

WHY IS THE TURKISH-ARMENIAN BORDER CLOSED?

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Alan Whitehorn, Kingston ON, 31 May 2016

Over the past decades, I was often asked by non-Armenians to try to explain the complexities around the ongoing tensions and conflict over the tiny mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabagh in the South Caucasus and the ongoing closure of the Turkish-Armenian border. As a political scientist, I knew the complex and winding path to peace, justice and security in the region was scattered with hazardous cliffs and many casualties. Amongst the local and nearby peoples involved, each claimed fiercely held views about the painful past history and the more appropriate future course.



Aware of the classical Socratic tradition of using literary dialogue between contrasting viewpoints as a possible means to ascertain insight, I decided to pen a complex poem. It has evolved over the years and was later printed in my book *Just Poems: Reflections on the Armenian Genocide* (Winnipeg, Hybrid Publishing, 2009). The poem sought to reflect the great diversity of the multitude of discordant and intense voices. Whether the various iterations of debate, tensions and conflict in the region will ever diminish, let alone cease, remain to be seen. The recent increasingly deadly clashes of 2016 suggest frank and sombre assessments are needed. Perhaps, this poem can suggest some of the challenges ahead.

Why is the Border Closed?

Turkish officials decry:

'Why are our election observers not allowed into Armenia?'

Armenian state spokespersons reply:

'Why have you closed our joint border?'

Turkey's government responds:

'Because Armenia invaded Azerbaijan.'

Armenians from Nagorno-Karabagh cry out:

'Why did the Azeri government persecute our fellow Armenians
and force them to flee the pogroms against Christians?'

The government of Azerbaijan warns:

'Azeri lands taken by Armenians must be returned
before peaceful relations can exist.'

Armenians counter:

'Each nation has a right to freedom and independence,

which is what Armenians in Artsakh sought.'

Azerbaijan replies:

'Our territorial lands are sacrosanct.'

Armenia notes:

'The lands of Armenian people were assigned to Azerbaijan
by the cruel dictator Stalin.

Turkey interjects:

'The border with land-locked Armenia
will remain closed until Nagorno-Karabagh is returned to Azerbaijan.'

The Armenian government responds:

'No Armenian Christian will ever again endure ethnic and religious slaughter
by an Islamic state.'

Azerbaijan proclaims:

'Muslim Azeris should have the right to return to Nagorno-Karabagh.'

Armenians respond:

'They can, but Artsakh will remain independent of Azerbaijan.'

Turkey decrees:

'In solidarity with our Muslim brothers
we shall keep the border with Armenia closed.'

Armenia notes with dismay:

'This is yet another form of genocide.

How much more must Armenians suffer at the hands of the Turks?'

Turkey quickly retorts:

'What genocide?'

All Ottoman Turks suffered during World War I.'

Armenia passionately responds:

'We lost 1,500,000 men, women and children.

They were our grandparents, parents and beloved families.'

Turkish officials reply:

'These are lies and Armenian anti-Turkish propaganda.'

Diaspora Armenians ask:

'Why were Armenians forced by the Ottoman Turk government
to leave their ancestral homelands under such terrible conditions?

Why do so few Armenians now live in their historic Western lands?'

Azeris, born in Nagorno-Karabagh, respond:

'When can we return to our homes
and have our region reunited with Azerbaijan?'

Armenians in Artsakh counter:

'Armenians will never again suffer religious persecution and slaughter
at the hands of the Azeris. We remember Sumgait.'

Russia, the once might imperial state, counsels:

'We will broker a truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan.'

Azerbaijan and Turkey, in unison, declare:

'We will never accept the status quo as permanent.
Nagorno-Karabagh must be returned.'

Turkish and Russian troops grimly face each other
on the tense Armenian-Turkish border.

Meanwhile tourists ask:

'Why is the border closed?'

Where do I start?

Where will it finish?
