

9th February 2016

House of Lords

Daesh: Genocide

Question

Asked by Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask Her Majesty's Government how they intend to respond to the resolutions of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe condemning the actions of Daesh/ISIS in the Middle East as genocide.

The Earl of Courtown (Con): My Lords, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are right to condemn Daesh abuses in the Middle East and its treatment of minorities. It is a long-standing government policy that any judgments on whether genocide has occurred are a matter for the international judicial system, rather than Governments or other non-judicial bodies. However, let me reassure noble Lords of the Government's commitment to defeating Daesh and preventing further abuses.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, what is the point of Britain being a signatory to the 1948 genocide convention if, when compelling evidence emerges of mass graves, systematic executions, abduction, rape, enslavement and the forced conversion of minorities such as Yazidis and Christians—evidence sufficient to convince the European Parliament and the Council of Europe—the United Kingdom declines to name this horrific cruelty for the genocide that it is? Do we intend to ignore these resolutions, or will we take them to the Security Council and seek a referral to the International Criminal Court or a regional tribunal, so that those responsible for these heinous crimes will one day be brought to justice?

The Earl of Courtown: The noble Lord, Lord Alton, describes these crimes quite rightly as heinous. He also suggested that we took this matter to the UN Security Council, but it would be for the Security Council as a whole to agree. The UN Security Council has already taken a number of steps against Daesh, for example the binding resolutions against it which seek to reduce its ability to finance its activities and cut the flow of foreign fighters. However, whether or not this is ever designated as genocide does not stop this country's determination to deliver aid to those people in that situation.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, some of us are really puzzled as to the slowness of the labelling as genocide of Daesh activities, whether by a stronger push from London or in the United Nations. Does my noble friend accept that we are dealing here with a movement of undiluted evil? As the noble Lord, Lord Alton, has reminded us, there have been beheadings, crucifixions, burnings alive, raping and the killing off of the entire Yazidi community. Its sister franchise in west Africa is even reported to be burning children alive. If this does not take us to the definition of genocide in its present form, and I realise that we have to be careful with the words, then surely there must be something wrong with the convention and the international bureaucracy that decrees these things. Can more urgency be put into a matter where it is plain

fact that we are dealing with one of the most evil movements of the world, which should be destroyed?

The Earl of Courtown: My Lords, once again my noble friend describes the dreadful activities taking place. Perhaps I could add a reference to a letter that was written to the noble Lord, Lord Alton, by the Prime Minister. I offer my apologies for how late it was in getting him a reply. My right honourable friend the Prime Minister repeated that it is a long-standing government policy that any judgment as to whether or not genocide has occurred is a matter to be judged by the international judicial system. We will nevertheless, of course, continue to fight to bring an end to Daesh's campaign of terror.

Lord Gordon of Strathblane (Lab): My Lords, I share the general confusion as to the Government's position on this. Do they think that genocide is an inappropriate word to ascribe to the activities of Daesh in the Middle East, or do they think that, although significant and accurate, it is better to keep quiet about it in the interests of some greater good, which I must confess for the moment eludes me?

The Earl of Courtown: On the contrary, my Lords, we are not keeping quiet about this issue at all. Only last week, we had 33 Heads of State and 60 different organisations across the road in the QEII Centre, where we had the Syria conference. At that conference, more than \$11 billion was committed to spending in Syria. This is not sitting back and doing nothing.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon (CB): My Lords, when a few months ago I asked for government support for an international inquiry into supposed genocide against the Sikh community in India, I was told, in a very short reply, that it was solely a matter for the Indian Government. That was not a very Christian sentiment. Would the Minister agree with the sentiments of the Sikh guru who gave his life defending the right of followers of another religion to worship in the manner of their choice? Human rights abuses against anyone are the responsibility of us all, and the Government should take every measure to bring those guilty of them to justice.

The Earl of Courtown: My Lords, the noble Lord refers to a Question that my noble friend Lady Anelay answered. We will of course take careful note of what the noble Lord said, including how important it is that people have the freedom to worship in their own faith.