. The numbers of casualties among them were high, and the underlying causes make it the object of considerable controversy still today. How can the two countries establish effective communication, cooperation and mutual confidence, 100 years on?

### Armenia and Turkey: A shared history

Every nation has had [both glorious and sad days in its history](#) which strongly mark its sense of identity. [Armenians and Turks share a common history](#), one that emerged out of their bitter experiences in World War I, in which both suffered greatly. [Millions of people of all religions and ethnicities](#) lost their lives in the [First World War](#). [One of the longest-standing controversies](#) in today's European politics, and in international law, remains the '[Armenian genocide](#)' question. For the Armenians, the [historical evidence of the genocide](#) is cast in stone. The Turks, for their part, strenuously [question the term](#) 'genocide'. Although they concede that crimes were committed during the [mass deportations](#) of the Armenian population from Turkey in 1915-16, they explain the suffering of the Armenians as acts of war against a nation which had betrayed its loyalty to the [Ottoman Empire](#), to which it belonged, taking up arms during World War I on the side of the Allied enemy.

[Exactly a century ago](#), in March 1915, the British and French navies, together with the [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps](#) (ANZAC), attempted to force their way through the [Turkish Dardanelles Straits](#) to attack Istanbul and open a new front in World War I, in the [Gallipoli Campaign](#) ([Çanakkale](#)). At the same time, the [Ottoman government](#) was in the process of moving its Armenian population away from the eastern parts of the empire bordering its arch-enemy, Russia. Amid [the chaos of war](#), the Ottomans feared Russia would stir the Christian Armenian 'millet' to revolt, fragmenting the Ottoman Empire while its armies clashed with Russia's allies, the British and the French. The [forced displacement of the Armenians](#) was accompanied by violence and depredation. Today, Armenians, as well as most historians, claim that [1.5 million of their ancestors](#) were deliberately and systematically killed in the modern world's first genocide. There are no exact, indisputable figures for the number of lives lost, but the magnitude of the catastrophe seems incontestable.

#### 24 April 1915

On 24 April 1915, Interior Minister [Mehmed Talaat signed the order to arrest](#) 250 prominent Armenian intellectuals, businessmen and cultural figures in Constantinople and take them to holding centres. Several hundred more followed them. A few weeks later Talaat signed the [Tehcir Law](#), expelling the Armenian population of the Empire. Armenians were forced out and their property seized. Ottoman soldiers massacred Armenian villages, burying the residents in mass graves. Some Armenians were forced into concentration camps. By 1919, more than a million Armenians had been killed. At first, the defeated Ottoman Empire [recognised the massacres](#) of Armenians and tried some of the perpetrators both within [Turkey](#) and then in the [Malta Trials](#). However, after Atatürk overthrew the Ottoman regime and founded modern Turkey in 1923, [attitudes began to change](#).

### *The Malta Trials and the legal vacuum*

Over [100 Turks were deported to Malta](#) by the British in 1919 to be charged with war crimes, including the crimes committed against the Armenian population. The lack of concrete evidence, and an appropriate legal framework with supranational jurisdiction, resulted in the Turkish detainees being repatriated and freed, in exchange for 22 British prisoners held by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). Following World War I, international [norms for regulating war crimes](#) were limited. [Judge Giovanni Bonello](#) in [Histories of Malta](#) claims that a 'series of engineered coincidences' meant that the 'Malta Trials' did not play a role following WWI similar to that of the Nuremberg Trials after WWII. The [breakdown of the Malta process](#) left the Armenian genocide controversy unresolved. The legal vacuum encountered in 1919 was huge. British military courts were only competent to try three offences (breach of armistice terms, hindering its execution, and ill-treatment of British POWs), but only in the occupied territories, not in Malta. All the other offences, including the crimes committed against the Armenian population, ['loomed large as legal no man's land](#) and had best be left for determination in accordance with a future peace treaty'. The [Paris Peace Conference](#) set up a '[Commission on Responsibilities and Sanctions](#)'. The workings of the Commission resulted in Article 230 of the [Treaty of Sèvres](#) that required the Ottoman Empire to hand over to the Allies all those suspected of massacres during the war, to recognise the right of the Allies to 'designate' the tribunals competent to try the accused and to hand over all documents and information necessary to prove the incriminating acts to ensure the prosecutions of the accused. Unfortunately this legal basis, a first of its kind, was too vague. The Malta Trials could have potentially revolutionised the basic principle of [nullum crimen sine lege](#). The Treaty of Sèvres was then superseded by the [Treaty of Lausanne](#), which recognised the boundaries of the modern state of [Turkey](#). The [legal definition of 'genocide'](#) only came later, in the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment on the Crime of Genocide, and has since been incorporated into the [Rome Statute](#) of the [International Criminal Court](#).

### **Small but significant steps forward**

24 April 2015 will be commemorated in Yerevan and globally as the centenary of these atrocities. In today's world though, deriving enmity from history and creating new antagonisms are not conducive to building a common future which could bring mutual benefit. A [common future cannot be built without a clear dialogue](#) and mutual understanding so that finally a just closure to this grave event can be achieved. The official Turkish position [has softened](#) over the course of the past decade. In April 2014, the former Prime Minister and current President of Turkey, [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#), recognised [the significance of 24 April for Armenians](#). He described the historic events as 'inhumane' and offered condolences to the grandchildren of those who lost their lives. Erdoğan's declaration fell short of issuing an apology or acknowledging genocide as such, but still marked a fundamental change in Turkey's approach to comprehending and addressing the events of 1915. Reconciliation faces immense challenges and affects identity as well as history. Various [Turkish civil society efforts](#) will also take place to observe, in some way, the commemorations in Yerevan in the spirit advocated by [Hrant Dink](#), the murdered Armenian journalist. This is the direction that both governments also generally favoured before they embarked on the [2009 Protocols](#). One [proposal](#) for the Turkish government could be to quietly open its side of the land border with Armenia; this would be akin to the [Turkish Cypriot decision in April 2003](#) to lift their long-standing restrictions on crossing to the Greek Cypriot side, which has [helped to diminish tension](#). A similar quiet move by Turkey would do the same for relations with Armenia, once both countries have dealt with their [separate commemorations](#) of 1915.

### **The European Parliament's position**

The [1987 EP resolution](#) 'On a political solution to the Armenian Question' has not yet led the Turkish government to recognise the historic reality of the 1915 genocide. In its 20 resolutions related to EU-Turkey relations, including on the annual report on Turkey's progress towards accession to the EU, the EP has systematically repeated this request to the Turkish government. Turkey has also been continuously encouraged to sign the statute of the ICC, as it declared itself willing to do in 2004. This is reiterated further in the EP's [resolution](#) of 12 March 2015 on its Annual Report on Human Rights. On 17 March 2015, the [Euronest Parliamentary Assembly](#) adopted a resolution on the Centennial of the Armenian genocide, calling on Turkey to 'come to terms with its past', and noting that genocide denial is the final stage of genocide, and that 'the absence of unequivocal and timely condemnation of the Armenian genocide largely contributed to the failure to prevent future crimes against humanity'.