

TURKEY PREVAILS IN ROUND 1; KICKS OFF ROUND 2 OF TRICKS ON ARMENIA

Posted on April 16, 2009 by Keghart



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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 16 April 2009

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Ever since 1993, when Turkish leaders closed the border, they set two main preconditions for its reopening. Armenia must: 1) Stop pursuing international recognition of the Armenian Genocide; and 2) Return Artsakh (Karabagh) to Azerbaijan.

Despite persistent Turkish attempts to impose such harsh terms on Armenia, successive Armenian governments have declared that diplomatic relations should be established and the border reopened without any preconditions. Thus, the standstill continues until today.

During the past year, however, a series of unexpected developments provided new impetus for Armenia and Turkey to repair their contentious relationship. Both countries, under pressure from the U.S. and Europe, were now prodded by a new major actor, Russia, to open the Armenian-Turkish border. As owner of major businesses in Armenia, Russia sought to establish cross border trade with Turkey, thereby also diminishing Georgia's strategic significance as a sole transit route for the region.

The turmoil in the aftermath of the contested Armenian presidential election last year rendered the new leaders more sensitive to demands from the major powers, expecting in return their support to counter the opposition at home. To be fair, the Armenian government believed that opening the border was also in Armenia's own economic interest. Moreover, when Armenia's imports through Georgia were temporarily blocked during last year's Georgian-Russian war, Armenian officials realized the strategic value of having an alternate border outlet.

Turkey also stood to gain both economically and politically from an open border with Armenia because: 1) The population of Turkey's eastern provinces, living in abject poverty, would significantly benefit from trading with Armenia; 2) Turkey would fulfill one of the prerequisites for European Union membership; and 3) Ankara hoped to preempt the White House and Congress from taking a stand on the Armenian Genocide.

Despite such clear and immediate advantages, Turkish officials prolonged the negotiations, in order to secure maximum concessions from Armenia in return for opening the border.

The first glimmer of a breakthrough came on June 23, 2008, when Armenia's newly-elected President, Serge Sargsyan, unexpectedly announced, during a Moscow visit, his acceptance of a Turkish proposal to form a "historical commission." However, the Armenian President insisted that the commission would be established "only after the opening of the border." Later, the Armenian side announced that it would accept the establishment an inter-governmental commission that would discuss all outstanding issues between the two countries.

As it became clear in late 2008 that Barack Obama would win the presidency and probably keep his promise to recognize the Armenian Genocide, the Turkish government launched a propaganda campaign to convince the international community that Armenia and Turkey were engaged in delicate negotiations which would be undermined if third countries acknowledged the Genocide. Clearly, the Turks were not sincere in their declared intentions. Had they been serious, the border could have been opened in a matter of days, not months or years! At the height of that campaign, the Presidents of Armenia and Turkey held a summit meeting in Yerevan on the sidelines of a soccer match between their national teams. Armenians were encouraged that Turkish officials made no mention of their usual preconditions for Armenia to desist from genocide recognition and to make concessions on Artsakh.

Pres. Obama's visit to Turkey last week had a critical impact on the development of Armenian-Turkish relations. Judging from his circumspect remarks in Ankara, it became clear that the American President had adopted the duplicitous Turkish line that third parties should not comment on the Armenian Genocide while Armenia and Turkey were engaged in serious negotiations.

This carefully orchestrated Turkish ploy, however, almost fell apart at the last minute when Pres. Aliyev of Azerbaijan refused to go to Istanbul and meet with Pres. Obama. Aliyev was upset that Turkey was considering opening the border with Armenia while ignoring Baku's interests. To reassure Aliyev, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan announced that the border would not be opened until Yerevan resolved its conflict with Azerbaijan. Armenia's Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, objecting that Turkey was reviving its old preconditions, canceled his trip to Istanbul. However, he ended up taking a later flight, possibly at the urging of American officials. Aliyev, on the other hand, remained steadfast in his refusal to go to Turkey. Mr. Nalbandian's presence in Istanbul regrettably gave credence to Turkish misrepresentations that the two countries were making good progress in their negotiations.

Thus, Turkey managed to fool Pres. Obama and other world leaders into thinking that it was seriously trying to resolve its long-strained relations with Armenia. Consequently, Turkish officials were showered with many accolades and received priceless publicity. The Economist magazine aptly pointed out: "Turkey basks in the glory of a two-day visit by Barack Obama." To be sure, the

Turks managed to get maximal public relations benefits by simply talking about opening the border and succeeded in convincing Pres. Obama that it was not a good idea to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide while in Ankara. It remains to be seen whether Turkey has also secured the President's silence on April 24!

Round 2 of the Turkish ploy is now in full swing, with Azerbaijan threatening to take all sorts of measures against Turkey should the latter dare to open the border with Armenia, without linking such action to territorial concessions on Artsakh. The entire population of Azerbaijan has been whipped into frenzy over this issue. Opposition leaders in Turkey are also up in arms, accusing Erdogan of abandoning "fraternal Azerbaijan's" interests. Pres. Obama, upon his return to the White House, immediately phoned Pres. Aliyev to assure him of America's support for the resolution of the Artsakh conflict as well as normalizing Armenian-Turkish relations.

While the charade goes on, Armenia's leaders continue to make surprisingly positive statements about their negotiations with Turkey, despite repeated announcements by Turkish officials that the border will not be opened until Yerevan makes concessions on Artsakh.

It now appears that Turkey will place the border negotiations on the back burner until the Minsk Group, composed of the United States, Russia and France, can come up with some evidence of progress on the Artsakh negotiations. Only then would Turkey consider opening the border with Armenia.

To counter these Turkish/Azeri ploys:

1. Armenia's leaders should start playing hardball with Turkey and Azerbaijan and not get overly concerned with making a good impression on the major powers in trying to accommodate their demands.
2. Armenia should stick to its long-avowed position of no preconditions for opening the border and establishing diplomatic relations with Turkey, and resist pressures from Russia, the U.S., and Europe.
3. Armenia should consider setting October 7 as a deadline for opening the border. In case of Turkish inaction by that time, Pres. Sargsyan should refuse to go to Turkey for the return soccer match, thus exposing Turkey's ploy on improving relations with Armenia.
4. Long in advance of any border accord, the Armenian Parliament should safeguard Armenia's national security by prohibiting all foreigners from purchasing land in sensitive border areas and making investments in certain strategic resources.
5. Armenia and Armenian-Americans should condemn, in the strongest possible terms, Pres. Gul's blatant denial of the Armenian Genocide during a joint press conference with Pres. Obama in Ankara last week, televised live worldwide. To set the record straight, Armenian-Americans should

immediately submit to the U.S. Senate the counterpart of the House genocide resolution. After all, it makes more sense to pass such a bill in the Senate, which has never approved a resolution on the Armenian Genocide, rather than in the House which has already adopted two such resolutions in 1975 and 1984.

Obama Undermines His Credibility By Not Saying Genocide in Ankara

By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 9 April 2009

For several months now, I have been exposing the Turkish government's ploy of creating the false impression that Ankara is engaged in serious negotiations to establish diplomatic relations with Yerevan. Turkey has been exploiting the illusive promise of opening the border in order to pressure Armenia into making concessions on a host of issues, while simultaneously subverting Pres. Obama's pledge to recognize the Armenian Genocide.

Turkish officials have been repeatedly warning Pres. Obama not to issue a statement on the Armenian Genocide, claiming that such a step would disrupt the on-going negotiations between Armenia and Turkey. Regrettably, Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian's decision to travel to Istanbul this week to participate in the meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations served to substantiate the Turkish government's contention that all is going well between the two countries.

Azerbaijan's President, on the other hand, was determined to stick to his guns in safeguarding his nation's interests. When Pres. Aliyev learned that Ankara was contemplating opening the border with Armenia, he viewed it as a betrayal of Azerbaijan by "fraternal Turkey." He promptly canceled his planned trip to Istanbul. Aliyev even threatened to block the sale of natural gas to Turkey should it proceed with its announced plan to open the border. He wanted the Turkish border to remain closed in order to force Armenia into making territorial concessions on Artsakh (Karabagh). The Azeri Press Agency reported that Aliyev turned down a personal invitation to Istanbul by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as well as Turkey's President and Prime Minister. Aliyev remained unmoved even when he was offered a private meeting with the President of the United States.

It is not clear if Pres. Obama was deceived by the Turks' warnings to third parties not to interfere in the Armenian-Turkish negotiations. It could be that he found it expedient to heed the Turkish objections in order to maximize the concessions he wanted to extract from Turkey on Iraq and Afghanistan.

During a press conference in Ankara on Monday, this is how Pres. Obama responded when asked if he had changed his view on the Armenian Genocide: "My views are on the record and I have not

changed views. What I have been very encouraged by is news that under Pres. Gul's leadership, you are seeing a series of negotiations, a process, in place between Armenia and Turkey to resolve a whole host of longstanding issues, including this one. I want to be as encouraging as possible around those negotiations which are moving forward and could bear fruit very quickly, very soon. And so, as a consequence, what I want to do is not focus on my views right now, but focus on the views of the Turkish and the Armenian people. If they can move forward and deal with a difficult and tragic history, then I think the entire world should encourage them. And so what I told the President was I want to be as constructive as possible in moving these issues forward quickly. And my sense is that they are moving quickly. I don't want, as the President of the United States, to preempt any possible arrangements or announcements that might be made in the near future. I just want to say that we are going to be a partner in working through these issues in such a way that the most important parties, the Turks and the Armenians, are finally coming to terms in a constructive way."

When the reporter pressed him for not using the term genocide, Pres. Obama repeated the deceptive arguments advanced by Turkey: "What I'd like to do is to encourage Pres. Gul to move forward with what have been some very fruitful negotiations. And I'm not interested in the United States in any way tilting these negotiations one way or another while they are having useful discussions."

Pres. Gul then took the floor, and in a lengthy response, repeated the standard Turkish denials of the Armenian Genocide.

Later that day, while addressing the Turkish Parliament, Pres. Obama again carefully avoided using the term genocide: "Human endeavor is by its nature imperfect. History is often tragic, but unresolved, it can be a heavy weight. Each country must work through its past. And reckoning with the past can help us seize a better future. I know there's strong views in this chamber about the terrible events of 1915. And while there's been a good deal of commentary about my views, it's really about how the Turkish and Armenian people deal with the past. And the best way forward for the Turkish and Armenian people is a process that works through the past in a way that is honest, open and constructive."

In view of these developments, it is imperative that the Armenian government terminate at once all negotiations with Turkish leaders in order to limit the damage caused by the continued exploitation of the illusion of productive negotiations. Moreover, the Armenian leadership should denounce in the strongest possible terms Pres. Gul's shameful denial of the Armenian Genocide during the Ankara press conference which was broadcast live by TV networks worldwide.

Meanwhile, Armenians from all over the world should inundate the White House Comment Line with phone calls to inform Pres. Obama that his statements on the Armenian Genocide in Ankara did not

go far enough and do not fulfill his solemn promises on this important issue. Please call: 1-202-456-1111 and leave a message. Unless the White House hears immediately from a large number of Armenians, Pres. Obama and his aides might think that Armenians are satisfied with the remarks he made in Ankara. The President may then not issue a statement on April 24 or he may repeat the same unacceptable words he used in Turkey.

Finally, Pres. Obama should understand that the significance of keeping his word on the Armenian Genocide goes beyond this issue and has a direct bearing on his overall credibility. Within hours of the President's remarks in Ankara, the Politifact.com website questioned his integrity, having concluded that he had broken his promise on the Armenian Genocide -- one of the 511 campaign promises that the website keeps track of, to verify his trustworthiness.

