
Iranian FM Promotes Closer Ties with Armenia

By Emil Danielyan and Tigran Avetisian
RFE/RL Armenia Report - 03/13/2009

Armenia and Iran have 'common interests' in the region and should deepen their already close political and economic relations, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said during an official visit to Yerevan on Friday.

'We are content with the course of [bilateral] relations but do not find it satisfactory given the two countries' potential,' Mottaki said after talks with his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandian.

'Similarities between our countries, their common historical roots, friendship based on mutual respect, and mutually beneficial cooperation laid the groundwork for our common interests,' he told a joint news conference. 'The history of Armenian-Iranian relations is full of friendship, respect and cooperation.'

Mottaki was reported to tell President Serzh Sarkisian later in the day that his upcoming official visit to Tehran 'will open a new page' in Armenian-Iranian ties and mark the beginning of more 'large-scale projects' involving the two nations. Sarkisian was quoted by his press service as referring to Iran as a 'good neighbor' and 'reliable partner' of Armenia.

According to the Armenian Foreign Ministry, the main purpose of Mottaki's trip was to 'spur the development of bilateral cooperation in various areas.' A ministry statement said the two ministers reviewed the implementation of decisions made by the Armenian-Iranian intergovernmental commission at a meeting in Tehran held late last year.

That meeting came as Armenia completed the construction of the second and final Armenian section of a natural gas pipeline from Iran. It is still not clear when Iranian gas will start flowing into Armenia, though. The bulk of that gas is due be converted into electricity at Armenian thermal-power plants that will be delivered to the Islamic Republic.

In preparation for Armenian electricity supplies, the two neighboring nations have agreed to build a third high-voltage transmission line inking their power grids. They have also been contemplating more bilateral projects such as the construction of a hydro-electric plant on the river Arax marking the Armenian-Iranian border, a petrol pipeline and an Armenian-Iranian railway.

A statement by the Armenian presidential press service said Sarkisian and Mottaki attached 'particular importance' to the railway project. They agreed that its implementation, which some experts believe requires as much as \$2 billion in funding, would have far-reaching implications for the entire region, the statement said.

Neither Nalbandian, nor Mottaki commented on chances or possible time frames for the launch of this and other ambitious projects as they spoke to journalists. The Iranian minister said only that Tehran and Yerevan are right to put the emphasis on transport and energy in bilateral commercial ties.

The volume of Armenian-Iranian trade remains rather modest in both absolute and relative terms, even if it rose by 26 percent to \$226.6 million last year. The figure is equivalent to only 4 percent of Armenia's overall 2008

trade with the outside world. By comparison, the United States accounted for almost 5 percent of the total.

Regional security issues were also on the agenda of Mottaki's talks with Nalbandian and Sarkisian. Nalbandian said he briefed his Iranian opposite number on Armenia's ongoing dialogue with Turkey and the latest developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

Mottaki reiterated Tehran's declared readiness to assist in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. 'Iran is familiar with Armenia's and Azerbaijan's positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and has presented its positions to the governments of both states,' he said.

Mottaki also said that a Karabakh settlement must be peaceful and gradual. 'The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the kind of problem that can be settled gradually, brick by brick,' he added. 'The whole building will eventually be constructed as a result.'
