

## Analysis

March 16, 2010

Summary: This month's vote by the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the U.S. House of Representatives condemning the mass slaughter of Ottoman Armenians during WWI as "genocide" is being cast as the final blow to Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. The bill might have been quashed had the parliament in Turkey ratified a set of protocols that would have established diplomatic ties and re-opened the border between Turkey and Armenia.

Turkey and Armenia may eventually resort to retooling the protocols in ways that make them easier to implement. Meanwhile, Washington should muster all its clout to get Azerbaijan and Armenia to shake hands. Russia's cooperation is key. And co-opting Russia means giving it a stake in the peace.

## Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation: Lots of Gloom but Not All Doom

by Amberin Zaman\*

ANKARA — This month's vote by the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the U.S. House of Representatives condemning the mass slaughter of the Ottoman Armenians during World War I as "genocide" is being cast as the final blow to Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. The conventional wisdom is that the 23-22 vote in favor of the bill might have been quashed had the Turkish Parliament ratified a set of protocols that foresaw the establishment of diplomatic ties and the re-opening of the long sealed land border between Turkey and Armenia. The protocols, a landmark deal that came after months of excruciating Swiss-brokered talks, were signed amid much fanfare on October 10, 2009, in Zurich.

There is little doubt that peace between Turkey and Armenia would arm any U.S. administration against future attempts by U.S. lawmakers to approve the non-binding resolution. But for how long? It is naive to assume that American citizens of Ottoman Armenian descent would abandon their decades-long campaign for Congressional recognition of what a growing number of academics declare

as historical fact. Nor is it true that the Congressional committee's razor thin "yes" vote is solely responsible for the apparent collapse of Turkish-Armenian détente.

The reason for the current deadlock is multi-pronged and came long before the Congressional committee's move. The first is Turkey's insistence that as a precondition for peace, Armenia withdraw from at least some of the territory it occupied in its war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Another is Turkey's demand that Armenia relinquish its support for the Armenian diaspora's campaign for international recognition of the genocide. Neither issue was addressed in the protocols (Karabakh was not mentioned and the events of 1915 were relegated to a proposed joint historical commission); yet they continue to dominate the increasingly harsh debate between the two countries. Turkey says that in the present climate it cannot approve the protocols. Armenia is threatening to scrap them altogether.

Untangling this mess will take courage, creativity, and a fair bit of time. It

G | M | F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • BRATISLAVA • PARIS

BRUSSELS • BELGRADE • ANKARA • BUCHAREST

www.gmfus.org

\* Amberin Zaman is the Turkey correspondent for *The Economist* and writes a weekly column for the Turkish daily *Taraf*. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF).



will also require some hard questions about what is achievable given the political landscape in both countries and beyond.

The first is this: Was it realistic for Turkey to expect Azerbaijan to remain silent in the face of the protocols? The answer depends on what assurances if any Turkey gave Azerbaijan. Turkish officials insist that Baku was kept informed of the details of the deal all along. Azerbaijan's volcanic reaction, including threats to sell all of its gas to Russia, suggest otherwise.

Could Turkey have turned a deaf ear to Azerbaijan and implemented the protocols? Ankara's calculation appears to be that between the time it initialled the protocols on February 7, 2009, and signed them eight months later, Armenia and Azerbaijan would have made the kind of progress on Karabakh that would justify their eventual ratification to Turks and Azeris alike. Such thinking was egged on by overzealous U.S. Department of State types who were desperate to get the protocols off the ground before President Barack Obama's April 24, 2009, speech to commemorate the events of 1915. No wonder then that Turkey and Armenia made the deal public on April 23, in the event Obama reneged on his campaign promise to use the "genocide" label. He plumped for "Medz Yeghern" (which means "great tragedy" in Armenian) instead.

This turnaround reinforced the cynics' view that Turkey never intended to ratify the protocols in the first place. These were devised, they claim, with the sole purpose of getting Obama to drop the "G" word and to torpedo the passage of the genocide resolution by the U.S. Congress. Either way, Ankara got it wrong. Azerbaijan and Armenia are nowhere closer to striking a deal. If anything, the Azeris are muttering about war. Russia, whose support Ankara was counting on, recently declared that peace between Turkey and Armenia should not be linked to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And although it seems unlikely that the Congressional resolution will be brought before the full House, it's not about to go away.

Yerevan did its share of miscalculating as well. Had it not insisted on linking the establishment of diplomatic relations to re-opening of the border (these steps are inseparable components of the protocols) Ankara would have sent its

first Ambassador to Yerevan by now. Diplomatic ties would have in turn created the sort of momentum that would have propelled border opening regardless of Azerbaijan's objections.

Yerevan's other miscalculation is linked to the Armenian Constitutional Court's reasoning for its sanctioning in January of the protocols. This included the conclusion that they do not amount to a rebuttal of the genocide. Armenia touted the Court's blessing as proof of its goodwill. Turkey says its reasoning makes nonsense of the historical commission foreseen under the protocols by prejudging its findings. Ankara wants the court to either retract its words or for Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to make a public statement that would have the same effect. Yerevan won't budge.

### Outlook

Turkish-Armenian reconciliation will remain on hold until Obama delivers a G-word free message on April 24, 2010, and the threat of the Congressional bill coming before the full House recedes. In any case, barring some miracle over Karabakh, nationwide parliamentary elections in Turkey due by July 2011 make it unlikely that the protocols will be considered anyway. The outcome of the elections will in turn, determine the future of Turkish-Armenian ties. If Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) is returned for a third term of single rule he might rouse the courage to move forward on Armenia. The flip side is that without the opposition's backing he may not risk doing so. Indeed, there are some who argue that a coalition government would be better placed to make peace with Armenia because responsibility for upsetting Azerbaijan would be more evenly spread.

As political dialogue hangs in the balance, the onus for promoting reconciliation rests on civil society more than ever before. Happily, assorted NGOs are ploughing ahead with joint projects to foster peace. Debate of the 1915 tragedy among ordinary Turks is growing louder and franker by the day. A private Turkish news channel, Su TV, has launched the country's first ever-Armenian language news program. Istanbul's prestigious Bosphorus University now offers Armenian language courses as part of its curriculum.

Business between the two countries (albeit via Georgia) is

<sup>2</sup>Amberin Zaman (2009), "Turkey's Kurdish Gambit," *On Turkey* series, November 13, 2009.



also on the rise. Two-way trade has reached an admittedly measly \$300 million. There is talk of Turkey buying electricity from Armenia and even of Turkey's state-owned Turkish airlines commencing flights to Yerevan. The two countries are also discussing plans to rebuild an ancient bridge that once spanned the Akhurian River separating Turkey from Armenia. Turkey's president, Abdullah Gül, has taken a personal interest in the scheme, which is aimed at promoting cultural dialogue and cross-border tourism. What sets this apart from other projects is that it involves direct cooperation between the two governments.

In the near term, Turkish-Armenian relations are poised to follow the pattern established in relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. Until recently, Ankara refused to recognize the Iraqi Kurds' regional government for fear that this would stoke Kurdish separatism at home. Yet cross-border trade is flourishing and formal relations exist all but in name. Last year, Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu took the plunge and visited the Iraqi Kurdish capital, Erbil.<sup>1</sup> The move was reminiscent of President Gül's historic visit to Yerevan in September 2007, where he watched the World Cup soccer pre-qualifier between Turkey and Armenia together with Sargsyan.

Turkey and Armenia may eventually resort to rejigging the protocols in ways that make them easier to implement. Meanwhile, Washington should muster all its clout to get Azerbaijan and Armenia to shake hands. Russia's cooperation is key. And co-opting Russia means giving it a stake in the peace. An obvious formula is to include the Kremlin in future energy projects, no matter that they are largely intended to reduce European dependence on Russian natural gas. Ultimately, Turkish-Armenian reconciliation needs to stand on its own merits, free of cynical tradeoffs, and more importantly free of the ghosts of a tragic and yet to be reckoned with past.

### **Amberin Zaman, Correspondent, *The Economist***

Amberin Zaman is the Turkey correspondent for *The Economist* and writes a weekly column for the Turkish daily *Taraf*.

### **About GMF**

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting greater cooperation and understanding between North America and Europe. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working on transatlantic issues, by convening leaders to discuss the most pressing transatlantic themes, and by examining ways in which transatlantic cooperation can address a variety of global policy challenges. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest.

### **About the *On Turkey* Series**

GMF's *On Turkey* is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at [www.gmfus.org/turkey](http://www.gmfus.org/turkey) or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.

<sup>1</sup>Amberin Zaman (2009). "Turkey's Kurdish Gambit," *On Turkey* series, November 13, 2009.