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FUTURE OF TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS DISCUSSED AT ZORYAN INSTITUTE PANEL

The Zoryan Institute, with the participation of the Armenian General Benevolent Union of Toronto, organized a panel discussion on the subject of “The Future of Turkish-Armenian Relations” on August 10, 2003. The panel consisted of Dr. Rouben Adalian, Director of the Armenian National Institute in Washington, DC, Dr. Taner Akçam, Visiting Assistant Professor of History at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and Dr. Roger Smith, Professor Emeritus of Government at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. Welcoming remarks were given in Armenian, English and Turkish by Mr. Hagop Tozak, a member of the AGBU Toronto Executive. The speakers were introduced by Dr. Razmik Panossian, Dept. of Political Science, London School of Economics, who also moderated the panel and question and answer session. Dr. Panossian has a new book on Armenian nationalism in press.

Rouben Adalian opened with an exploration of the theme of the importance of Armenian history. He explained how there has been a stagnant view of Armenian history, with the devastation caused by the Genocide, and with the Soviet period somehow seeming to lack legitimacy and never being regarded as a particularly interesting object to study. “And yet, the independence of Armenia should make us think very, very hard about that,” he cautioned.

He explained, “What is lost when people become trapped in this kind of self-image is that they tend to feel they are no longer actors in their own history. With that you have the ascending spiral of a people who are entirely captured and overwhelmed by its own sense of victimhood. Neither the Genocide, nor its aftermath, nor the Diaspora have been particularly encouraging frameworks in which a people could rethink, re-examine, and reconstitute itself, and out of that derive a consciousness and an awareness. All of this is particularly critical in the modern age, when there is constant reference to the globalization process. What is really meant is the increased international contact among peoples and the necessity of having the confidence and capacity to engage in reasonable communication. And that is something that got left out of the Armenian reality.”

Adalian continued that the re-emergence of independent statehood should have allowed Armenians to re-evaluate their status, but the problems of the earthquake, the Karabagh conflict, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis prevented that. Even the date of independence, September 21, which should be a unifying issue, is rivaled by the celebration of other dates, such as April 24 and May 28.

He asserted that Armenians’ view of themselves has affected their perception of Turkey. At the same time, Turkey also had a static view of Armenia, and has never figured out how to cope with a country full of Armenians on its doorstep. Knee-jerk reactions, such as the blockade of Armenia as a response to the Karabagh conflict, show Turkey’s inability to rationalize the Armenians.

Even though there is an economic blockade and the Turkish-Armenian border is closed, he reminded, there is still \$40 to \$60 million dollars in trade going on annually, and it has reached as high as \$100 million. Georgia and Iran have become conduits for this trade, even if the diplomats don’t know what to do.



However, the situation is changing, Adalian concluded. Ten years ago the Turkish media completely avoided reference to the Armenian Genocide. Now, there are headlines in the press, in which the term “genocide” is even used. We must realize that Turkey is not a monolithic society, and that the state’s position on the Armenian Genocide does not represent all of the Turkish people.

The next speaker was Taner Akçam, who described the challenges to reconciliation between the Armenian and Turkish peoples. “The basic question,” he began, “is how the Armenian Genocide can be acknowledged by the Turkish State.” One argument is that this can be achieved only by other governments putting pressure on Turkey. However, there is also a neglected strategy of bringing Turkish society into the debate. There is a contradiction between the Turkish state and society that is not well recognized outside of Turkey. This strategy can be complementary to the other.

He explained that the Turkish state policy of denial is inflexible and not likely to change soon. It determines how both Turks and Armenians approach the issue. It prevents debate between the two communities. Neither group is able to look at itself critically. The denial policy is the beginning and the end of every explanation of the problems between Turks and Armenians. The question becomes, therefore, how to break free from the influence of this denial policy and how to approach the issue of the Genocide from a different perspective. Is there any possibility of interacting with each other, in spite of this policy of denial?

“It is a general rule that a conflict can only be resolved through direct interaction between the communities that have a problem with each other,” Akçam asserted. They must reconceptualize the problem and put both societies at the center of the analysis. The opportunity has to be created in which both groups can learn about each other.

He described the four basic elements for reconciliation, truth, mercy, justice and peace, and then went on to talk about the importance of language. “We must recognize that the language we use to discuss an issue is the result of a certain power relation. There is no objective terminology, as it reflects certain mindsets,” he stated. “The existing discourse between the two communities is determined mostly by the Turkish state policy of denial. Therefore, if we want to create a new approach to Armenian-Turkish relations, we have to acknowledge that we should start by creating our own language, our own terms, that are the product of this new mindset, of being willing to reach reconciliation.”

Akçam described the two major obstacles to reconciliation. The first is that both parties see Turks and Armenians not as individuals but as negative stereotypes. The second is that each party equates both the individuals and the collectives of today with those of the past. He concluded that the problem is not primarily disagreement over an historical event, but rather how the two communities perceive each other today.

Roger Smith addressed three large issues: the costs of denial, the role of truth and reconciliation commissions, and the idea of forgiveness, especially after acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

“Of course there have been great costs to the Armenians,” he began, “but there have also been costs to Turkey.” He described how Turkey spends millions of dollars on denial, on public relations firms, and on lobbyists. There have also been costs to third parties, such as the contracts to sell military equipment to



Turkey that France lost due to its official recognition of the Genocide. And finally, there have been costs to scholarship, as the Turkish policy of denial has produced bad scholarship.

Smith noted that there have been some thirty truth commissions, but not all aimed at reconciliation. Without justice, perhaps in the form of reparations, there can be no reconciliation. “A precondition for reconciliation is a shared, accepted historical account,” he asserted, “which is lacking between Armenians and Turks.” In discussing the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), he noted that the term “truth” was absent from the name. He described the importance of the legitimacy of such commissions, which is derived from who initiates them and who the members are. He noted that there were notorious deniers among the Turkish members of TARC.

In asking the question, “Is partial reconciliation possible without an admission of guilt,” Smith gave as an analogy America’s dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan, a war crime. The US has never apologized for that, and Japan, on its side, committed many atrocities during WWII, but the two countries and peoples get along very well today. Turkey and Armenia could recognize each other; Turkey could open the border between them and lift the embargo; it could allow for the development of Armenian culture in Turkey, allow Ani to be Armenian, let churches exist, permit education in the Armenian language, and allow open discussion of the Genocide in Turkey. It could rescind the recent educational policy of teaching that there was no Armenian Genocide. It should allow for the notion of Turkey as a pluralistic society.

On the subject of forgiveness, Smith asked, “Who can forgive Turkey?” Descendants might forgive the denial, but only survivors could forgive the Genocide. However, for this to happen, there has to be acknowledgement and repentance and the making of amends. On the other hand, while it may not be the place of Armenians today to forgive the Genocide, they could try to put aside their ill feelings. Recently, the Prime Minister of Turkey said in Kars that if the Armenians would stop their efforts at getting foreign governments to recognize the Genocide, then Turkey might be able to open a dialogue with them.

A lengthy and lively discussion between the panelists and the audience followed. One of the most interesting questions raised was how it could be possible to bring the Armenian and Turkish communities together. Greg Sarkissian, President of Zoryan, answered by describing a long-term project the Institute is involved in, called “Building a Common Body of Knowledge.” The objective of this project is to make available authoritative documents and publications about the Armenian Genocide, in both English and Turkish, so that both communities could have the same basic, agreed upon facts as a starting point for their discussions.

“We are very fortunate to have so many renowned experts in Toronto right now, participating in the Genocide and Human Rights University Program,” said George Shirinian, Director of the Zoryan Institute. “With all of these specialists gathered in one place, it provides us with the opportunity to present some of the latest thinking on a subject of vital interest to the Armenian community, as well as the Turkish community. We at Zoryan hope that through such forums as this panel discussion, we can help create an understanding between the two communities that can eventually help in the process of establishing a dialogue between them.”



The Zoryan Institute is a non-profit, international center devoted to the research and documentation of contemporary issues related to the history, politics, society, and culture of Armenia and Armenians around the world.