

## UNDERSTANDING THE TURKISH-ARMENIAN CONTROVERSY OVER 1915

(“1915’LE İLGİLİ TÜRK-ERMENİ ANLAŞMAZLIĞINI  
ANLAMAK”)

**Author:** Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık, *Understanding the Turkish Armenian Controversy over 1915* (İstanbul: Beta Basım Yayım Dağıtım, 2015), 132 pp.<sup>1</sup>

### About the Author

Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık finished his undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in the International Relations Department of the Middle East Technical University (METU). His works include the Armenian issue, the Ottoman Empire and the Armenians, history of Ottoman diplomacy, Turkish foreign policy, and also theories on geopolitics and international relations.

In *Understanding the Turkish Armenian Controversy over 1915*, Palabıyık gives a brief description about some major points regarding the “Armenian Issue”. His work in question serves as an introductory book to this topic. Containing many important information for academics, students, and other groups who may not know much about or be experts on Ottoman history, this book as such manages to appeal to a wide audience.

With the help of this book, readers who may have heard the term “genocide” on many occasions -but who may not know its legal definition- will have the chance to find out about the meaning of this term in its international context, and will become knowledgeable about this topic. To

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a Turkish version of the book: Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık, *1915 Olaylarını Anlamak: Türkler ve Ermeniler* (İstanbul: Beta Basım Yayım Dağıtım, 2015), 132 pp.

put it succinctly; this book delves foremost into and informs about what the 1915 events were, how these events are relayed and understood by Turks and Armenians, and also how these events are characterized in today's politics and how a historical event is turned into a political tool.

The shortness of the book may actually be an advantage for readers who want to be informed on this issue only in general terms. In fact, it can be said this book "*is an opportunity for readers to look afresh at the central issues in what perseveres as a volatile issue in international relations.*"<sup>2</sup>

The book opens with a foreword by historian Jeremy Salt, a Middle East studies veteran and someone who has himself worked substantially on the late history of the Ottoman Empire. In the pages that follow the foreword, the book presents to the readers -who want to be informed about events of 1915- a number of crucial points such as: the definition of genocide in its legal context, the general condition of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the problems that were experienced during and after of the Armenian relocation, a description of the Armenian diaspora, and also information about legal verdicts related to the Armenian relocation.

In the introduction of the book, by using the examples of both the Armenian and Ottoman-Turkish narratives on the 1915 events, Palabıyık indicates that he will set out to do an overall assessment of the situation regarding the controversy over 1915. Palabıyık informs the reader that this work was meant to serve as a handbook for those who want to be informed on this controversy in easily understandable manner.

In the first chapter of the book the author states that the term "genocide" is a legal concept. Due to this, he indicates that the genocide allegations should be evaluated within the framework of international law and with the guidance of the provisions of 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention. This chapter ends with Palabıyık pointing out which elements need to be considered for defining an event as genocide by giving examples of the opinions of various authors on this subject.

The second chapter of the book deals with the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire and whether there was a racist anti-Armenian sentiment in prevalent in the empire. The author states that in the mid-19th century of the Ottoman Empire, the empire came to see Armenians as the "Millet-i Sadıka" (The Loyal People) and Armenians were appointed to various positions in the

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2 Jeremy Salt's words, as seen in: Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık, *Understanding the Turkish Armenian Controversy over 1915* (İstanbul: Beta Basım Yayım Dağıtım, 2015), p. xix.

political and bureaucratic structure of the empire. This point is further emphasized when the author gives a number of examples: Abdul Hamid II being confident enough in Armenians to entrust his own assets to them, Armenians serving as deputies in the “Meclis-i Mebusan” (Ottoman parliament) after the Union and Progress Party’s seizure of political power, and the fact that the events of 1915 did not occur due to racial and religious hatred. It is emphasized that the sequence of events that led to the relocation of Armenians can be directly traced back to when Armenians revolted against Ottoman rule during the 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian War.

The third chapter can be succinctly put forth with the following words by the author:

*“... the Ottoman administration could not manage and allocate enough resources for the relocation process. Although, the administration tried to minimize casualties through governmental decrees, the losses of relocated Armenians were still high. However, this does not mean definitely that the Ottoman government acted with genocidal intent.”<sup>3</sup>*

Furthermore, the author indicates that no statement that can be evaluated within the definition of genocide has ever been found in any Ottoman document. The fourth chapter builds upon this narrative, by giving information about the Courts-Martial (Divan-ı Harpler) that were established in 1916 to prosecute Ottoman officials and other individuals who were identified as having mistreated Armenians while the relocation was taking place.

The fifth chapter of the book deals entirely with question of whether or not the decision for relocating Armenians was taken as a form of military precaution. For this, in general terms, Palabıyık looks into the military considerations behind Armenians’ relocation, the activities of the Armenian revolutionary committees that were operating against the Ottoman Empire, and the relations between the Ottoman Empire and Armenians on the eve of World War I and the Armenian relocation. Within such a context, Palabıyık indicates that there really was a military motive behind the Armenian relocation. As a way of showing that the Armenian relocation was not unique in history, he gives some examples of other relocations that were carried out in different parts of the world due to military considerations.

The sixth chapter looks into the characteristics of the Armenian diaspora. The author provides a definition for the term “diaspora” and informs the reader

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3 Palabıyık, *Understanding the Turkish Armenian Controversy...*, p. 39.

about the power and influence of the Armenian diaspora that can be felt on an international level. The author indicates that the Diaspora has the capacity to intervene in both the domestic and foreign policy of Armenia. According to the author, any rapprochement that may take place between Turkey and Armenia will result in accusations of betrayal by the Armenia diaspora directed against Armenia.

In the seventh chapter, Palabiyk gives a narration of some important parliament decisions and court verdicts regarding the 1915 events. The author divides the chapter into three parts. In sequence, these parts deal with the 2003 verdict of the Court of First Instance of the European Communities, the 2012 verdict of France's Constitutional Council, and the 2013 verdict of the European Court of Human Rights.

In the first part, it is indicated that two French citizens of Armenian heritage – with the backing of the Armenian diaspora- applied to the Court of First Instance, arguing that the granting of candidacy status for European Union (EU) membership to Turkey by the EU was against the 1987 resolution of the European Parliament and that Turkey's "denial" of the "Armenian genocide" would prevent it from attaining full membership to the EU. In this respect, the applicants defended the idea that the European Parliament's resolution was legal in character and thus bore legal results. The Court of First Instance evaluated this application, and underlined in its 17 December 2003 verdict that the 1987 resolution of the European Parliament did not bear any legal results, and expressed the resolution was political in character.

In the second part, the author deals with the law adopted by the French parliament on 30 January 2001 that specifically states: "France publicly recognizes the Armenian Genocide of 1915". Arguing that the "Armenian genocide" was just like the Holocaust, the French Socialist Party sought to have a law enacted whereby the "denial" of the "Armenian genocide" would result in imprisonment and monetary fine. Despite the fact that France recognized the Armenian genocide claims, the Constitutional Council of France struck this law proposal down, stating that it was against the right of free speech and thus against France's constitution. The Constitutional Council went even further, and questioned the legal validity of the 2001 law.

In the third part, the author comments on the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the following manner:

*"... [the ECHR] implies that the Armenian genocide allegations cannot be substantiated as clearly as the Holocaust and therefore accepting the*

*“Armenian genocide” as a fact and doing so in a way which hampers sound discussion on this controversial issue would be contrary to the right to free speech. Moreover, the accusation of “denialism, made by persons who accept the Armenian genocide allegations against those people [who] reject the validity of the allegations, is dismissed by this decision. For denialism, there must be a real genocide, one proved and established in law but, in the Armenian case, this fundamental aspect is lacking.”<sup>4</sup>*

In conclusion, in this book, the 1915 relocation events have been evaluated via Turkish and Armenian narratives through a systematic way. The Turkish narrative draws attention to the sufferings of both peoples, yet the Armenian narrative is confined to mentioning the sufferings of just the Armenians during the First World War. This problem, ongoing for a hundred years, profoundly affects both communities, and today has led to a standstill in political relations. Palabıyık’s book, titled *Understanding the Turkish Armenian Controversy over 1915*, appeals to those who are curious about the relocation of 1915 and the resulting dispute, and who wish to find out more about this issue. The overall language employed in the book is simple and lucid, which will be to the advantage of those who are just getting acquainted to the 1915 events. As such, this book will serve as an important starting source for those who wish to conduct research on this disputed issue.

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4 Palabıyık, *Understanding the Turkish Armenian Controversy...*, p.

