

# From its Soviet past to a new era Yerevan

Today's Zaman, Turkey - 30/11/2008

With its sturdy stone structure, grimy appearance and abandoned state, it would not be a typical watchtower for a Western airport. It is hard not to notice, even in the dark hours of the early morning, when the only weekly flight from Turkey arrives at Yerevan's Zvartnots International Airport, about 12 kilometers from the city.

The scene once could have served as the set for an Orwellian movie. But not anymore, as it now stands against the glitter of the new terminal, which welcomes passengers with all the amenities of international standards.

And even with sleepy post-flight eyes, who can miss "Ararat." It's a well-known cognac from Armenia in variously sized bottles lined up on the shelves of the duty-free shop. The name appears many times in Armenia, sometimes as a male first name, sometimes as the title of a town or province. In Yerevan "Ararat" is everlasting in the form of a majestic mountain that is called "Mount Ararat" by the Turkish people who reside on the western side of the border. In daylight in Yerevan the snow-capped mountain is usually hidden under heavy fog, but heads always turn to the site where it sits, stately. It represents a lost past for Armenians.

But today's Yerevan has been dominated by cranes representing realities rather than sentiments. It is a city of about 1.2 million trying to erase the traces of some 70 years of Soviet dominance. Construction of modern buildings, sometimes at the expense of historic ones, is in progress everywhere.

Casinos crowd the main street from the airport to the center of the city. International brand names and luxurious shops adorn the wide streets. Behind the dazzle, there are homes without running water and gas, even though the Armenian economy has seen some growth since the 1994 cease-fire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

And income disparity is unmistakable. There are both ramshackle huts and grand jeeps on the streets of Yerevan, where a loaf of bread costs 70 cents, a kilogram of oranges is \$2-3 and a kilogram of meat ranges between \$5 and \$7. Renting a regular two-bedroom apartment in the center of the city costs about \$350-400 a month, while the average salary is around \$200. So Armenians say young people and even newlyweds either live with their parents or far from the city to reduce their expenditures. Also, many Armenians subsidize their living expenses with money from their relatives living abroad, and this group is considerable in size. While there are approximately 3.2 million Armenians in Armenia, there are about five million outside, 1.5 million of them living in the United States.

Sometimes it is a give and take, as many diaspora Armenians go to Armenia for surgeries and dental treatment because it is much less expensive there.

Oligarchs and their kitsch homes

There is a big house out in the country in the middle of nowhere still under construction. The gates around the house complex are adorned with golden motifs. It looks like a small palace designed by someone with awful taste. The guide says this is a typical house owned by an oligarch. Leaving the rest of the group in the van, he tries to get some information from the watchmen outside who look like body guards. He returns empty handed, warning the group not to take pictures.

But who are these oligarchs really? An Armenian economist says many of the oligarchs are in the parliament. And in the ruling Republican Party, there are only about 10 deputies who are not oligarchs.

Armenia and Turkey sail to new seas

The closed border between Armenia and Turkey makes things harder economically. The Armenian people look forward to the opening of the border -- closed in 1993 by Turkey in protest against the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan -- since the country is dependent on other states for energy supplies and most raw materials.

There are a lot of Russian investors in Armenia and there is not much other foreign direct investment. Some Armenians are concerned that dependence on Russia is a threat. Diaspora Armenians have also invested in Armenia, but they are weary because of corruption.

Landlocked Armenia has highway routes through Georgia to the north and Iran to the south, but they are not enough. Armenia is forced to pay higher transit costs for imports coming from Turkey. Even though the Turkish province of Kars is 20 kilometers away from the Armenian province of Gyumri, it takes at least 14 hours for a truck to reach Armenia through Georgia, increasing the costs for Armenia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been the biggest challenge for the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations because Turkey has made resolving the conflict a precondition. As there are signs of a possible resolution to the conflict and Turkey follows a "zero problem policy" with all its neighbors, there is hope. Both sides have started to emphasize a no-preconditions policy for the opening of the border.

Making matters even more hopeful, Serzh Sarkisyan will visit Turkey in October 2009 to watch a game between the national soccer teams of the two countries, reciprocating a similar visit by Turkish President Abdullah Gül in September.

However, when exactly a concrete step will be taken by both sides is not known. Some observers worry that the Armenian diaspora could force the Armenian government to not go forward with the border opening until US President-elect Barack Obama delivers what he promised before his election: official recognition of the World War I-era killings of Anatolian Armenians as genocide. The Turkish government is equally adamant. Categorically denying "genocide" charges, Turkey says the killings of Anatolian Armenians came when Armenians revolted against the Ottoman Empire in collaboration with an invading Russian army.

But for the general public in Armenia, the opening of the border carries more importance than "genocide" recognition, at least for the time being.

For some, the question is whether or not Turkey can marginalize the diaspora even more.

Museum against magnificent view of Mt. Ararat

"I've become a changed person since I started working here for the last two years. I constantly collect stories of death. And when you that you have that pressure in your brain, you have this helpless feeling."

These are the words of Hayk Demoyan, director of the Museum-Institute of the Armenian Genocide, opened in 1995.

At the end of the special tour he kindly offered to our group of journalists and civil society representatives, he complained that there was no direct contact between Turkish and Armenian historians.

The museum had a temporary exhibition on Sep. 2-15 called "Armenian Sport in the Ottoman Empire" reflecting the history of Armenian sports clubs and football teams in the Ottoman Empire until 1915. A total of about 70 photos, documents, newspapers and magazines were shown. According to the documents, the number of Armenian sports clubs in the Ottoman Empire reached 100 and two Armenian sportsmen represented Ottoman Turkey in the Fifth International Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912.

Demoyan mentions that they have plans to expand the museum and add an educational complex, particularly for the young visitors of the museum -- to help their psychological well-being. He stresses that there are no efforts to demonize Turks in the museum.

Outside, Armenians privately admit that they need to change their education system, which is full of hatred toward the Turkish people. And, speaking of young visitors, a two-year-old, holding his grandfather's hand, leaves the memorial complex, consisting of a 40-meter-high spire next to a circle of 12 tilted slabs representing lost provinces of what the Armenians call "Western Armenia" (Eastern Turkey) leaning over to guard an eternal flame.

Speaking Turkish in Yerevan

"Ne gÅ¼zel!" (So beautiful!) a Turkish visitor says to another Turk as they look at the beautiful woodcarvings at the arts and crafts market, called Vernisage, close to the Republic Square. "Hadi alÄ±n o zaman" (Then come and buy) says the smiling vendor to the surprise of the Turkish visitors. Immediately, a conversation starts. The visitors learn that he moved to Yerevan from Ä°stanbul in 1980 and that he is from the sports team BeyoÄ°luspor. His name is Stephan Galloshyan, known by the last name KalataÄ° in Ä°stanbul.

He says he lived in the district of BakÄ±rkÄ±y for a long time, adding that he loves Ä°stanbul and that his children still go back and forth. But, after seeing so much, he likes living in Yerevan more.

His hands show all the signs that he carves the wood products himself.

Indeed, there are handmade backgammon boards sold at Vernisage. Their covers are delicately carved. Vernisage also features handmade lacework, silver jewelry and carpets. Additionally, ornamental pomegranates, a symbol of Armenia that also represent fertility, are sold in abundance at the market.

There is a flea market next to Vernisage featuring such strange items as used surgical devices, small and big parts of random machines and strange chemicals placed in hundreds of jars.

And then there is Sarkis, the owner of a small fast-food restaurant that features Turkish "lahmacun" or "Armenian pizza" combined with the drink "ayran." Sarkis is a talkative Turkish-speaking person. Once you ask this man in his 40s where he learned the language, he will start telling his story: "Once upon a time, something happened. I won't tell you what happened because you are guests here. But I can tell you that your grandfather did something to my grandmother. And my grandmother was in an orphanage in Syria. She was forbidden to speak Armenian. My Turkish is a legacy to my grandmother."

MerhaBarev project continues

Turkish people say "merhaba," Armenians "barev." A photography project was born out of the combination: MerhaBarev.

It started in 2006, when five Armenian photojournalists from the Patker Photo Agency went to İstanbul to take photos for a week. And so did five Turkish photojournalists from the Nar Photo Agency in Yerevan. Using the black-and-white language of photography, they narrated the traditions, every-day life and people of the two cities.

The project was showcased in a number of exhibitions in Yerevan and Gyumri in Armenia and in İstanbul and Diyarbakır in Turkey, as well as in Georgia's Tbilisi. A book was created out of the MerhaBarev project in four languages -- Armenian, Turkish, English and German -- as well as calendars and posters.

Following that success, the Patker Photo Agency, in a partnership with the Turkish Fotoroportaj.org, further developed another project this year by sending five photographers from Turkey to shoot in Gyumri and five Armenian photographers to Kars for a week in April and June. Then, as the last part of MerhaBarev, a border journey was embarked upon by Armenian Ruben Mangasaryan and Turk Ali Saltan, who made a two-week journey together along both sides of the closed border in October.

Together with National Geographic Traveler Armenia, they are producing a special issue of the magazine dedicated entirely to MerhaBarev. The magazine will be in Armenian with inserts in Turkish and English. Four thousand copies will be freely distributed to the people living on both sides of the border. They indicate that the special issue is probably the best way to reach their most important target audience: people living on both sides of the closed border.

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