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Building Bridge of Trust and Confidence between Turks and Armenians in Support of the Normalization and Reconciliation Process

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The US congressional vote on how to define the tragic events of 1915, scheduled for the last 15 years before April, 24 which commemorates the tragic history of the Armenians, has become a harbinger for spring in Washington. The vote in the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 4 March came less than two months before President Barack Obama is due to make an annual White House statement on April, 24.

The effect of the resolution, though non-binding, in Turkey is entirely counter-productive. The dominant tone in Ankara is that of contempt. The vote has been slammed as a parody, many pointed out to the absurdity of bringing a historical event to trial with a jury unable to find Turkey or Armenia on a map. In comparison to 2007, reactions have been harsher and almost exclusively targeting the United States. The ire against Washington was commensurate with the degree of political courage that took the Turkish leadership to launch the normalization process with Armenia-hailed as a harbinger of winds of change in South Caucasus where the status quo characterized by conflicts divides, blockades and trade restrictions is far from satisfactory. This new resolution came in a context when positive incentives were most needed in order to rescue the ground of the bilateral inter-governmental consensus for the normalization of the relations. The Turkish-Armenian bilateral dialogue has already suffered enough from third country/third actor involvement.

The degree of disappointment and disillusion in case of a total failure of the rapprochement process will be commensurate with the intensity of hope generated by the visits of the Presidents and the breathtaking signature ceremony in Zurich. The personal re-involvement of the Presidents of both countries can raise the issue of the normalization of bilateral relations and efforts at reconciliation above domestic political concerns. There is a pressing need to keep the momentum alive and support the decision-making process with practical and symbolical steps.

The politicization of history

So much effort goes into passing resolutions from the Armenian side. What are they ultimately trying to accomplish? Otherwise what do Armenian communities hope to accomplish through recognition? Most of the Armenian organizations are looking at regional power balance in a realistic way. The recognition and acknowledgement is seen as a victory for the Armenian moral issue. The recognition is expected to heal the individual and collective emotional wounds of the survivors and the nation as a whole; and is sometimes depicted as a foreign policy issue as a way of maintaining vigilance against the Turkish threat.

23 countries, together with Sweden, are today officially qualifying the tragic events of 1915 as genocide, 11 states of NATO and 42 US states. Uruguay was the first country, the recognition bill was adopted in 1965, followed in 1982 by Cyprus, in 1985 by a sub-commission of the UN, in 1987 by the European Parliament, in 1995 by Russia, in 1998 by the Council of Europe. The process speeded up in the 70's and gained a new momentum

after 1998 with the support given to the international campaign under President Kocharian and the launch of the Turkey-EU accession process. The international campaign has started well before the creation of an independent Armenia. Between 1991-1998, President Petrosyan had avoided politicizing history. The turning point with the accession of Kocharian to power gave a boost to the international recognition efforts. Until the creation of the independent Armenian state, the Diaspora perceived themselves as the sole representative of their nation. With the formation of the Republic of Armenia, the Diaspora became the representative of Armenia abroad. The recognition by France in 2001 provoked a strong reaction. Interestingly during the EU enlargement and Turkey-EU accession process, many EU countries join the list. New EU member countries, though with no significant Armenian community, are following suit after their accession.

Search for morality

Turkey has once again launched her *Geostrategy versus Morality* struggle. Infuriated by the vote of 4 March, she warned that the consequences of the adoption of the resolution would be felt across the range of issues of shared concern to Turkey and the United States. The US can't ignore the strategic importance of Turkey, a vital American ally and the second biggest army in NATO. The country is home to an important American airbase and is a crucial supply route for America's forces in Iraq. Turkey helps in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, without of course forgetting the need for Turkey's constructive approach, as a non permanent UN Security Council, in modeling UN policy towards Iran. Even doubts on Prime Minister Erdogan's participation to the International Nuclear Security Summit to be held in Washington on 12-13 April were raised. Decisions on such vital issues for Turkey's national security should be guided by national policy rather than the outcome of a trade-off. Furthermore, the publicity given to the support received by the US defense industry is totally disqualifying Turkey on moral high grounds. And that in a play mainly taking place on moral grounds.

Interestingly the protest at Prime Minister Erdoğan's statement on March, 16 in an interview with the BBC Turkish service in London, threatening to send back irregular Armenian workers in Turkey in retaliation to the US resolution, brought in the Turkish political debate this much missing moral dimension. No doubt that an administration has the right and indeed the duty to fight with illegal immigration, however the intention to target irregular workers, selected on an ethnic basis, as a bargaining chip in relation with other countries, has been unanimously condemned. Taking the needy Armenians hostage of blackmail appeared profoundly immoral. What might be seen as a second deportation or forced relocation would tarnish Turkey's international reputation and overshadow her magnanimity. All were acknowledging that arrogance was becoming a nuisance for Turkey.

On the other side, it is doubtful whether the politicization of the unhealed sufferings of the past is serving well the moral aim. An impartial observer could have hardly reached the conclusion at the end of the vote of 4 March that human rights and justice had prevailed. That spectacle – the vote was this time broadcasting on Turkish news channels – could hardly convince the audience of the strong devotion of the American people to universal human values. That human sufferings can become a chip for cheap political bargaining contradicts with the presumed search for morality.

It is disputable whether the objectives behind the international campaign have ever been met. Can a resolution bring real satisfaction? Resolutions cut communication. Groups advocating on both sides for the normalization of the Turkish-Armenian relations have to focus on damage control. The priority should be to have an impact within Turkey. The struggle for the acknowledgement of the Armenian identity calls for engaging constructively with Turkey.

Building jointly the future to deal with the past

The way forward necessitates a pathway for collaboration between Turkey and Armenia. The intensification of contacts between Turks and Armenians will create opportunities for new experiences, new memories, new interactions to build up alongside the old. Yet it is exactly because Turks and Armenians live right next door that the willingness and preparation to transcend the past is an obligation. We share the burden of the past and bear a joint responsibility for a bright future for our peoples.

Turks and Armenians share five centuries of common history, which the nationalist narratives constructed in the 20th century have almost entirely erased from memory on both sides of the border. On both sides, five centuries of commercial, social and political interaction seem to have been erased. Armenians were an important and visible part of the Ottoman Empire's economic and cultural life and they prospered in the Ottoman Empire until the last decades of the 19th Century; Istanbul was the main cultural centre for Armenians at a time when Yerevan was a small trading post. Past events must be seen in the context of a far longer period of history and help to unravel the Ottoman-Armenian heritage. Improving mutual knowledge and rediscovering a shared past would foster reconciliation by eroding stereotypes and enemy images of the other and giving back to both Turks and Armenians a larger share of their collective identities. Architecture acts as powerful testimonials of the common Turkish-Armenian past.

Supporting the cultural revival of Armenians in Turkey today would act as a powerful signal of the Ottoman-Armenian heritage, Turkish-Armenian common past, identity and peaceful coexistence. Future restoration projects most notably in the Armenian site of Ani in Turkey carried out in cooperation with Armenian counterparts would further contribute to normalization. Promoting reconciliation by fostering of Turkey's Armenian heritage would also boost Turkey's tourism sector, which, while burgeoning and representing an important source of income for the western part of the country, remain highly underdeveloped in the east.

Ani: a three way bridge of peace between Armenia, Turkey and the Diaspora

The acknowledgment of past sufferings, present yearnings and hopes should inspire a confidence-building scheme, aimed at promoting cultural dialogue and cross-border tourism and at preparing the ground to rebuild the ancient Silk Road Bridge at Ani that once spanned the Arpacay-Akhourian river separating Turkey from Armenia. This initiative will prepare the road for the restoration of the Medieval Silk Road Bridge at Ani, support the development of a Turkish-Armenian tourism cluster and open a cultural corridor across the Arpacay/Akhourian river for rebridging the Turkey-Armenia divide.

The rediscovery of the common cultural heritage in Anatolia will help to eliminate the human barrier between the peoples of Turkey and Armenia. The rediscovery through economically relevant projects of the Turkish-Armenian borderland will help to build trust and transcend mental and physical borders. Furthermore the initiative will keep the border opening as a shared objective on the political agenda of both governments. The physical restoration of the Ani bridge should lead to the opening of a cultural corridor between Turkey and Armenia. The ultimate aim of the initiative is to open the bridge for pedestrian crossings: the creation of a free tour zone will allow tourists to cross the Turkish-Armenian border.