

ARMENIANS AND SYRIA - 1915 AND 2013

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In a recent article, Robert Fisk has drawn a parallel between massacres of the Armenians in 1915 and their suffering in Syria in 2013. This response is based on what happened to the Armenians during the First World War, what is happening in Syria now and where other parallels lie between these two periods of history.

For a long time Fisks accusations against the Ottoman government were based on forged documents, the notorious Andonian papers, which purported to show that the Ottoman government sent orders to provincial officials to exterminate the Armenians. Most of his other claims are based on First World War propaganda or his own imaginative suppositions. The stories told to him by ancient Armenian survivors from the massacres of 1915 could have been matched by the tales of ancient Muslim survivors of massacres by Armenians, had he even been aware of their existence, had he bothered to travel to eastern Anatolia to talk to them before they, too, died. With 2015 rapidly approaching, the cultural mainstream is going to be saturated with a wave of propaganda aimed at compelling the Turkish government to admit that what happened in 1915 was genocide, i.e. the destruction of Armenians for no other reason than that they were Armenians.

There is no debate on this issue, not because there is not a counter-narrative but because it is barred from being given a hearing. The truth is apparently known to people who would have no idea of what happened in late Ottoman history outside what has been handed to them on a plate by Armenian propagandists or what they have read in deeply prejudiced, frequently dishonest or ignorant sources. The resolution passed by the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on this issue in 2010 is stamped with all these characteristics. Its claim that nearly two million Armenians were deported is ludicrous, beginning with the fact that the Armenians were not deported but relocated

within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire and ending with the fact that the number said to have been deported was close to half million more than the empires entire Armenian population. In between there are many other facts that expose the falsehoods in this resolution. History has turned into theology on this issue. To say that there is no God is to deny his existence. That was the bottom line of the Star Chamber and the same tactic is used by Armenian lobbyists and propagandists around the world. Genocide scholars use the same unscrupulous tool of denialist to denigrate and marginalize those who disagree with their version of history. If they have a reason for going for the man instead of the ball, it is because their narrative cannot stand once the Armenian question is properly contextualised. It is for this reason that debate on the Armenian question has to be shut down before it starts. In this respect, the abuse of the U.S. scholar Justin McCarthy while visiting Australia was another salutary lesson to those who dare to stand up – and stand out – and say what they think is the truth.

Professor McCarthy is a well-established scholar, a leading expert on the demographics of the late Ottoman Empire, with a long list of books and articles to his name yet none of this countered in Australia. The media took up the cry of the Armenian, Greek and Jewish lobbies that he was a holocaust denialist. One of the worst offenders was the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, one of whose reporters, Michael Brissenden, called Professor McCarthy one of the worlds most strident genocide deniers. The clamor the lobbies raised had the desired effect. Professor McCarthy was due to give a public lecture at the University of Melbourne and at the New South Wales Art Gallery but both venues refused to give him a platform after learning of his denialist views. Having flown from the US to Australia, the only talk Professor McCarthy could give was at a small private function in a committee room in Parliament House in Canberra, arranged by the Australian Labor Partys Senator Laurie Ferguson. The abusive treatment of Professor McCarthy was an exemplary demonstration of media cowardice and ignorance in the face of determined lobbies, working in combination to close down open discussion and prevent Australians from hearing what they might be interested in knowing. Against this background, here is a heretics view of some of the key issues:

1. Numbers: The number of Armenian dead given by Armenian or pro-Armenian sources has fluctuated and continues to fluctuate depending on who you read. Estimates made at the end of the First World War on the allied side suggest between 600,000-800,000. The figures most commonly given in Armenian sources now alternate between about one million and 1.5 million. On the Turkish side estimates range between about 300,000 and 600,000. There were about 1.6 million Ottoman Armenians and as hundreds of thousands survived the war the higher figure given by Fisk and others is not and cannot be correct. The Armenians suffered terribly, but in the interest of historical truth the claims that 1.5 million Armenians were massacred in 1915 or even during the whole course of the war have to be unequivocally refuted. The causes of death among the Ottoman Armenian population included combat, exposure, malnutrition and disease. Far more Armenians died from these other causes than actual massacre. What is never mentioned in the standard narrative is that probably between two and 2.5 million Ottoman Muslim civilians

died in this war from the same range of causes. They are the ghosts never talked about because the news correspondents, consuls and missionaries were only interested in the suffering of Christians. The Muslims have disappeared from history as if they never existed.

2. Military necessity: Dismissed out of hand by Armenian propagandists and scholars inside the genocide network, it is the crux of the argument from history on the Turkish side. The two relevant questions here are

a) Does a government have the right in international law to remove a rebellious population in time of war?

b) Did sabotage from behind the lines by Armenian armed insurgent groups represent such a threat to the war effort that the relocation of the Armenians could be justified?

Here the central issues include the role of Russia in using the Armenians as a weapon of war. Apart from Armenians fighting in the Russian army, the Tsar formed special Armenian units tasked with liberating east Anatolian Ottoman provinces in which the population was more than 80 per cent Muslim (largely Kurdish or Turkish). The Armenians were coaxed along with promises of autonomy in a region that would include conquered Ottoman lands. The striking power of these Russian Armenians was augmented inside the Ottoman Empire by tens of thousands of Ottoman Armenians. They cut lines of supply and communication, attacked military convoys and massacred Muslim civilians. Their violence reached a peak during the Russian-Armenian occupation of northeastern Anatolia from 1916-18. Towns, villages and cities were turned into a charnel house, with Russians officers shocked at the savagery of the atrocities being perpetrated by their Armenian protégés. The Armenian insurgency - uprisings, attacks on military convoys and Muslim villages, the cutting of telegraph lines and the sabotage of government buildings - in the first half of 1915 culminated in the uprising in the eastern city of Van. Thousands of Armenians were involved. They were well armed and well prepared, down to the trenches and tunnels they had dug and the uniforms they had fashioned for themselves. With no soldiers available, the defence of government positions rested in the hands of gendarmes (jandarma) and volunteers. After weeks of heavy fighting the Armenians triumphed. As the governor fled and the city fell, many thousands of Muslim civilians were massacred by Armenians within the city limits or in the villages around the nearby lake. The revolt was launched in the middle of April and may well have been coordinated with Britain and Russia, and thus timed to take place as the British were preparing to land in Gallipoli and the Russians were about to launch a large-scale offensive around Dilman in northwestern Persia. The fighting in Mesopotamia, with the British pushing north from their foothold in Basra, may also have been part of these calculations. Having captured Van, the Armenians handed it over to the Russians.

On April 24, about a week after the launching of the Van uprising, the Ottoman government closed down the Armenian committees in Istanbul, moving the hundreds of people they arrested into the interior, mainly to Çankiri and Ayyaş, on the outskirts of

Ankara. It is from April 24 that the Armenians date the genocide, when the critical date was when Armenians launched their revolt in Van about a week earlier. Given Armenian desertions from the army, actions of Armenian bands from behind the lines and the collaboration of Armenian revolutionary committees with the enemy, all that should be surprising about the action taken on April 24 is that it was not taken earlier. Towards the end of May the Ottoman military command recommended that the Armenian population in the war zone be relocated southwards into Syria. It is clear that the Van rebellion had brought a deteriorating security situation to a head. Since its shattering defeat at Sarikamiş early in 1915, the Ottoman Third Army had been in no position to defend northeastern Anatolia from Russian invasion and attacks from behind the lines. Launched in late 1914 the Sarikamiş campaign started well but ended disastrously when a blizzard swept across the mountains and tens of thousands of Ottoman soldiers, ill prepared for a winter campaign, froze to death overnight.

The Third Army was decimated and unable to launch strategic offensives for three years. The civilian population of the entire region was virtually on its own. The military command had already moved some Armenians but after Van, unable to stem uprisings and sabotage of the war effort from behind the lines, it finally recommended that the bulk of the Armenian population be relocated. These facts are the core of the argument from military necessity. The attempts by Vakahn Dadrian and his Turkish protégé, Taner Akçam, to show that the Ottoman government met before the Van uprising and decided to annihilate the Armenians have no basis in fact. Both fortify their case with forged documents, namely the Andonian papers and the so-called ten commandments. Handed to British officials by an Ottoman functionary after the war, this second piece of paper purports to show that ruling CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) figures sat around a table in Istanbul and took a decision to annihilate all Armenian men and convert their women and children to Islam. The British were then searching high and low for evidence they could use against the leading figures in the Ottoman government. They scoured the Ottoman archives, they raked through their own archives and they asked the Americans if they had anything but they could not find one incriminating document. Had there been any possibility of convincing the world that the piece of paper on which the ten commandments were written was a genuine document the British would have jumped on it straight away but it was so obviously a fake they quickly discarded it. Yet in his book Blood and Soil: A History of Genocide from Sparta to Darfur, Ben Kiernan, the Director of Yale Universitys Genocide Studies Program, uses this bogus document as the very foundation for his accusation of genocide against the wartime Ottoman government. These forgeries are not isolated examples because the Armenian case against the Turks is buttressed with numerous fabrications, both textual and photographic.

3. Conflation: Towards the end of maximizing the numbers of dead, Armenian lobbyists and propagandists have lengthened the time frame of the genocide to 1922 or 1923, a period that includes the First World War, the Greek invasion of western Anatolia in 1919, and the fighting in the Caucasus and southeastern Turkey that continued at the same time. In fact, each of these periods of history has to be examined separately. The fighting

in the Caucasus over territory and resources (the oil of the Caspian Sea) involved the British and their western allies, white Russians, Bolsheviks, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Armenians and other ethno-religious groups in the Caucasian mosaic. They all killed each other and they all died from the same other causes, including disease, malnutrition and exposure. At the same time France had invaded what is now southeastern Turkey, bringing with it an Armenian legion and intending to set up an autonomous or semi-independent Armenian state under French protection. By agreement with Britain its territorial remit - sphere of influence - ran as far north as Lake Van. For France southeastern Turkey was part of la Syrie integrale greater Syria whose central attractions were the cotton fields of Çukurova and the deep water port of Eskanderun, tucked away in the corner of the eastern Mediterranean, which could be developed to create a trans-Mediterranean naval axis with Algeria. The French invasion triggered off a new wave of killing of Muslims and destruction of Muslim property which did not stop until both the French and their Armenian legion had been driven back by the Turkish nationalists.

4. The missing Muslims: Noone knows with any semblance of accuracy how many Ottoman Muslim civilians died during the First World War, not to speak of those who died during the fighting which continued afterwards. More than 80 per cent of the Muslim population was illiterate and therefore incapable of writing down the story of what they endured. The round figure already given of between two and 2.5 million Muslim civilian dead is no more than a starting point for discussion of numbers. Many Muslim civilians - half a million according to the figures compiled from Ottoman documents - were massacred throughout the course of the war. Many if not most of the dead were Kurds and their killers were mostly Armenian, underlining the degree to which the conflict in eastern Anatolia was a continuation of an Armenian-Kurdish struggle over territory incited by the British in the late 19th century when they took on the Armenian question and began to apply the word Armenia to Ottoman provinces in which Armenians constituted a small minority. The word used by the Kurds and even by the sultan and the Ottoman government was Kurdistan. Threatened by what appeared to be an attempt by the British to grant the Armenians autonomy in their traditional lands, the Kurds prepared to defend themselves. Many of the crimes committed by Armenians during the First World War were recorded in documents written by Ottoman army commanders and provincial authorities when they were able to return to eastern Anatolia the central killing grounds - in 1918. These accounts were not written for propaganda purposes as were the lurid allegations made against the Turks by James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee in 1915-16. They were recorded solely for the information of the central government. This other truth blurs the divide between perpetrator and victim and threatens the Manichean narrative which lies at the heart of modern Armenian nationalism. If young Armenians ever conclude that their forefathers were perpetrators as well as victims, the national narrative will be exploded. This is why the countervailing narrative has to be closed down. A more balanced appraisal of history might lead to a real reconciliation with Turks and Kurds on the basis of the mutual acknowledgement of the crimes committed by all their ancestors and the suffering of all the innocent whether Muslim or Christian. This point might be reached one day but

at the moment it seems psychologically, culturally, historically and politically impossible for Armenians to own up to the scale of atrocities (even if some admit there were a few) carried out by their forebears. Needless to say, as they insist decade after decade that the Turks were responsible for genocide, they should be obliged to consider whether what Armenians did to the Muslims should be given the same label. The reports of Armenian atrocities came from across eastern Anatolia. These were killings on a large-scale and grossly inhumane in their nature. Babies thrown into bread ovens; people flayed alive or trampled to death by horses; people locked in barns or houses and burnt alive; people taken away en masse and killed out of sight of the Russians. Ottoman forces entered cities strewn with bodies and even body parts. In their reports some Russian officers expressed revulsion at the behavior of their Armenian protégés and even accused them of seeking to exterminate the Muslims. While these killings brought Armenian violence to a peak, earlier killings of Kurds and other Muslims establish revenge as a motive for the mass attacks on Armenians as they were led south to Syria in 1915.

5. The trials: In his writings Taner Akçam pays considerable attention to the show trials held in occupied Istanbul under the aegis of the British authorities. These resulted in few convictions for crimes committed against the Armenians. In any case, the more authentic trials were those established by the Ottoman government following attacks on Armenian convoys in 1915. Commissions of inquiry were set up in late 1915 and about 1600 people court-martialled as a result. Some of those found guilty were executed and others were imprisoned, including Ottoman officials guilty of negligence or complicity. As news came through of attacks on the convoys the government in Istanbul sent coded messages to provincial officials demanding that they provide the Armenians with greater protection. There are many such documents in the archives and they clearly establish that in relocating the Armenians the government did not have the intention of killing them. That many of the provincial officials handed the responsibility of arranging the relocation were incompetent, that numbers of them were actively complicit in the mistreatment of Armenians and that others were wilfully negligent is very clear. At the same time it would have been extremely difficult to organize such a mass movement of people when the military had its back against the wall on all fronts and all the necessities of life were being directed towards its needs. There was not sufficient food, medical care, transport and even armed men to guard the convoys. Civilians were in a desperate state and even many soldiers were dying of disease or malnutrition before they reached the front. The Ottoman government has to be held responsible for the calamitous consequences of the relocation decision even if it did not know what those consequences would be. However, in acting on the recommendation of the military command, did the government have any idea of how badly things would turn out? Did anyone at any stage stand up and say this cant be done even if the military command had reached the conclusion that it had to be done? Almost a century later, there will probably never be clear answers to these questions.

6. Greeks and Assyrians: As both claim to have suffered genocide at the hands of the Turks, here is some of the context generally missing from the standard mainstream

narrative. In 1897 a Greek army attacked the Ottoman Empire and was beaten off. In 1912 the Greeks tried again in the company of Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro. The Ottomans were outnumbered and quickly overwhelmed on all fronts. The empire lost most of its territory on the European land mass and probably would have lost all of it had not the Balkan allies fallen out in 1913 and started attacking each other just as viciously as they had laid into the Muslim enemy. In the territories overrun by the Balkan armies the Muslim population was ethnically cleansed as the process would now be called for the second time since the 1870s. The intention of the Balkan governments was to obliterate the Ottoman presence in southeastern Europe and to kill or drive out as many Muslims as possible. Between 1904-1907 the Germans murdered or otherwise caused the death through their brutality of up to 100,000 Hereros in what is now Namibia. If this was the 20th centurys first genocide, the massacre and dispossession of Balkan Muslims in 1912-13 has to be regarded as the second, even if completely ignored by Kiernan and other scholars in the professional genocide network. Justin McCarthy, has estimated that the Balkans war ended in the death of 632,000 Muslims, or 27 per cent of the Muslim population of the conquered Ottoman domains in Europe. Those who survived massacres and the pillaging of their villages by soldiers and the bloodthirsty çeteler (bandit gangs) following in their wake fled across the Aegean or on land towards Istanbul. Along with retreating soldiers they died en masse from disease, malnutrition and exposure. If they managed to reach Istanbul they were given shelter and medical treatment in mosques and converted government buildings. The fields along the approaches to the city were littered with the bodies of the dead and dying. Even now the extirpation of Muslims in 1877-78 and again in 1912-13 has virtually no place in western histories of the Balkans.

In 1919 the Greeks invaded Ottoman lands again. The empire had by this time been at war since the Italian invasion of Libya (1911). Libya was followed by the Balkan wars (1912-13), then the First World War (1914-1918) and then the fighting which convulsed the Caucasus and what is now southeastern Turkey. To launch yet another war on this devastated land was an act of almost sadistic cruelty, but this is exactly what the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, as intense in his love of the Greeks as he was in his racist hatred of the Turks, and his dear friend, Eleftherios Venizelos, the Greek Prime Minister, did. Ferried across the Aegean under the protection of an allied fleet, the Greek army landed at Izmir in May, 1919. The killing started immediately. The dead included Christians identified as Muslims because they were wearing a fez. Theoretically, the Greek army was supposed to remain within a restricted zone centring on Izmir but it soon burst these bounds and began heading north in the direction of Istanbul and east in the direction of Ankara. Its trail was marked by massacres, arson, pillage and destruction in towns and villages. Arnold Toynbee was in the region at the time and described the Greek campaign as a war of extermination of the Turks. An Interallied Commission of Inquiry and the representative of the International Red Cross agreed. Finally held and defeated by the Turks in 1922, the Greek retreat to the Aegean coast was marked by the same atrocities and destruction the whole way. Armenian and Greek civilians supporting the invading army joined in the pillage and destruction of Muslim property. This criminal adventure ended in the population exchange of 1922, with 1.5 million Greeks uprooted from their homes in Anatolia and half a million Turks uprooted from their homes in Greece.

Lloyd George and Venizelos have to be held directly responsible for this tragedy. With British troops facing the resurgent Turkish nationalists at Canakkale, Lloyd George was ready for yet another war as long as someone else would fight it but his appeals to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa to send troops fell on deaf ears. The third ethno-religious group making allegations of genocide are the Assyrians, a tiny community based in southeastern Turkey and northwest Persia which was lured into the war by the promises of the British and the Russians but had no hope of standing up against the Ottoman army, the Turkish army or the Kurdish forces. Fleeing from their Ottoman homeland, the Assyrians joined their coreligionists in northwestern Persia before fleeing in the direction of Iraq, thousands dying on the way. Most of the survivors ended up in the Baquba refugee camp, north of Baghdad. They were acknowledged as being brave soldiers but prone to indiscipline and brutal behavior. In 1924 a group of Assyrian levies attached to the British army opened fire with machine guns in the central market of Kirkuk, killing hundreds of people; in 1933 a band of armed Assyrians provoked a major crisis by attacking Iraqi troops near the Tigris river, killing 34, wounding about 100 and mutilating the bodies of the dead (striking back, the army massacred hundreds of innocent people near the Mosul district village of Simel); when Kurds attacked the Assyrian camp at Baquba some of those captured and killed had their heads cut off, according to the British proconsul in Iraq, Arnold Wilson.

7. So, who comes out of this with clean hands? Noone, it seems. There were not perpetrators on one side and victims on the other. There were perpetrators and victims on all sides. Even during the relocation many Muslims tried to help the Armenians and alongside the negligent Ottoman officials were those who, in extremely difficult circumstances, did their best to see that the Armenians in their charge were looked after. There is still no comprehension in mainstream western histories of how devastating the war was for the Ottoman civilian population. When it ended people were digging barley out of horse manure and eating grass in the attempt to survive. Even during the war, in 1915-16, people were dropping dead from hunger or disease in the streets of Beirut and other Syrian towns and cities. In the mountains of Lebanon men who could not feed their families were wandering off to die alone in their shame. Whole villages were depopulated. The dire consequences of war, the draining of food, medicine and transport for the men at the front and the enormous death toll from diseases such as cholera and typhus among soldiers and civilians alike were worsened by the allied naval blockade of the Mediterranean coast, killing off cash economies and depriving farmers of spare parts needed for the irrigation of their crops. The locust plague of 1915 stripped crops and trees bare, adding to the general misery and destitution. The Arab historian George Antonius estimated that the civilian death toll in Syria alone during the war was about 400,000. Across eastern Anatolia, conditions were just as bad if not worse. The population of some provinces was reduced by 40 to 60 per cent. Hundreds of thousands of people fled the war zones and the survivors were left uprooted and starving not just in the Ottoman lands, but in the Caucasus and northwestern Persia. This was a war of annihilation, of an empire being put to the sword and fighting for its life and of minorities sucked into the maelstrom by the intrigues and false promises of the allied powers.

8. Finally we come to other parallels between 1915 and Syria in 2013: It is not just Armenian Christians being killed or driven out of Syria right now but all Christians. Two orthodox bishops are still missing, believed to be held in Aleppo by Chechens, if they are still alive; priests have been murdered and the ancient Christian city of Malula attacked and its churches desecrated; in another recent attack on Malula 12 nuns were taken hostage by armed men; only recently more than 40 Christians, men, women and children, were massacred in the village of Sadad. The black flag of Al Qaida has been hoisted over churches by the equally black forces of darkness unleashed on Syria by western governments and their regional allies. They have destroyed more than 60 churches and monasteries and driven tens of thousands of Christians out of their homes. Only the Vatican is speaking out against these atrocities and the extirpation of Christianity in the lands of its birth. Western politicians who wear their Christianity on their sleeve when it suits them have had nothing to say about the Christians or the tens of thousands of Muslims who have died in Syria as the direct result of the intervention by the cohort of governments calling themselves, grotesquely, the Friends of the Syrian People, not to speak of the millions who have been displaced. If they are pulling back now it is only because they realize they have created a Frankenstein who threatens to turn on them, within their own borders and against their interests around the world. For two centuries

the west and its local allies have been playing havoc with peoples lives in the Middle East. They have played the minority card, the sectarian card, the civil war card, the invasion and occupation card, the assassination card, the sabotage card, the bribery card, the sanctions card, the economic boycott card and the overthrow card. They shuffle the pack according to need and so far they have shown they will stop at nothing to get what they want. This is the true parallel with the First World War.

The world created in great power interests in 1918 is now being ripped apart in great power interests. Iraq has gone and Syria is being destroyed. The central lands of the Middle East are spilling over with refugees. The outflow from Iraq after 2003 was the greatest since 1948 and the outflow from Syria is as bad if not worse. The Armenians and Assyrians got nothing back in return for their support of the allied war effort. Promises made either were not kept or could not be kept. Thanks to the Bolsheviks the Armenians got their autonomous republic but the Assyrians ended up as refugees in Iraq or other countries prepared to take them in. The Arabs were deceived and betrayed. The only promise followed through was that made to the Zionists, and as was the case post-1918, so it is the case now: the greatest single beneficiary from the destruction of Iraq and the ongoing destruction of Syria is the colonial settler state implanted in the Middle East in furtherance of western strategies. The suffering of Armenians in Syria today is only a fragment of the overall picture. The central lands of the Middle East are being ravaged in the most shocking fashion. Stirred up by the true enemies of God - the clerical sowers of fitna and the governments that support them and unable to stand back and see the bigger historical picture, as relevant now as it was more than a century ago, of countries being destroyed in accordance with grand strategies developed in distant western capitals, the people of the region again tumble into the traps set for them. Their governments and institutions disgrace themselves with their treachery, collaboration and abject surrender to money and power. Surely such a low point has rarely been reached in the history of the Arab and Islamic Middle East.

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