
Stuck In 1915; How Turkey And Armenia Blew Their Big Chance At Peace.

By Thomas De Waal
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Not many borders are closed in our globalized world, but the frontier between Armenia and Turkey is still a dead zone where the railroad stops. The closed border is a strange anomaly in the new Europe that stems from two old tragedies: the still unresolved conflict of the early 1990s between Armenia and Turkey's ally Azerbaijan, and the catastrophe of 1915 when the entire Armenian population of eastern Anatolia was deported or killed in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire.

People on both sides of this closed border want it open. Last month I flew between the Armenian capital of Yerevan and Istanbul -- the two countries do at least have an air connection. The standard look of the Armenian businessmen packing the plane was slightly menacing at first.

They all had dark leather jackets and hair cut short to the scalp, concealing a cheerful friendliness toward Turks. The two men sitting next to me wanted to be able to send the carpets, doors, and windows they currently buy in Turkey, and dispatch to Armenia in a roundabout route via Georgia, directly home across an open border.

In Istanbul, the thoughtful Turkish academic Cengiz Aktar told me why he thinks that Turkey will be liberated if it faces up to the truth of what happened to its missing Armenians. Aktar initiated an Internet petition apologizing for the "Great Catastrophe" of 1915 (adopting the Armenians' own phrase for the tragedy) and expressing sympathy for "my Armenian brothers and sisters." More than 30,000 Turks have signed it -- remarkable for a country whose schoolbooks were, until recently, saying that Armenians killed Turks in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire and not the other way around. It is not an easy process, but the taboo on discussing the issue of what happened to the missing Armenians has now been lifted in Turkey.

For a little while it seemed as if the governments in Yerevan and Ankara were also defying their region's dark historical determinism.

Last October, the Armenian and Turkish presidents, Serzh Sargsyan and Abdullah Gul, moved to sign two protocols on normalizing relations, pledging that, once the documents were ratified by their countries' parliaments, the closed border would open within two months. Six months on, insecurities and local politics are again winning the day, and the protocols are in trouble. Turkish leaders are postponing ratification of the agreements. An April 12 meeting between Sargsyan and Turkey's powerful prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Washington on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit, was a last-ditch attempt to broker a rescue, but the initial omens from it are not good.

What has gone wrong? Ankara has gone cool on the process, saying it wants to see progress on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh -- even though the conflict is not mentioned in the protocols. The Turks clearly did not expect the furious reaction the rapprochement would have with Azerbaijan, the losing side in the conflict over the disputed province in the early 1990s. One-seventh of Azerbaijan's de jure territory is still under Armenian control, and in 1993, Turkey closed its border with Armenia in solidarity with its Turkic ally. Azerbaijan has been lobbying hard and effectively against the protocols, and its fears are understandable -- it is worried that if the Armenia-Turkey border opens, a key lever of influence on the Armenians to make concessions over Nagorno-Karabakh will be lost.

That might be true in the short term, but in the long run the opening of the border would be bound to transform the South Caucasus region and have a positive effect on the deep-set Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well. The Turks would become a neutral player in the Caucasus and have positive leverage there for the first time. Alas, this kind of long-term thinking is not the norm in this region.

Another complication is the approach of April 24, the date marked as Armenian Genocide Day. As always, the coming anniversary is fraying tempers, as Armenians make their annual push for the U.S. president and Congress to term the 1915 killings "genocide," infuriating Turkey.

Sargsyan has endured much criticism from diaspora Armenians for his rapprochement with Turkey. He is now under pressure to withdraw his signature from the protocols and ward off criticism at home and in the diaspora that he has allowed the Turks to string him along.

A short-term fix is needed to overcome the immediate danger of a collapse in the process, one that the U.S. administration might have only a few days to try to engineer. But there is also a longer-term challenge here -- how to pull the South Caucasus region as a whole out of its historical cycle of mistrust and deadlock. Local actors appear trapped, afraid to break the recurring negative dynamics that keep borders and minds closed. A broader long-term strategy akin to the one that has slowly turned around the Balkans in the last decade and a half is needed here.

That means making a much greater commitment to untying the biggest knot tangling up the area between the Black and Caspian Seas, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Currently the international resources being invested in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process are much too small to make a difference. The conflict is dormant, but there is no room for complacency. Oil-rich Azerbaijan now spends more than \$2 billion a year on its military budget, more than Armenia's entire annual budget. A few years down the line this could lead Azerbaijan into an attempt to reconquer Nagorno-Karabakh by force, triggering a regional war that would shake the area between Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

The United States could also invest in some long-term thinking on the Armenian-Turkish issue, making reconciliation its strategic goal and not treating it as a problem that flashes up as a red light once a year, close to Armenian Genocide Day. In recent years, the issue of whether the U.S. president will use the "G word" -- genocide -- in his annual April 24 statement has degraded what should be the commemoration of a historical tragedy into grubby political bargaining.

A key date, the centenary of the Armenian holocaust in 2015, is glimmering over the horizon and can be a useful star for Turks, Armenians -- and President Barack Obama -- to be guided by. The Turkish government should recognize that it has five years to come up with a better response to the Armenian question before the whole world commemorates the 100th anniversary of the Armenian holocaust. By pushing the question five years into the future, Obama would be respectfully but gravely giving the Turkish government a chance to catch up with the growing debate in its own society. If on April 24 he says, "In five years' time I will be marking the centenary of the Great Catastrophe of 1915. I hope to be marking it with our Turkish friends and not without them," he will start to be a catalyst for reconciliation rather than just a player in the perpetual Armenian-Turkish quarrel.

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