
'Open Border A Win-Win Situation For Armenia, Turkey'

Today's Zaman Turkey - 1/12/2008

Richard Giragosian, an Armenian-American analyst who has been based in Armenia for the last two years, has said an open border between Turkey and Armenia would be a good move for both sides, as Armenians would be able to import and export goods at a much lower cost by circumventing the Georgian monopoly on the trade route and Turkey would benefit from its role as a transit state.

He also said Turkey even may benefit more from such a move than Armenia in the short term. "The opening of the border will help the Turkish government offer economic stability to the Kurdish region, especially job creation and some new economic activity. Also that kind of cross-border trade will lead to a bigger and larger role for Turkey in the region."

Turkey severed its ties with Armenia in the early 1990s in protest of the Armenian occupation of the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Official Turkish policy has stipulated that the normalization of ties depends on Armenian withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh, the termination of the Armenian policy of supporting claims of an Armenian genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire and an official endorsement by Armenia of the current border between the two countries.

There are signs of a possible resolution to the conflict as both sides have started to show signs of backing away from insistence on preconditions for the opening of the border.

In an interview with Monday Talk in Yerevan, Giragosian elaborated on these and other issues.

When you look at the Turkey-Armenia rapprochement from the Armenian side, what obstacles do you see ahead?

If we look at the diplomacy, we see that it is not only the Turkish efforts to reconcile many outstanding issues. This Armenian government, more than many other governments in the past, is facing an internal political challenge of limited legitimacy and very limited popular support. So a breakthrough on Turkish-Armenian relations with this Armenian government is more important than ever before.

Do you say that because of the present Armenian coalition government?

I say this because on March 1 we saw a violent clash between the opposition and the government. President Serzh Sargsyan was elected in February. That was an election tainted in terms of voting fraud and irregularities, like many elections before. What was different, however, was the opposition's demonstration in protest of the election results and the police crackdown, which killed at least 10 people and injured many more. Some opposition supporters are still being held in Armenian prisons, and the underlying tension remains unresolved. Therefore, this Armenian government seems desperate for a foreign policy success, not only to normalize relations with Turkey and open the border, but also to divert attention away from the internal domestic situation. It's also important for the Armenian government to divert the attention of the international community away from the shortcomings of its democracy and focus on foreign policy success.

Could you talk about the vested interest of the oligarchs, who seem to be obstructing normalization of relations with Turkey?

Many of the oligarchs here have emerged from the Nagorno-Karabakh war conflict during the difficult transition from the former Soviet economy to a market economy -- like Russia, where during the privatization process they were using their connections in government and corruption to acquire power and economic businesses unfairly. What they do is operate cartels, big monopolies that are based on control of the import and export of specific commodities. They exercise this control without allowing competition from other Armenian businesses or foreign investors, and they see the opening of the border as introducing new competition that they don't want, because that may threaten their economic position and power. More recently, in 2005, they decided -- smartly, from their point of view -- to go beyond simple economic power and acquire political power. Just as the oligarchs in Russia have entered the political field, oligarchs in Armenia have also acquired seats in the parliament; they have become deputies in order to safeguard their wealth and power, and to be able to sustain that wealth and power.

What is the worst thing they could do to prevent the opening of the border?

Because of a lack of popular support, the Armenian government desperately needs to be able to fight corruption and confront these powerful oligarchs in order to maintain its power. But it's a difficult situation, because the oligarchs are the key to real power here, and the worst thing they can do is much bigger and deeper than simply delaying or opposing the opening of the border with Turkey. They may actually pressure the government more to not carry out the economic or political reforms that it needs to.

Then what is the real strength behind the Armenian government?

In the face of a lack of legitimacy combined with lack of popular support, the only real foundation for the power of the government now rests on two things: One is control over the security services, the police and the army, in terms of instrumental power. And, secondly, by using the system of corruption to be able to basically buy off votes and intimidate. In other words, we have a system of authoritarian-managed democracy, similar to Russia but much smaller, where the power is somewhat fragile. It's weaker than power based on legitimacy or popular support, but it's power also because the opposition is marginalized and there is no real political threat or alternative. An ordinary Armenian citizen does not have much of an alternative.

And you think the public is ready for the opening of the border?

This is the interesting paradox. Unlike Nagorno-Karabakh, unlike the domestic political situation, the Armenian government is very lucky because, by proceeding with diplomatic talks with Turkey, negotiating a possible opening of the border, etc., this is one area where public opinion is strongly behind the government. And even the opposition is supporting the government's efforts at engaging Turkey in dialogue. It's no longer a question of if we can normalize relations with Turkey, but a question of when.

How do you think the Armenian public reached that point?

Following the past 16 years of closed borders, blockades and sanctions, the Armenian people are fed up. They want real change, and they want real change in every category -- economic reform, more democracy and, at the same time, an end to the closed borders. And it seems that the only future for progress in Armenia requires having a normal relationship with its

neighbors. Public opinion has evolved to the point where the years of denying any relationship with one of Armenia's most significant neighbors, Turkey, has proven fruitless. It's been more harmful than useful.

What would you say about the genocide claims?

It's the most difficult obstacle in the long run because it's not only about the genocide issue. From the local Armenian and diaspora perspective, it is one thing to address the past, but another to look forward. The second obstacle is that many years of official Turkish policy of genocide denial has made the issue more important than it really should be. And the Turkish position throughout the '70s, '80s and '90s was actually counterproductive; it gave more significance to this issue than it ordinarily would have. And what this means is that while the genocide issue is important, it is only one of many important issues. There is optimism that progress can be made in diplomatic relations, opening of the border, economic relations and exchange of people, so it will allow for an environment later to produce results in genocide issue.

What do you think will change economically for the Armenian people following an opening of the border?

I don't exaggerate the potential of immediate economic benefits from an open border. Everyone would gain in the long run but, in the short run, Armenia would be able to import and export goods on a much cheaper basis without relying on the Georgian monopoly on the trade route. Turkey would also benefit from its role as a transit state. I think the real benefits are in terms of the psychological benefits, as much as economic. Given the nature of the Armenian system, the benefits will be limited in the immediate term. Actually, Turkey may benefit more economically than Armenia.

How?

Because from a security perspective, part of the problem in the east of Turkey, in terms of the Kurdish-populated regions, is a problem of security and instability. And the rise of Kurdish nationalism after the removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the continuing threat of PKK [outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party] terrorism mean that the military solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey has not been effective enough. Now it's also a political issue in terms of EU engagement, in terms of Kurdish language broadcasting and linguistic rights, but what was missing was the economic factor. Opening of the border will help the Turkish government offer economic stability to the Kurdish region, especially job creation and some new economic activity. Also, that kind of cross-border trade will lead to a bigger and larger role for Turkey in the region because if we look at the Turkish engagement with Armenia, it's only one piece of the puzzle.

Would you elaborate on that idea?

Especially after the events of August in Georgia, we see a new role for Turkey as a regional leader, where it's not Turkey acting on behalf of the US nor as a NATO member. Turkish foreign policy is now asserting Turkey's leadership on its own two feet. It's more about Turkey expanding its options in foreign policy for its own benefit and that of the region.

US-Turkish ties will be more significant than Armenian genocide for Obama

What would you say about Barack Obama's election to the American presidency and how that will affect the genocide issue?

The Turkish reaction to the election of President-elect Obama is exaggerated. There is an exaggerated fear that Obama's rather strong statements on the Armenian genocide as a candidate will mean that as president he will be just as dynamic. I don't think so. Once in office, like every other American president, the broader significance of US-Turkish relations and the need to repair and improve US-Turkish relations will be a more significant factor than the Armenian genocide. In other words, it's a role for the US Congress, in their opinion, and less of a role for the US executive branch.

What if there is improvement in Turkish-Armenian relations, like opening of the border?

That will be much more important than a limited, simple resolution in the US Congress not binding on the United States government. While the Armenian genocide is, of course, significant, from the US national security point of view, so is dealing with the need to repair US-Turkish military relations and bilateral relations. The challenge is not from the Armenian genocide; the core challenge is actually resolving the emergence of the Kurdish proto-state in northern Iraq, and as the Americans pull out of Iraq, how Turkey is challenged by the vacuum that's left, in terms of Kirkuk, in terms of northern security and in terms of PKK activity.

So you believe US-Turkish relations will improve?

As the US withdraws from Iraq in the next one or two years, there will be more of a US need to work with Turkey, to strengthen Iraq and also to ensure that the PKK threat does not increase. The most important and most interesting factor in terms of the US-Turkish dynamic is that it's no longer about simply talking about genocide or even the opening of the border, but it is more about the process that the late Hrant Dink started. In many ways he accomplished more in his death than he did in his life by demonstrating that the real future of Armenian-Turkish relations is not talking about these issues in Washington or Brussels, but talking about and debating the future of Turkish identity within Turkey, and the future of Turkish-Armenian relations within Armenia and Turkey. That's why real exchange and dialogue is most important between the people of Turkey and Armenia, and much less about what Washington wants or what Brussels demands.

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For nine years Giragosian served as a professional staff member of the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress, and also worked as an analyst for the Abt Associates Inc. consulting firm from 2000-2005.

Among the publications he has contributed to are Jane's Defence Weekly, the China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, Jane's Intelligence Digest, Asia Times Online, Demokratizatsiya, Jane's Foreign Report, the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst, the Turkish Daily News and the Turkish Policy Quarterly.
