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Thaw in Turkey-Armenia relations

By Jonathan Gorvett in Istanbul

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Despite continuing tensions between Turkey and Armenia over allegations of a 20th century genocide, the two countries seem to be moving closer together.

Ankara angrily condemned on 18 December a recent Swiss parliament vote that recognised Armenian claims about the "genocide".

Yerevan accuses the Turks of being responsible for the deaths of more than one and a half million Armenians between 1915 and 1923.

After summoning the Swiss ambassador to the Turkish foreign ministry, the deputy undersecretary Nabi Sensoy told him the Swiss decision was "unjust, wrong and not in conformity with the historical facts".

However, Armenian Ambassador to Switzerland Zograb Mnatsakanyan told Armenian Public TV: "The Swiss parliament has once again confirmed its adherence to human values and justice."

Yet, despite the obvious distance between the two countries' governments over genocide allegations, recent months have seen something of a rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan.

Turkish troops

"Both governments want to have normal relations," said Professor Edmund Herzig of Manchester University, an acknowledged expert on Turkish-Armenian affairs.

Earlier this month, Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian and Turkish Foreign Minister Abd Allah Gul met for the third time this year.

This marked a "small, but nonetheless "... when the war with



Turkish PM Erdogan refuses to acknowledge Armenia's "genocide" accusations

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positive change”, according to Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamlet Gasparian.

Turkey also agreed earlier this year to send troops to Armenia to take part in joint military exercises with other Caucasian states.

“Back in 1991, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognise Armenia as independent from the Soviet Union,” said Herzig.

“Trade then opened up between the two countries, but then when the war with Azerbaijan started over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Armenians scored military successes, the Turkish government essentially backed away from them,” he added.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan, ended with the Armenians conquering a large swathe of Azeri territory.

War factor

This was unacceptable to Turkey, which enjoys strong religious, ethnic and cultural links with Azerbaijan. Ankara broke off diplomatic relations with Yerevan in 1993 and joined an Azeri blockade of Armenia’s frontiers.

This has hit trade hard, particularly in Turkey’s depressed eastern regions along the Armenian frontier.

Now, the only way for trade to continue between the two is via a third country – normally Georgia. However, Turkey would like to change this situation.

Speaking back in October, Turkish foreign trade minister Kursad Tuzmen said: “I would like to improve my trade with every neighbouring country,” when referring directly to Armenia.

“Armenia is the bridge,” said Soyak, “connecting Turkey to Central Asia. The Kars-Yerevan railway is the only railway that connects Turkey to Central Asia. This railway was actively working until 1993.”

Turkey is also under pressure from the European Union to normalise its relations with its eastern neighbour, a major factor given Turkey’s strong desire to join the EU.

International pressure

The US is also pressuring Turkey to restore diplomatic relations and open the border.

However, “As long as the Nagorno-Karabakh issue remains unsolved,” says Herzig, “it’s very hard to see how Turkey can abandon the Azeri government on this and restore relations”.

Talk of opening the border is greeted with great hostility in Azerbaijan, with the government in Baku recently saying this would

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Prof Edmund Herzig,
Manchester University



Impact of Azerbaijan-Armenia war has declined

be seen as a sign of "treachery".

However, for many of those who are descendants of the survivors of the 1915-23 events, "the genocide is a crucial aspect of identity".

Many of these descendants – the Armenian Diaspora – live in the US and France, where they constitute powerful lobbies.

"Turkey's line of straight denial as far as the genocide is concerned doesn't convince anybody," said Herzig. "In fact, it tends to give the impression that something must have happened."

"The genocide is part of the Armenian Diaspora identity today, not necessarily for political reasons"

While acknowledging many died during forced deportations of Armenians in 1915-18, the Turkish authorities say this was not the result of any deliberate – and therefore genocide – policy.

Dr Hratch Tchilingirian,
Cambridge University

At the same time, "the Armenians also committed many massacres," said Professor Mehmet Kulaz of Van's Yuzuncu Yil University.

Forced deportations

Meanwhile, for many Armenians, questions of regional politics are not as important as a simple recognition of the fate that befell many of their ancestors.

"The genocide is part of the Armenian Diaspora identity today, not necessarily for political reasons," said Dr Hratch Tchilingirian of Cambridge University's Eurasian Programme.

"Nor is it because of anti-Turkish feelings per se. Primarily, it's there because its part of family history... I would say that for the 'silent majority' of Armenians, the moral issue comes first.

"They want an acknowledgement that their grandparents and their relatives were murdered, an apology for a crime committed against a people by the very government which was supposed to protect them."

Armenians say Turkey made a land grab for their territory in the chaos that reigned during World War I.

However, Ankara has always fiercely denied the allegations.

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