

# GALLIPOLI COMMEMORATIONS CANCELLED

*Posted on February 20, 2015 by Keghart*



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**Lamiya Adilgızı**, [Sunday's Zaman](#), 21 February 2015

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#### The Gallipoli Peninsula

"The Gallipoli celebrations have been cancelled. All preparations have been suspended as the number of RSVPs to the invitation is not positive. Only five countries have accepted the invitation and they will not be represented by high-level officials," an official from the government, who asked to remain anonymous, said in a talk with Sunday's Zaman.

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The suspension of the Gallipoli commemorations, which were being organized by the Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sport, is part of longstanding war of words between the Turkish and Armenian leaders following an exchange of invitations by both sides urging each other to accept the request and honor their victims of the World War I in their respective countries. However, neither side appears to be compromising.

The tense ties between Armenians and Turks became particularly strained after Ankara decided to commemorate the Gallipoli Campaign on the same date as the 100th anniversary of the 1915 events that led to the killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during WWI. The Turkish government sent invitations to more than 100 leaders around the world, including Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan,

to attend the event. The campaign was one of the most famous battles of WWI when Ottoman troops resisted the invading Allied forces who sought to control the Gallipoli peninsula on the Dardanelles strait.

"We fought together as one of a kind. That's why we invited Sarkisyan," a government official was quoted by local media as saying, referring to the participation of Armenian minorities alongside Turks in the Ottoman army.

Yerevan rejected the invitation and in an open letter to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Sarkisyan said the invitation itself showed Turkey's continuing policy of denying the Armenian genocide and emphasized that Turkey needs to recognize the 1915 killings as a genocide.

A couple of months earlier Sarkisyan had first invited Erdoğan -- after he was elected president in August of last year -- to join Armenians in commemorating the victims of the Armenian "genocide" in Yerevan on April 24. The invitation was presented by Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan during the first official visit of an Armenian minister to Ankara.

Armenians claim that 1.5 million Armenians were systematically killed in the final years of the Ottoman Empire in a way that constitutes genocide, a claim categorically denied by Turkey. Ankara says the death toll is inflated and denies that the events of 1915 amounted to genocide, arguing instead that both Turks and Armenians were killed when Armenians revolted against the Ottoman Empire during WWI in collaboration with the Russian army, which was then invading Eastern Anatolia. Every year on April 24, Armenians around the world commemorate the Armenian victims who died at the end of WWI.

The latest debacle in the already heated relations between Turkey and Armenia was Sarkisyan's withdrawal of the Zurich protocols from the Armenian Parliament. "The Turkish government has no political will, distorts the spirit of the protocols and continues its policy of setting preconditions," Sarkisyan said in a statement issued on Monday, adding that Turkey's "policy of denial and rewriting of history" on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the 1915 killings is being revived in Ankara.

The Zurich protocols, intended to normalize ties between Turkey and Armenia, were signed in Zurich on Oct. 10, 2009 with the aim of establishing diplomatic relations and opening the two countries' land border, which was closed in solidarity with Azerbaijan after Armenia-backed armed forces seized Azerbaijani territories as part of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The normalization process had been deadlocked ever since as neither Parliament approved the deal. Both Ankara and Yerevan have accused each other of setting new conditions on the deal agreed to in Zurich years ago. Turkey has many times stated that any development, such as reconciliation or opening the border between the two estranged nations, could not be expected until Armenia settles the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, Turkey's ally in the region.

Instead, Ankara extended its commitment to the peace protocols. Calling Armenia's decision "inconsistent and insincere," Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanju Bilgiç said on Tuesday that

Armenia wanted further reasons to criticize Turkey ahead of the 100th anniversary of the 1915 events.

"The real test will be in April," said Richard Giragosian, the director of the Yerevan-based Regional Studies Center (RSC), adding that although the current developments seem to taint relations, they do not necessarily signal the death of the normalization process although the process itself has reached its lowest point.

Relating the tense political atmosphere on the Armenian-Turkish normalization to the domestic issues in both countries -- the upcoming June general election for which Erdoğan is trying to secure votes and Sarkisyan using the protocols to deal with his own domestic political troubles -- Giragosian says the test will depend more on what Turkish leaders say and do on April 24.

Last April Erdoğan extended his condolences to Armenians over what happened in 1915, although the act did not meet the expectations of Yerevan or the Armenian diaspora.

In Ankara, Güner Özkan, an expert on the Caucasus at the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), is not positive about any new developments in the Turkish-Armenian ties at least until the upcoming general election in Turkey on June 7.

Calling Sarkisyan's latest step a "unilateral decision," Özkan doesn't seem convinced as to the continuation of the precedent established by Erdoğan a year ago: "I don't expect any sudden move especially under the increasing pressure on Ankara on the eve of the approaching 100th anniversary of the so-called genocide and the upcoming election."

