

Cooling the Cauldron in the Caucasus

By Bruce Fein



Cooling the enduring cauldron in the Caucasus involving Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia is in the national security interests of the United States. Past American foreign policy initiatives in this region have been vexed by the efforts of a well organized Armenian American lobby barking at Congress at the expense of wider US interests. That ethnic lobby is fixated on the distant past—a time when few if any living Turks, Azerbaijanis, or Armenians

were then alive. The Armenian diaspora would fossilize the foreign policy of the United States, rather than chart a more enlightened future for the living and those yet to be born. The United States Congress should not permit its backward-looking lobbyists to deflect the United States from more enduring and important forward-looking interests.

The most vocal segments of the Armenian American diaspora, though not all, have positioned themselves against rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia and the hopes of the Obama Administration. Most Turkish American community groups, including the Turkish Coalition of America, generally support the ongoing unfreezing process between the two countries. Turkey and Armenia signed two important protocols recently to establish diplomatic ties and pave the way to compromise and reconciliation over such issues as border openings, economic and political collaboration, as well as establishing an international commission of experts to determine authoritatively how to characterize the tragic carnage of World War I.

But one of the leading Armenian American organizations staged mass protests against the current government of Armenia under the banner, “Stop the Protocols.” The diaspora’s numbers and wealth makes it exceptionally influential in Yerevan.

Some members of Congress with large Armenian American constituents have subordinated the interests of the United States to sabotage this opening between Turkey and Armenia. The leaders of the Armenian Caucus in the US House of Representatives, some of whom championed reparations and land concessions from the Republic of Turkey, a NATO ally, seem committed to free-lancing Turkish-Armenian history through non-binding

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resolutions. These echo chambers of the Armenian American lobby are also seeking US foreign aid for the Armenian occupied territory of Nagorno Karabakh, in contravention of President Barack Obama's foreign policy and UN Resolutions. The result undermines America's relations with Turkey, a key ally, and with Azerbaijan, a solid friend of the US in the region. Turkey is too important to NATO and the region to be treated cavalierly.

The surging grass roots initiatives of Americans of Turkic descent provide optimism that the forward-looking will prevail over the backward-looking in the United States Congress.

They have been instrumental in swelling the numbers and political sway of the Turkish and Azeri Caucuses in Congress. The Turkish Caucus has reached 100, a sharp climb from 72 in 2006. The Azeri Caucus, though of recent vintage, signals unprecedented organization and sophistication among Azerbaijani Americans in the United States. By contrast, the number of congressional co-sponsors of the perennial resolution supported by the Armenian Caucus that would affirm solely the Armenian thesis of World War I has plunged sharply from its peak of more than 200.

The grass roots assertiveness of Turkish Americans, Azeri Americans, and Armenian Americans will be decisive in determining whether warm neighborly relations will replace frostiness between Turkey and Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia. And the consequences will directly impact the national security of the United States. The chasm between Turkey and Armenia has enabled Russia to exert mischievous influence over the latter by forging a semi-alliance, including the stationing of Russian troops on Armenian soil. The closed border between Turkey and Armenia enhances Russia's economic domination of the latter.

The efforts by the Armenian lobby and its supporters in Congress have serious public relations, as well as political implications for US-Turkey relations. Turkish public opinion turns sour when even a few members of Congress engage in ritual anti-Turkish diatribes that make it to the next morning's Turkish headlines. Such perceptions have handicapped the ability of Turkey's leaders to assist United States policy in vital areas, including Iraq. As the United States military footprint recedes there, Turkey will be required to assume a greater role in maintaining Iraqi unity and preventing internequine strife that could turn Iraq into a Middle East variation of Somalia. At least two powder kegs in Iraq could explode without Turkey's constructive influence: the territorial status of Kirkuk; and, the sovereign powers of the Kurdish Regional Government, which could trigger the disintegration of Iraq. Turkey is equally instrumental as part of the ISAF forces in Afghanistan to the defeat of Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The opening of diplomatic relations and the border between Turkey and Armenia is not a done deal. It still needs ratification by the two national parliaments. Armenia would be the greater beneficiary. Turkey is the 17th largest economy in the world, while Armenia's is not even an integer. While Turkey's border economy will receive a fillip from free trade, Armenia's border economy will rocket.

The border closing issue, however, necessarily implicates Azerbaijan. As a gesture of support for its neighbor, Turkey acted in defense of national unity and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. The strife in Azerbaijan has affected 20% of its sovereign territory. For a time, the conflict created nearly 1 million Azeri refugees, half of whom remain displaced. Convinced supporters of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement nevertheless persuasively argue that progress towards a peaceful resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh consistent with Azerbaijani sovereignty will be a determining factor of whether this process will flourish or falter. Nagorno-Karabakh is but one of a multiplicity of strife-ridden secessionist movements; a resolution could augur well for the entire region: Russia's Chechnya; Moldova's Transdnistria Republic; Ukraine's Russian ethnics in the east and Crimea; and, Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia. If Nagorno-Karabakh is not restored de facto and de jure to Azerbaijan, an international precedent would have been set that would embolden other insurgencies and possibly set the region aflame.

In the past, when the Turkish and Azerbaijani grass roots organizations and activism were largely inaudible or invisible, an ill-informed United States Congress unwittingly or myopically inflamed rather than assuaged bilateral Turkish-Armenian and Azerbaijani-Armenian relations. Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, routinely enacted by Congress over presidential vetoes, bedevils US relations with oil-rich Azerbaijan. It undermined rather than advanced a peaceful resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh. Similarly, perennial backward-looking congressional resolutions that would endorse solely the Armenian thesis of the tragic deaths of World War I tend to sour relations between the United States and Turkey at a time when harmony has never been more urgent over energy, Iraq, Afghanistan, international terrorism, and Palestine.

The growing political activism of Turkish Americans coupled with their Azeri American counterparts has interjected a healthy balance into congressional deliberations. With a diversity of views and perspectives and a focus on the future, Congress is poised to usher in a new forward-looking foreign policy in the Caucuses with Turkey as the leading actor.

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The Turkish Coalition of America (TCA) is an educational, charitable organization incorporated in February 2007. Based in the nation's capital, TCA's objective is to educate the general public about Turkey and Turkish Americans and voice their opinion on critical issues to interested parties; engage and cultivate a new generation of young Turkish American leaders; promote and advance the interests of the Turkish American community and Turks; foster friendship, understanding and cooperation between the United States and Turkey; protect the character and ensure a realistic portrayal of Turkey and Turkish Americans in the media and the arts; serve as a think tank of expertise and a clearinghouse of information on Turkey and Americans of Turkish descent.