

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND THE ARMENIAN ISSUE

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Abstract: *In this paper, the Turkish-American relationship is studied in light of the Armenian “genocide” claims. Furthermore, how the relations between Turkey and Armenia will be shaped under the Caucasus and the Middle East policies of the U.S. and Russia is explored. In this context, whether or not the Obama administration will ratify the Armenian “genocide” bill is discussed .*

Key Words: *Armenian Issue, Turkey, the USA, relations of the two states, Karabakh.*

INTRODUCTION

Though Americans became acquainted with Turks in the late 18th century, the first official treaty between the U.S. and the Ottoman state was signed in 1830, which was based primarily on trade relations. Around this time, the first American missionaries began to arrive in the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the 19th century, Ottoman-American relations were relatively smooth, continuing in this manner through the early 20th century as a result of America not declaring war on the Ottoman state during World War I.¹ This cordial atmosphere allowed American diplomats and missionaries to write reports and carry out neutral, objective observation studies during the war. However, wide press coverage in the U.S. regarding the tragic incidents of oppression against Armenian rebels around 1915 gave place to a pro-Armenian/anti-Turkish public opinion in the U.S. Disturbed by numerous biased reports that emerged from European circles, U.S. President Wilson dispatched General Harbord to Eastern Anatolia in 1919 just as the Turkish national movement was getting underway. Harbord’s meticulously objective report,² which states that Armenians and Turks alike died in large numbers during that period’s regional conflict, is stored in the National Archives in Washington D.C.

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS BETWEEN 1923-2008

After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Republic of Turkey, the initial stages of Turkish-American relations proceeded with the U.S.

1 L. James Gordon, *American Relations With Turkey 1890-1930*, London: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932, pp. 191-266.

2 Nurşen Mazıcı, *Amerika’nın G.Kafkasya Politikası Olarak Ermenistan Sorunu 1919-1921*, İstanbul: Pozitif Yayınları, 2005, pp. 55-61.

participating to the Lausanne Conference as observer. The U.S. Senate vetoed the Lausanne Treaty, partly due to the lobby pressure of the Armenian Diaspora in the U.S., creating the first political challenge between the two countries. However, as a result of American business interests, including the New York Chamber of Commerce, and the skillful diplomacy of High Commissioner Admiral Mark. L. Bristol, followed by the first U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Joseph C. Grew, the bilateral Friendship and Trade Agreement, ratified in 1927, served to restore relations between the two nations.³

Turkish-American relations began to focus upon the military platform after World War II, with the Truman Doctrine and then the Marshall Plan aid starting in 1947, Turkey dispatching troops to Korea to fight alongside American soldiers, and Turkey becoming a member of NATO in 1952.

However, in 1964, Turkish-American relations again were strained, this time over the Cyprus issue. When Greek Cypriots attempted to purge the island of Turks, the latter responded with a military intervention on Cyprus, basing their actions on Article 4 of the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee signed by Turkey, Greece and England. As a consequence of the Turkish intervention, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson sent Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü a letter on June 2, 1964, which stated, "If Turkey makes a move requiring Soviet interference, the rest of NATO will not protect her."⁴ This letter incident gave rise to significant anti-U.S. sentiment in Turkey, a reduction of American personnel in the country and the fostering of relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey. Subsequently, the U.S. backed down on its tough political stance, with tensions between the two countries, stabilizing in 1967.⁵

However, relations between the two countries reached a critical stage over the Cyprus Question again in 1974. On July 15 of that year, the island was taken over by a military *coup d'état* led by Nikos Sampson with the intent of annexing Cyprus to Greece. As Greek-Cypriots were carrying out a massacre of their Turkish counterparts, Turkey countered this time with a military intervention within the same Guarantor Treaty framework. The U.S. then initiated an arms embargo against Turkey. Turkey countered this move in abrogating the 1969 Defense and Cooperation Agreement whereby all American facilities in Turkey, excluding those belonging to NATO, were effectively closed. Though Turkey was close to being ejected from NATO in 1978, the U.S. lifted the arms embargo the same year, because the solution plan of UN General Secretary about Cyprus issue was accepted by the Turkish side of the island, but rejected by Greek part. Therefore, a subsequent realignment in relations between the two nations was afforded.⁶

Turkish-American relations passed fairly uneventfully during the 1980s and 1990s, with the exception of the Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal switching off

3 John A. de Novo, *American Interest and Politics in the Middle East 1900-1939*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963, pp.237-272.

4 For the Johnson's letter see *Middle East Journal*, Vol : 20, No:3, Summer 1966, pp. 386-388.

5 William Hale, *Türk Dış Politikası 1774-2000*, Mozaik Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003, pp. 154-157.

6 William Hale, *Türk Dış Politikası...*, pp. 161-169.

the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik Pipeline in the beginning of the 1991 Gulf Crisis. The situation changed dramatically when Turkey declined its support to the U.S. invasion of Iraq on March 1, 2003. The relationships hit rock bottom with the Süleymaniye Incident where American soldiers captured Turkish soldiers in Süleymaniye - Irak. In consequence, hatred and anger against the Bush Administration began among Turkish people at that time.

In this context, various media organizations suggested that Turkish-American relations would go beyond a critical mass and unravel completely on April 24, 2007 when the "Armenian Genocide Bill" was scheduled to pass in the U.S. Congress. Ultimately, President Bush did not use the word "genocide" during his speeches on April 24, 2007 and 2008, although he had promised to approve the "the Armenian Genocide in 1915 Bill."

Speculations had it that the Democrat Party, which gained a majority in both the House and the Senate during the past U.S. mid-term elections, might put the Bush administration on trial for the detrimental Iraq policy if the Democrat Party's candidate won the 2008 presidential election. Moreover, it is known that the first female House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, is also a supporter of the claims regarding the so-called Armenian genocide. Also, then Democrat candidate Barack Obama promised the Armenian lobby in the U.S. to approve the "Armenian Genocide Bill" if he won the 2008 elections. Now that Obama has been elected, it remains to be seen if he will keep this promise.

DEMANDS OF ARMENIA FROM TURKEY

At various meetings, Armenian officials have put forth a number of demands to Turkey for the improvement of bilateral relations, including:

- Taking the Sèvres Treaty rather than the Kars Treaty as a basis to redraw the border between Turkey and Armenia,
- Having Turkey pay reparations to the relocated Armenians who were allegedly subjected to genocide,
- Having Turkey desist from seeking a solution that favors Azerbaijan over the Karabagh conflict and from saying that there was no genocide,⁷

In 1998, the Dashnak Party issuing a declaration claiming sixteen and half Turkish provinces as "Western Armenia" and being able to insert a reference to this declaration into the Armenian constitution due to the efforts of Robert Kocharyan, former president of Armenia, also a Dashnak party member. In this context, one ought to ask Armenian politicians the following: Please let us know if you wish to draw the Turkish-Armenian border along Giresun-Sivas-Mersin or through Trabzon-Malatya-Hatay. It is incomprehensible that government representatives of these two countries can put forth such illegal and unserious proposals.

⁷ *Hürriyet*, January 2, 2008.

First, it should be reminded that:

1. For a text to become a treaty the parties have to sign it, and then the respective parliaments need to ratify it. Finally, the respective heads of state need to sign it and publish it for the treaty to be executed. Armenian politicians ought to know that the Sèvres Treaty only made it to the first stage and that no other signatory country, except for Greece, proceeded to the second stage, which essentially renders Sèvres closer to a “draft” rather than a treaty.

2. In addition, preceding the Kars Treaty, the Ankara government signed the Gyumri (Gümrü) Treaty with the independent Republic of Armenia on December 2, 1920, represented by the Dashnak Party’s former Minister of Finance Avram Gulhandanyan, former Prime Minister Alexander Hadisyan and Deputy Minister of Interior İstevan Gurganyan. The Gyumri Treaty stipulates in Article 2 that the current Turkish-Armenian border has been recognized with minor adjustments. Article 3, dealing with the legal status of the territories left with Turkey according to this agreement, speaks of the “undeniable historical, legal and ethnic relations of Turkey” to these territories. Article 4 stipulates “the cessation of acts that violate the order and security and are a result of the instigation and encouragement of imperialist countries.” Article 6 regulates that “the signatories allow for the return of all refugees to their homes left inside the old borders, except for those who have joined enemy armies and took up arms against their own state or have participated in wholesale massacres in occupied territories...” Article 10 states that the “Yerevan Government accepts the Sévres Treaty, which was rejected categorically by the Turkish Grand National Assembly as null and void and commits to recall (Armenian) representative delegations in Europe and the United States, which have become instigation tools in the hands of some imperialist governments and political circles in a bona fide effort to remove all ill will between the two countries. The Republic of Armenia commits to not include ill intended and violent individuals with imperialist designs who have jeopardized peace and security between the two nations.”

The Kars Treaty⁸ of October 13, 1921 ratified the border between Turkey and Armenia with minor changes and also recognized Turkey’s international/national borders. The treaty was signed on behalf of the Republic of Armenia by Foreign Affairs Commissioner İskinaz Mravyan and by Interior Affairs Commissioner Bogos Makisyan.

As the treaty reveals, the Dashnak party officials formally reiterated on behalf of the Armenian government that they did not recognize the Sévres Treaty. In a sense, they also confessed to Ottoman Armenians’ collaborating with the imperialists and committing massacres. Therefore, Armenia’s political leaders should know that one of the two conditions of defining an administration as a “state” is “continuity”; the other is “recognition” and that these two conditions complement each other. It must also be known that the Ankara government, which signed the Gyumri Agreement, also managed to have all three conditions

8 İsmail Soysal, *Türkiye’nin Siyasal Andlaşmaları 1.Cilt (1920-1945)*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1983, pp. 41-47.

required by international law, satisfied by the signatories of the Lausanne Treaty and turned this treaty into the title deed which is recognizing the Republic of Turkey as a sovereign state. Under these circumstance this treaty is also a taboo for Turkey.

In this legal framework, one does not need to be a foreign minister or deputy or even an academic to know that demanding land from Turkey or Armenia or from any other “sovereign state” is a *casus belli*. However, occasionally, it can happen in every society that some rather educated albeit dense individuals make claims to eastern Anatolian lands or that others claim Armenia to be an ancient Turkish khanate and demand land from Armenia.

As for the Lausanne Treaty and the Property Debate, while discussing the Lausanne Treaty, it may be appropriate to evaluate the demand voiced in the Armenian National Assembly’s session on December 19-20, 2007. Reportedly demanded by the former Armenian Ambassador to Canada Ara Papyan, Turkey was responsible for paying reparations in the amount of \$14.5 million. The 1915 Law for Relocation and Resettlement, since being a provisional law, required the government to hold an inventory of the property belonging to Armenians in anticipation of their return after the war. This was followed in 1918 with the Repatriation Law. As also stipulated in Article 3 of the Gyumri Treaty,⁹ those exiled were given the right to return to their homes within three years. Armenian properties were also subject to lengthy discussion during the Lausanne Conference culminating in a determination that while Ottoman citizens who left their residents during the war had a right to regain their property upon their return, the statute of limitations had expired and that they had lost their property rights.

Furthermore, the Addendum to the Lausanne Treaty outlined an amnesty for all crimes committed during the war for political and military purposes and determined that no compensation was due to Armenians who died during the war.

Another issue related to Armenians’ demands is the Karabakh Debate. According to the year 2007 reports, former Foreign Minister Oskanyan stated, “Turkey’s demands from us to end the Karabakh problem in Azerbaijan’s favor and drop our genocide allegations, aside from the legal perspective, had no moral basis.”¹⁰ Moral values carry a philosophical definition that may differ among societies and can be subject to debate. However, based on the historical record, Karabakh¹¹ came under Ottoman rule during the reign of Sultan Murat III, entered a time of turmoil as it constantly changed hands among Turkey, Russia and Iran during the 18th and 19th centuries. When the Turkish army left the region after the Mudros Armistice, the British entered in 1920 declaring Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. In 1923, the Soviet Union declared Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over Karabakh. While the Armenians in Karabakh petitioned the Soviet Union in

9 İsmail Soysal, *Türkiye'nin Siyasal Andlaşmaları...*, pp. 19-23.

10 *Taraf*, January 4, 2007.

11 For history of Karabagh, see İsmail Özçelik, *Karabağ Tarihi ve Karabağ'da Ermeni Olayları*, Ankara: Bilge Yayınları, 2003.

1929 to annex Karabakh to Armenia and settle Armenians from outside of Armenia there and continued to do so at every occasion, these demands were rejected by the Soviet Union.

After independence, both countries pledged to adhere the OSCE principles with respect to Karabakh and to support the peacekeeping efforts of the UN and other international institutions. However, after the Armenian offense that resulted in the ethnic cleansing and deportation of one million Azeris from Karabakh and particularly in 1993 following the massacres of Azerbaijanis in Hodjali,¹² Turkey changed its policy regarding the problem, mainly an internal issue of the Soviet Union and remained uninvolved. Henceforth, Turkey engaged in a policy that revolved around seeking regional peace in the Caucasus. Turkey received assurances from the OSCE that Karabakh's official status as an autonomous region within Azerbaijan will be recognized and also requested that this status shall not change by means of aggression.

Russian Foreign minister Sergeev Lavrov presented a new concessions package to solve the Karabakh issue to the Armenian Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanyan prior to the OSCE Foreign Minister's Assembly on November 29, 2007. Entitled 'The Framework Agreement' by the Minsk Group, this document outlined that:

- Armenian forces must withdraw from the seven other Azerbaijani provinces they occupied in addition to Karabagh,
- Refugees will return,
- Karabakh's status was to be determined.¹³

These provisions in the Framework Agreement, under which the status of Karabagh was yet to be determined, show clearly that Turkey's policy is in line with international law and that it is not pursuing in any way a policy that favors Azerbaijan.

In the same meeting, former Foreign Minister Oskanyan also stated that "Turkey missed the opportunity to normalize relations in 1991 when the Soviet Union broke apart and when Turkey started membership talks with the EU." Turkey was at the top of the list of countries to recognize Armenian independence in 1991. It was also due to the insistence of former Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, that Armenia was admitted to the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation, despite objections of others concerning the fact that Armenia was not a littoral country to the Black Sea.

With respect to the legal dimensions of the allegation that Armenians were subject to genocide, such an allegation can only have legal consequences once it is adjudicated by a court of law. In documents on this issue, found particularly in the Russian, British, U.S. and French archives, court decisions, Western

12 <http://azerbaycan.ihh.org.tr/insan/daglik/sorunun.html>.; Ömer, E.Lütem, www.hannover-bk.de/ermeni/3.doc

13 <http://unzipped.blogspot.com/2008/10/disclosed-madrid-principles-of-Karabagh.html>

commission reports, diplomatic dispatches and others, the events that occurred between 1890-1918 are referred to as mutual massacres. There is no doubt that the 1915 Relocation is not an “auspicious event” for the Ottoman Armenians; it is a great tragedy. Yet, this tragedy was mutual. It is hoped that the two Eastern nations, which previously slaughtered each other as a result of British imperialism and German militarism, will prove that history only repeats itself for fools and will become the main actors in the new balance of power which is being shaped in the region.

After being elected in 2008, President Sargsyan surprisingly shifted Armenia’s foreign policy toward Turkey to discuss bilateral relations between the two countries, and invited the Turkish President Abdullah Gül to watch a football game between Turkey and Armenia in Yerevan. However, it is important not to forget that Armenia’s policy toward Turkey came forth during Georgia’s intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, namely Caucasus regional rivalry between Russia and the U.S.

CONCLUSION

As an academician who has conducted studies on both the Armenian Question and Turkish-American relations and who has had the opportunity to observe the political and social environment while living in the USA for approximately four years, I deem it unlikely that President Obama will use the word “genocide” on April 24, 2009 simply because of the following reasons:

1. American political history shows that even though there are significant differences in viewpoints between the Democrat and Republican parties regarding domestic policy, their stances on foreign affairs are rather similar. In this context, populist sound bites propagated during the election campaign in the quest for votes are more or less dismissed after the election. Under these conditions, President Obama likely will not use the word “genocide” on April 24, 2009 and the most the Obama administration would probably do about the Bush administration’s Iraq policy is to condemn it and expedite U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. This is due to the fact that the “Greater Middle East Project” was drafted during the Democratic Clinton administration. In any case, beyond the “sword of democracy” that is poised above the U.S. Congress is that of the American interest groups such as the defense industries, petroleum companies and so on which are the real power wielders when it comes to U.S. foreign policy. Consequently, for the U.S. to overcome the self-induced Iraq syndrome with the least amount of damage possible, it depends entirely on how the U.S. mends its relations with the Muslim world. Though the Cold War is a concept of the past, how the U.S. keeps Russia and China in check in the Middle East and the Caucasian region depends mainly on how it decides to proceed with its alliance with Turkey.

2. One of the top domestic policy concerns for the U.S. is infighting amongst religious and ethnic groups comprising of its own citizens. In this regard, the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission, chaired by David Phillips, was

cordially established to devise a solution for this problem once and for all. Though the U.S. is regarded as sincere in dealing with this issue, the commission effectively failed in its capacity due to Philips' lack of information and ineptitude in dealing with the Armenian Question. If, in fact, President Obama accepts the claims regarding the Armenian "genocide," which is not based on any court decision, on April 24, 2009 or in 2010, there may be more harm done to the social fabric in America than to Turkish-American relations. A hint of what is referred to here occurred on September 15, 2005 at a House International Relations Committee debate on the draft resolution of the Armenian Genocide (H.Res 316). I had also participated in this meeting, whereas the first reaction came from an African-American congressman who exclaimed something to the effect of, "Go ahead and mess around in other countries' affairs when you should be sweeping the porch of your own home; my fellow African-Americans have yet to receive an apology for what we were subject to for the past century or so." In an era that is full of domestic problems, including an economy that is not performing well, it does not appear possible that the American administration is going to follow populist, risky policies. What President Obama could do before April 24, 2009 on the Armenian claims is to locate a political way that suggests to the Turkish government to open the Armenian border with Turkey and to the Armenian government not to express genocide claims while negotiating Turkish-Armenian relations.

As Armenian claims are generally based neither on historical nor juridical problem but political grounds, the latter may be the most logical and realistic path to follow.

3. If in this period Turkish-American relations reach a breaking point, without Turkey' support, the U.S. administration will have to consider how to manipulate Israel, which follows American policies in the Middle East as well.

In short, are Turkish-American relations, which have survived 179 consecutive years without interruption and have been put to the test once before with the Armenian Diaspora and twice by the Greek lobby, going to reach a breaking point for a second time because of the Armenian Diaspora? This is not likely, but only time can tell for certain.