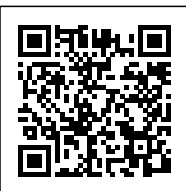


# IS "RECONCILIATION" COMPATIBLE WITH JUSTICE?

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By Lucine Kasbarian, 12 May 2010



On Wednesday May 12, at the Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA) in Watertown, Massachusetts, editors Emil Sanamyan of the *Armenian Reporter* and Khatchig Mouradian of the *Armenian Weekly* spoke about their recent trip to Turkey sponsored by TEPAV -- a Turkish think tank that has recently been promoting Turkish-Armenian relations. TEPAV is funded by TOBB, the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey.

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ALMA Executive Director Mariam Stepanyan welcomed the audience after which moderator Marc Mamigonian, Academic Affairs Director of the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR), opened by noting that there was no formal title for the evening's program because the trip was not necessarily part of what would be termed "Turkish-Armenian reconciliation or relations."

Mamigonian said the reason is "not because we can't trust the Turks or because Turks are all alike, or because of any other negative stereotype that Armenians reject when applied to themselves." Such stereotypes, he continued, "would be as ignorant as assuming that the Turkish government's position on Armenians is the same as the Turkish people's position." The latter, Mamigonian continued, "has changed somewhat, though such profound changes as their recognizing the Armenian Genocide haven't happened yet." From his disjointed remarks, this writer concluded that Mamigonian may have been trying to warm up the audience to the idea of "reconciliation," as the evening's program seemed, in most respects, to be an attempt to convince attendees that new efforts to establish "Turkish-Armenian relations" were underway.

Prior to editing the *Armenian Reporter*, the Baku-born Sanamyan was employed by the Armenian Assembly of America, which works closely with the US State Department. While his initial impression of TEPAV's invitation was that it was "intended to be a brainwashing trip," Sanamyan noted that, by trip's end, if that had been the intent it was "done in a very advanced and unnoticeable way, and this experience was by far a greater opportunity for the visiting delegation than it was for the hosts." He also said that influential Turkish organizations had arranged for the delegation to meet with high-level government officials.

It is unclear if Sanamyan realizes that the trip was the Turks' way of trying to butter up Sanamyan and Mouradian, give them the soft-sell and make them feel important. According to TEPAV's website, the rest of the delegation was comprised of journalists and policy experts from the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *Forbes.com*, *Foreign Policy*, National Security Network, The Century Foundation, and New America Foundation -- all of which generally promote policies from a US government establishment perspective. Did it occur to Sanamyan and Mouradian that two Armenians from comparatively small newspapers fit in rather awkwardly with this group?

Did it not also seem strange to the two that they would be invited to join a delegation headed by former US Ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz, a notorious genocide denier? When asked later what was going through their minds when they accepted the invite, Sanamyan replied that "Abramowitz's views have evolved." However, Abramowitz's dispatches about the trip, available on *TodaysZaman.com*, demonstrated otherwise. Why did Sanamyan defend Abramowitz, who still opposes the US Congressional Genocide Resolution?

Sanamyan said he returned from the trip "looking at" what he called 'the Armenian-Turkish experience' "in a new light." He said, "The Armenian-Turkish experience for Armenians is the Genocide, while the Armenian-Turkish experience for Turks is terrorism and the Genocide resolution." This writer must ask: Are such generalizations accurate? And was Sanamyan saying that these alleged "experiences" are simply two equally valid sides of the same story? His comments seemed to contradict Mamigonian's introductory remarks about spurning stereotyping. Sanamyan gave an example of how " 'the weight of history' is present in Turkey." In the Foreign Ministry building, he saw "a plaque dedicated to Turkish diplomats slain by Armenians during the terrorism period." Sanamyan also said he was "irked somewhat" as he traveled along "Talaat Pasha Boulevard," named after one of the masterminds of the Genocide.

By raising the points above, Sanamyan seemed to be trying to step into the role of intermediary by throwing a bone to the Turkish as well as the Armenian communities in an effort to equalize history. It is also not clear what Sanamyan has seen in "a new light."

During the junket, Sanamyan said, "very little politics were discussed, but lots of hospitality was extended." He made a point of telling the audience of how lavish Turkish hospitality was. Sanamyan described Turkey as "popular with Hayastansi tourists and Armenians in Russia." Was Sanamyan's purpose to emphasize that the Turks were not hostile but instead shared a culture of hospitableness with Armenians? Did he wish for us to conclude that Armenian tourists from Russia and Armenia appear to have no beef with Turkey, and thus it was high time for the Diaspora to follow suit?

The TEPAV website notes that the delegation met with President Gul, Foreign Minister Davutoglu, Foreign Ministry Ambassador Sinirlioglu, Deputy Undersecretary Yenel, US Ambassador to Turkey Jeffrey, Turkish political party leaders, and the Turkish-American Business Council, among others. This and the subsequent reportage of the other delegates show that the trip may have been more

political than Sanamyan indicated. (Dispatches published by some writers in the delegation are available [here](#))

Instead of traveling to Cappadocia with the delegation, Sanamyan and Mouradian were flown to Kars and Ani. There, hoteliers explained that local Turks hoped the border with Armenia would open soon, that the locals would benefit, and that "Diasporan tourists such as yourselves would visit."

To this writer, it sounded as if TEPAV and TOBB were trying to keep the Turkish-Armenian Protocols alive by touting the alleged benefits of a border opening so that the Armenian journalists would convey that to their Diaspora. We can take Sanamyan's words as a clear signal that the Turkish government is still dangling the promise of a border opening before Armenians, even though many Armenian economists, policy analysts, politicians and others have expressed skepticism that a border opening would benefit Armenia's economy, people, and national security.

Sanamyan was taken to an Armenian church in Kars that had been converted into a mosque. Most of its Christian elements had been removed. He observed that the Turks took great pains to avoid using wording on any signage that would identify the Armenian origin of the structures around Kars and Ani. Even so, Sanamyan said, "there seems to be effort from the Turkish government to change this." A former mayor of Kars supports Turkish-Armenian reconciliation "so that," in Sanamyan's words, "Turkey can develop business in Kars." What this writer heard is that "reconciliation" is good for the Turkish economy and public image. But is it good for restorative justice for Armenians?

Sanamyan showed a slide projection of the unfinished statue in Kars dedicated to "Turkish-Armenian Friendship." The 100-foot high sculpture of two human figures facing one another looked more like a confrontation between combatants. Even Sanamyan himself admitted he didn't like the monument, but called it "a good effort."

Visting the Akhorian (Arpa-Chai) River near Ani was "the reason we came," said Sanamyan, as TEPAV/TOBB have "a dream to restore the ancient bridge between Turkey and Armenia as a symbol of friendship." Sanamyan said that Ani had the potential to become a major tourist destination. Though he noted that Turks had removed many of the Armenian inscriptions and motifs on ancient monuments "to neutralize the history of the place," Sanamyan said that "real things that weren't done before are being done, even if it is a slow change."

Sanamyan closed by saying that the "new elite" in Turkey in the last 10 years is looking for "a new modus operandi." "Since Turkey wishes to become one of the largest powers in the world," Sanamyan said, "they view the Armenian issue as something that world powers can use against them. And so it is seeking different avenues to cope with the Armenian issue." Sanamyan's presentation and parting words only emphasized what has been obvious to this writer and others: The only "change" is Turkey's strategy. It hopes that by acting conciliatory it will improve its image and the economy of an impoverished region using income generated from the descendants of evicted Armenians.

"Reconciliation" advocates seem to think that Armenians can be persuaded to sacrifice their dignity and quest for justice in exchange for visitation rights to Turkish-occupied Western Armenia. Stripping sacred cities of their Armenian identity and converting them into tourist destinations with the intention of extracting wealth from Armenians does not correct historic injustices, respect the humanity of the Armenian people, or their indigenous rights on those lands. Under such circumstances, is it accurate to call the junket to Turkey a "remarkable event," as ALMA's Stepanyan and NAASR's Mamigonian did in their introductory remarks?

Khatchig Mouradian, editor of *the Armenian Weekly* and a doctoral candidate in Holocaust and Genocide Studies under Prof. Taner Akcam at Clark University in Massachusetts, began by stating that he wouldn't repeat what his articles had already described about the trip. He said that during the delegation's meeting with Davutoglu, the foreign minister "laid out a massive plan for engaging the Armenians." Presumably, Davutoglu has now turned his gaze on the Diaspora. Will he make a mess of that, too, as he did when he engaged Armenia through the Protocols?

Mouradian said he attended the April 24 demonstrations in Turkey, the largest of which attracted two hundred people. One such event was an annual vigil by the Kurdish mothers of sons and daughters lost in the fight against the Turkish army. The mothers and others held photos of their children as well as of Armenian intellectuals slain in 1915. The latter photos were provided by Ragip Zarakolu, the Turkish publisher/human rights activist.

Nearby were other demonstrations: one by Turkish genocide deniers and another by progressive Turks. The latter displayed banners about the "shared pain" that they claim Turks and Armenians experienced in 1915 and other times. Of the second demonstration, Mouradian noted that a bystander may not have discerned that Armenians, not Turks, had been the real victims of genocide. A third gathering featured speakers talking openly about the Genocide.

Mouradian said that the main reason he went to Turkey was to attend the "Armenian Genocide and its Consequences" conference organized by the Ankara Freedom of Thought Initiative. Initially cancelled, it eventually went forward because, said Mouradian, the government did not wish to be seen as censoring such a high-profile conference while allegedly seeking rapprochement with Armenia. The conference was attended by some two hundred people under tight security and featured scholars from Turkey and the Diaspora. Among the panelists were Worcester State College Prof. Henry Theriault and Mouradian, who said that it was the first time in Turkey that a conference "discussed the history of 1915, confiscation of Armenian properties and reparations."

According to Mouradian, panelist Sevan Nishanian, a Turkish Armenian scholar and *Agos* newspaper contributor, became livid after hearing Prof. Theriault discuss reparations. Nishanian disavowed reparations, saying that he himself desired only that a street in Istanbul be named after the slain Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. Nishanian admonished the Diasporan Armenian panelists: "As guests, you can say what you want and then leave. We who live in Turkey must deal with the

consequences." Apparently, Turkish intellectual and panelist Temel Demirer then scathingly called Nishanian himself "a non-issue and a dead end." Demirer went on to recount the ways in which the Turkish government, Turkish companies and Turkish individuals benefited from the seizure of Armenian property during the Genocide.

As Sanamyan and Mouradian fielded questions from the ALMA audience, one person asked if the panelists felt that they were being "used for PR value" by their Turkish hosts. Another asked why the panelists agreed to go on a junket that had been arranged like a "stacked deck." Yet another asked whether it was the job of Armenians to play psychotherapists to Turks, who must face their own history. Both speakers justified the trip by saying that nothing could be gained by staying away.

Another audience member asked why Armenia's geopolitical importance to the major powers was often erroneously minimized by Armenians themselves. Sanamyan argued that Armenia's importance does not play as much of a role in US policy as do "our loud mouths that make it relevant in the American political process." Another person inquired if during the trip the two journalists "asked about reparations and land return." Mouradian replied that "at almost every meeting, the Turks deflected the question, instead making remarks such as 'We have so much in common. Our home's engraved door was made by an Armenian. Our peoples both eat dolma.'" Sanamyan added that "the reality is that Armenians lost those lands and that the Treaty of Sèvres is not a valid treaty," to which incredulous laughter could be heard from some in the audience.

"How do we proceed when an unrepentant Turkey still poses a threat to modern Armenia?" was another question. Neither panelist gave a clear answer. Yet another audience member asked, "Turkish propaganda is changing, and is more sugar-coated. How do Armenians deal with it?" Mouradian responded, "the tactics have changed but the strategy is the same. We must challenge their discourse. We can't talk about the Genocide only in the context of democracy but also justice. You must make your points at every opportunity."

When audience questions revealed skepticism of the trip's success and value for Armenians, Mouradian accused questioners of concocting "conspiracy theories" while sitting comfortably in their homes in the Diaspora. He added that their unfounded criticisms offend "activists who have spent time in prison for protesting against the Turkish state." He said it was "an insult to those who critique this process by saying there is a right and wrong way of doing things." It seemed as if Mouradian was saying that privileged Armenians and others may participate in and criticize current Turkish-Armenian dialogue methods, but that the Armenian community-at-large was not allowed to critique the privileged few or articulate their disapproval. Mouradian went on to reprimand members of the audience, shouting, "Your comments disregard any change that is going on in Turkey! We must stop talking to ourselves! Armenians must realize that not every Turk has his belly button attached to the Turkish nation! We must help Turks take real steps. There is no constituency in Turkey talking about reparations. Only when it's an issue in Turkey can we expect major foreign policy changes by Turkey. The Genocide started in Turkey, and it will be resolved in Turkey!"

Mouradian's outburst seemed unconstructive. Journalists and community leaders should welcome questions and concerns from the Armenian public.

In describing his and Mouradian's roles during their Turkey trip, Sanamyan added, "We don't represent the Armenian community. We are channels conveying information." And yet, Sanamyan is the editor of a newspaper co-owned by Armenian-American multi-millionaire Gerald Cafesjian, who also co-owns TV, radio and other media with government officials in Armenia. And Mouradian edits a newspaper representing the largest Diasporan political party.

Mouradian added, "We didn't negotiate anything or negotiate anything away." Yet, in this writer's opinion, when there is a scarcity of popularly elected leaders in the Diaspora, it's not always clear who represents us and our interests. That leaves the door open for any Armenian, regardless of his views or aptitude, to become an emissary and a de-facto negotiator. More and more, Diasporan Armenians are talking to world leaders. Is dialogue with Turkey appropriate at this time? Are we prepared for it? Do we have a clear agenda and strategy? Who speaks for the Diaspora?

All of this leads to some fundamental questions: In the absence of a rigorous pursuit of justice by the Republic of Armenia, what is the collective Armenian agenda? What are our national goals vis-à-vis Turkey? Have the traditional Diasporan political parties and organizations spelled out their agendas, and are they actively pursuing them? Do most Armenians feel comfortable having the established organizations represent their interests?

In the final analysis, what was to be gained and lost from this trip? Do journalist junkets and conferences that engage the Turks serve the Armenian national interest? Aside from the reparations panel, are such trips propaganda victories for Turks? If this was a "fishing expedition," did Armenians learn anything new, or present "the Armenian position" to Turks in a persuasive way?

For several years now, we've been told that Turkey is changing. In that time, we've endured the assassination of Hrant Dink by a Turkish national, Turkish perfidy surrounding the Protocols, Turkish claims that Genocide resolutions harm "reconciliation" efforts, Turkish preconditions regarding Karabagh and Western Armenian territorial claims, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's threat to deport Armenians, and more.

If Turkey is changing, why are we not seeing that change -- or honest dealings -- in the government's policies, actions and negotiating stances? Turkey continues to erase and rename Armenian cities, eradicate Armenian elements and symbols from their surroundings and remove references to the existence of Armenians. These actions tell us that genocide is still ongoing even after the physical elimination of a people has occurred. If Turkey is to be trusted at this juncture, it must halt the genocide still in progress today.

The TEPAV junket demonstrated that the Turkish government is neither repentant nor ready to face history. Turkish officials look upon the "Armenian issue" as a war that needs to be won, not an opportunity to come clean and join the family of civilized nations.

Mamigonian in his opening remarks said that we should not generalize that "we can't trust the Turks." But in view of the above actions by Turkey, how can Armenians develop a trusting attitude?

And while we are on the subject of trust, where is the openness that should exist among Armenian political parties, organizations, the press and the communities they serve? Transparency and trust are sorely lacking. For example, a number of public events have been organized for the Armenian communities of the eastern United States in which individuals such as Hasan Cemal (grandson of Genocide mastermind Cemal Pasha), Turkish historian Halil Berktag, and even the great granddaughter of US Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau, Pamela Steiner, have participated. In their talks, one or more have spoken about "joint historical commissions," "Turkish pain," and against territorial claims, among other things. These events have upset and even re-traumatized Armenians. Why have Armenian organizations collaborated with individuals who carry such messages to us?

Perhaps the most helpful thing that came out of the ALMA event was the realization that the ill-fated Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission's (TARC's) "Track II Diplomacy" is back in effect. Only this time, our Armenian organizations are on board -- but without the knowledge or consent of the Armenian Diaspora.

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