

## **The Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission: A Commentary by the Zoryan Institute**

**August 10, 2001**

Normally, dialogue is the first step towards the possible resolution of any conflict, and therefore reconciliation. The participants in a dialogue generally need to define the key issues which divide the parties and establish a process by which the dialogue will be conducted. There must be a sincere desire for mutual understanding and willingness to accept the factual issues in contention, even if emotionally highly charged. The Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (“TARC”) has acknowledged, “there are serious differences between Armenians and Turks as well as obstacles to normal relations...” The definition and articulation of the key issues dividing Turks and Armenians are yet to be addressed. This is understandable, because it takes considerable time to conceptualize new approaches to large problems, which have eluded solution for generations.

The failure of Turks and Armenians to sustain a true dialogue has prevented the development of a mutual understanding of the factual issues between the two peoples, and of the very strong emotional reactions each has to these issues. This failure has precluded the possibility of developing solutions to such issues as Turkey’s blockade of Armenia, its refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia, its unwillingness or inability to detach the Karabagh conflict in Azerbaijan from building its own relations with Armenia, the omission of Armenia from the Ceyhan-Baku oil pipeline negotiations, and the Armenian Genocide.

Most of these issues could be resolved by the two states dealing with each other directly. However, in the case of the Genocide issue, the Armenian Diaspora, largely a by-product of that very genocide, is fundamentally defined by it. Therefore, any attempt at dialogue, which does not address this fundamental issue will fail to enlist the support of the large, vocal, and influential Armenian Diaspora, no matter how assimilated and moderate in its politics.

Surprisingly, a number of Armenians seem to expect the worst, that because of the existence of this Commission, the Armenian Genocide will be ignored or bartered away. Others are concerned that the Turkish State will use it to misdirect key Western governments and stymie new initiatives for affirmation of the Genocide, arguing that they should be deferred in order to give a chance to the Commission to succeed.

One should keep the role of the Commission in perspective. It has no legal mandate to decide or barter anything. Any recommendations it might make would not be binding on any country, and certainly could not be binding on the Armenian Diaspora, which would never tolerate the ignoring, diminishing, or trading off of the Genocide, a key component of its collective identity. By the same token, one should expect that the citizens of Armenia would never tolerate any compromise, either. After all, it was they, who, in 1965, staged a mass rally in Yerevan in order to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Genocide, in the face of a hostile Soviet

nationalities policy, leading to the erection of the national Genocide monument in Dzidzernagapert.

There are three levels of initiatives for dialogue: those taken by individuals, those taken by civil groups, and those sanctioned by governments. On an individual level, one example is the participation of Yilmaz Güney, an early Turkish advocate of the affirmation of the Armenian Genocide, in the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, held in Paris in April 1984, and cosponsored by the Zoryan Institute. Another is that of Dr. Levon Marashlian, the first Armenian to participate in a historical conference in Turkey in 1990, who courageously presented the facts of the Armenian Genocide under daunting circumstances. A third example is the dialogue started by scholars Taner Akçam and Vahakn Dadrian in the early 1990s. The participation of Dr. Akçam in the Genocide Conference in Yerevan in 1995, cosponsored by the Government of Armenia and the Zoryan Institute, led to his discovery of how one Armenian family was saved during the Genocide by a Turk, and gave hope that the two nations could find opportunities for positive relations. This moved him to pursue dialogue and reconciliation ever since. He took the message home, delivering it in lectures, publishing it in journals and books, and, within three months from that conference, Gürbüz Çapan, then Mayor of Esenyurt municipality, Istanbul, similarly moved by this story, went to Armenia and laid a wreath at the monument to the Armenian Genocide, an unprecedented event for a Turkish official.

The second category of initiatives for dialogue is that by civil groups. For example, there have been several panels and colloquia of Turkish and Armenian scholars in Paris (1998 and 2000), Chicago (March 2000), and Mülheim (April 2001) to discuss their common history, primarily the 1915 Genocide and its repercussions.

In the third category, there have been various meetings, both public and covert, between Turkish and Armenian Presidents, Foreign Ministers, and other government representatives, as part of multilateral relations in the region, as well as bilaterally.

TARC, although ostensibly the initiative of ten individuals, could be considered semi-official, as it is formed with the approval of both governments, and is just the latest example of an initiative for dialogue. When we take an overview of these examples, we see that one initiative can lead to another, and each has the potential to help build mutual familiarity and confidence, and to create new opportunities to increase mutual understanding.

In an attempt to define the factual issues for Turkish-Armenian dialogue, the Zoryan Institute published a book in May 2001, titled, Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue, by Dr. Taner Akçam (with a Foreword written by Profs. Fatma Müge Göçek and Kevork Bardakjian, both of the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, who, themselves, represent another example of Turkish-Armenian dialogue.) This book provides a model for conflict resolution through dialogue, in terms of defining the factual issues, suggesting a certain process for this dialogue, and ultimately achieving the goal of "truth and fruitful understanding between Turks and Armenians." The Zoryan Institute is prepared to support all thoughtful and

earnest efforts at Turkish-Armenian dialogue. Its archives and its expertise can be valuable resources in this respect.

The announcement of TARC has stirred up considerable controversy. Discussion by Armenians has focused on the nature of the representatives, the relative numbers of Turks and Armenian participants, who on the Armenian side does or does not meet the criteria to participate, etc. Some of the Turkish Commissioners, within only hours of publicly launching TARC, made categorical statements of genocide denial, aggravating the existing mistrust among Armenians towards Turkey. Furthermore, many segments of Turkish civil society, which are striving for the democratization of the country, and see Turkey's coming to terms with its history as an essential part of that process, are also discouraged from supporting such a commission. While it is understandable that it would be very difficult for the Turkish State to accept the Genocide in the short term, because of its policy of denial since the foundation of the Republic, it is reasonable to think that the Turks who accepted to be on the Commission are fully aware of the Armenian position on the Genocide and the resolve not to compromise on this issue. If the impetus behind this initiative is genuinely to achieve progress, the only way is for the parties to discuss the Genocide openly.

Some people believe that reconciliation is a process of bargaining, and that each party must give up something precious. They think that any agreement must mean painful compromise and the settling on a dissatisfying middle ground. Some think that acknowledgement of the Genocide would be a "victory" for the Armenians and a "loss" for the Turks. This is not necessarily the case. It could also be a "win-win" situation, if both parties are willing to be exposed to alternative perspectives, which highlight the mutual benefits of such acknowledgement over the perceived risks. This can only be achieved through dialogue.

It is too early to judge TARC. The road to Turkish-Armenian reconciliation will be long, but the goal can be reached through a number of small steps. No single step can achieve it. The TARC initiative is just one such small step. At the very least, it can be a concrete test of the true intentions of the Turkish State. Conceivably, TARC can be instrumental in educating the Turkish people about the Armenian Genocide and may pave the way for the eventual jettisoning of the dogmas of Turkish official history (*resmi tarih*) regarding the Armenian Genocide.