

TOWARD THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF 1915 ESRA ELMAS

THE SHIFTING FOCUS OF THE ARMENIAN CAUSE NAREG SEFERIAN

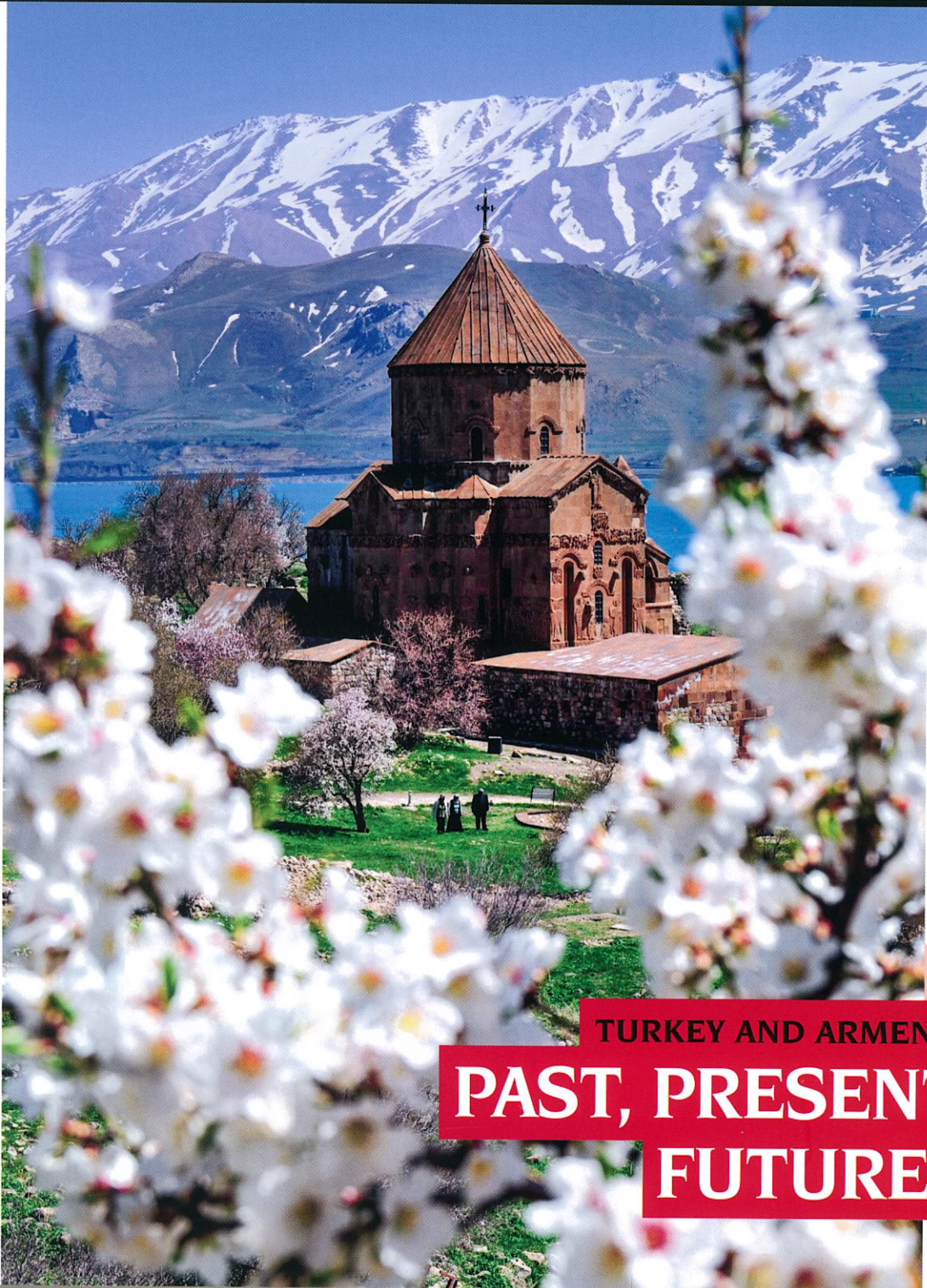
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PAST, PRESENT
FUTURE?



The shifting focus of the Armenian Cause

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he issue of the Armenian Genocide did not manifest any regular political expression until the late 1960s. The Armenian Cause, as it has come to be known (*Hai Tahd* in Western Armenian; *Hai Daht* in Eastern Armenian), followed mass demonstrations in particular in 1965. That was the 50th year marking the arrest of notable Armenians in İstanbul on April 24, which heralded the massacres and deportations that followed

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Surprisingly, rallies took place in Yerevan in Soviet Armenia in 1965, running contrary to the anti-national policies of the USSR. It did not take long for communities within the organized Armenian diaspora to take on the mantle of genocide recognition as their primary *raison d'être*.¹

At that time, an Armenian genocide was a non-issue as far as Turkey was concerned. No such thing happened, according to the official line. The past Armenian presence in Anatolia and whatever remained of the meager contemporary one was strongly suppressed. Genocide denial, in fact, encompassed the denial of any Armenian cultural heritage in Turkey. Kemalist nationalism was still the mainstay of the country, after all -- including for the Armenian population: April 24, 1965, also saw a public event in İstanbul, led by a former parliamentarian of Armenian background, Berç Turan. On that day, around 25-30 Armenians placed wreaths at the memorial to Atatürk and the revolution in Taksim Square, denouncing commemorations in communities elsewhere in the

world to "the 50th anniversary of the unpleasant events that took place during Ottoman times."²

Until the 1990s, then, it was recognition and recognition alone that was the primary agenda item for the organized Armenian diaspora. Having authoritative bodies -- most often national legislatures -- pass resolutions recognizing the massacres as a genocide and calling on Turkey to do the same was considered a success for relatively small community groups in which entire operations were often being run by a handful of dedicated, volunteer individuals.

Distinct from parliamentary resolutions, Armenian Studies had begun to grow as a separate discipline in the Western world even before 1965, reaching beyond its niche among scholars of the Near East or Middle East or Oriental Studies.³ Many areas of interest in Armenian Studies later overlapped with Diaspora Studies and, still later, the study of genocide or comparative studies of genocides. Over the course of the past three or four decades, Armenian and Turkish points of view have sparred in the academic realm as well, far away from legislatures or desks of high-level officials in capitals around the world.⁴

Another side of the Armenian Cause -- confined to



the 1970s and 1980s -- was a bloody one. A number of assassinations and other acts of violence took place, in particular against Turkish diplomats and Turkish interests around the world, during the course of those two decades. The Turkish position on the Armenian Genocide did not budge, even with all the headlines. However, the only time the Republic of Turkey ever formally engaged with the organized Armenian diaspora was as a result of these violent acts. In 1977, a secret meeting took place in Zurich between then-Turkish Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çaglayangil and leaders of the so-called "traditional" Armenian political parties with a diaspora presence -- the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Tashnagtsoutiun* or *Dashnaksoutiun*), the Social Democrat Party (Hunchakian) and the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party (*Ramgavar*).⁵ Nothing came of it. But it is noteworthy that violence was the only means by which Ankara's attention was ever seriously attracted by any Armenian organization.

The violence by those Armenian groups came to an end as the USSR began to unravel and resources and energy were directed towards the armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the newly independent Republic of Armenia. A new generation of Armenian

diaspora activists, benefitting from the experience of their predecessors, added new elements into the Armenian Cause in the 1990s: High-level relationships between the host country and the new Armenian state, including trade and aid packages, advocacy for the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and, conversely, advocacy against the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Armenian Genocide issue did not go away, of course. On the contrary, especially during the presidency of Robert Kocharian in Armenia (1998-2008), state-level support was given to include the Armenian Genocide on the official diplomatic agenda, as the increase in the number of related official documents during that era shows.⁶

REPHRASING AND REFRAMING THE NARRATIVE

Over the past decade, however, one can notice a change in the narrative.

First of all, within Turkey itself, mention of the massacres is no longer considered taboo per se. At the very least, it has become acceptable within a wider circle than ever before. The Turkish position has gone from outright denial to a new formulation, that of "shared pain" or "common pain."⁷ Certainly the death of numerous Turks or Muslims during the World War I

Mount Ararat (Ağrı Dağı) is a national symbol for the Armenians.

OCT. 6, 2010
PHOTO: CIHAN,
SELAHATTIN KACURU



cannot be denied. But, of course, equating the deaths of Ottoman soldiers in the battlefield with organized massacres and death marches of Christian civilians in the interior is ridiculous, not to say insulting. No one laments dead Nazi soldiers in the same breath as they do Jewish, Roma, Polish or other victims of the Holocaust.⁸

Turkey has been beating the “common pain” drum at the same time as Armenian individuals and organizations have begun to take on the idea of restitution, reparations or compensation in a serious, systematic manner, going beyond solely recognition. An early manifestation of this phenomenon was the cases against Western insurance companies to make payments to descendants of victims of the Armenian Genocide.⁹ Later, a groundbreaking study published in 2011 on the fate of Armenian property over the course of the genocide was carried out by Uğur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel.¹⁰ “Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property” has set the stage for a number of past and ongoing studies within Turkey of the systematic nature of the confiscation of Armenian properties and how the economy of the country benefits from those acts to this day. It might be impossible to calculate a final figure today of how much damage was caused to the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire by the state during World War I. It would have to be an astronomical sum, in all events. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 did take the trouble of coming up with a figure, in fact, assessing that Armenians were owed a total of some 14.5 billion francs -- coming to more than \$100 billion today.¹¹ An estimation with more complex, modern methodology was made in early 2015, coming to the figure of \$3 trillion.¹²

Another argument that has gained currency in Armenian circles in recent years involves the Treaty of Sèvres. The Modus Vivendi Center, based in Yerevan and led by former Ambassador Ara Papian, brings forth the idea that the Turkish and Armenian states, such as they were in 1920, agreed to abide by the decision of US President Woodrow Wilson to determine the border between them. This arbitral award, the argument goes, remains valid, even if the Treaty of Sèvres was never enforced.¹³ This is a problematic argument inasmuch as the Treaty of Sèvres was not only not enforced but was

never ratified by its signatories, being superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne. Still, if ever the international community were in need of putting diplomatic pressure on Ankara, this argument could be invoked. The political force of this line of thinking is not inconsiderable, even if its legal basis is shaky. Given Turkey’s current worsening position on the world stage, one should perhaps expect more voluble Armenian voices in Washington and Brussels in this regard.

Papian also forms part of the Armenian Genocide Reparations Study Group (AGRSG) alongside three other scholars and a consultant. AGRSG issued its findings at the end of March 2015.¹⁴ In its initial report, the group claimed to have prepared “the only systematic, all-encompassing, in-depth approach to Armenian Genocide Reparations. The report examines the case for reparations from legal, historical, and ethical perspectives [...] offers a plan for a productive reparative process

drawing on transitional justice theory and practice [...] and proposes a concrete reparations package.”¹⁵ A second such group, known as Armenian Genocide International Reparations (AGIR), is likewise pursuing the legal approach, as is a working group coordinated by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Armenia.¹⁶

Increasingly, the field of public international law is being seen as a point of leverage that could be used against Turkey. International law is carried out between states, however. It is only when the Republic of Armenia itself appeals, for example, to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague, that this option may become viable.

There are indications of that happening, perhaps even as early as this year (2015). The president of the Republic of Armenia convened the State Commission on Coordination of the Events for the Commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 2011 in order to prepare for the 2015 centennial.¹⁷ Although this commission has not been very active over its almost four years of existence -- at least not in the public eye -- it did issue an official statement at the end of January 2015.¹⁸ Much of the text of the Pan-Armenian Declaration is a rehash of general Armenian Cause rhetoric. One clause, however, specifically indicates: “[The Commission e]xpresses the united will of Armenia and the Armenian people to achieve worldwide recognition of

THE TURKISH POSITION HAS GONE FROM OUTRIGHT DENIAL TO A NEW FORMULATION OF ‘SHARED PAIN’

Small unofficial commemorations to mark the Armenian Genocide have been held in Istanbul in recent years.

APRIL 24, 2010
PHOTO: REUTERS,
OSMAN ORSAL

the Armenian Genocide and the elimination of the consequences of the genocide, preparing to this end a file of legal claims as a point of departure in the process of restoring individual, communal and pan-Armenian rights and legitimate interests.”

A member of this body, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, who sits in Lebanon, has in turn strongly supported carrying out legal action against Turkey for the return of the properties of the Catholicosate at Sis (Kozan).¹⁹ That idea echoes a resolution spearheaded by Armenian-American and Greek-American advocacy groups and passed by the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Congress in 2014 for the return of church properties.²⁰ Apart from the highly political atmosphere of public international law, then, it is in fact the legal route within Turkey itself that has opened up -- especially for Turkish citizens of Armenian descent or those belonging to other minority groups. One recent case is that of Zuart Sudjian, who demands Diyarbakır Airport as property that has been built on land belonging to her family.²¹ The Hrant Dink Foundation has also been involved in this issue by preparing a study of properties of Armenian foundations seized by the state in the republican era, in particular in İstanbul.²²

This trend of invoking the law -- whether international or domestic -- is juxtaposed with an already quite active civil society sector that has been involved with issues dealing with Armenians and other minorities in Turkey within the broader context of democratization and human rights. Organizations such as the Hrant Dink Foundation, DurDe, Anadolu Kültür, the Human Rights Association (İHD) and others have been carrying out various projects including research, cultural activities, media work and even legal actions, oftentimes involving groups and individuals from Armenia itself.²³ Activities that emphasize, say, intercultural exchange within a broader, liberal human rights agenda, aiming at a nebulous reconciliation effort are sometimes seen with a cynical eye by some harder-line circles in the Armenian diaspora, however.²⁴

One of the latest players on the civil-society scene styles itself an international NGO -- the National Congress of Western Armenians (NCWA). Based in Paris, with representatives in Europe, North America and the former Soviet Union, the NCWA has also established itself in Turkey. The strategy, as explained by its leader -- a longtime UN official originally from Syria -- is to





engage with civil society in Turkey on the one hand but also to find a more powerful legal voice, such as in the form of an NGO with consultative status at the UN. The NCWA has so far been unable to achieve such a status due to efforts by the Turkish and Azerbaijani delegations there.²⁵ The NCWA has not had any major impact within Armenia or the Armenian diaspora, but it hosted a conference in Paris in March 2015 with the participation of notable figures from Armenia, the

diaspora, and minority leaders in Turkey, as well as a representative from Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).²⁶ This organization serves as an example of civil-society engagement that has a political agenda in mind, beyond merely reconciliation, human rights or the democratization of Turkish society.

AN UNCLEAR ENDGAME

There are two big hindrances to a lasting and meaningful resolution to the Armenian-Turkish issue. The first is that of representation: Who speaks on behalf of the Armenians? As we see above, the Armenians are a motley bunch, with one-and-a-half states (counting the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) and a number of prominent individuals and organized Armenian diaspora bodies ranging from religious groups and political parties to academic gatherings and NGOs. The state commission mentioned above can claim some legitimacy in bringing most of the Armenian leadership in one place.²⁷ However, it has not been very active in any sense, nor has it formally claimed to be a pan-national body that takes on any pan-national concerns beyond marking the centennial of the Armenian Genocide.

The other side is much more clearly represented, because there is a state, the Republic of Turkey. Of course, this state has a diverse population, with varying public opinion on the issue and a number of political and other kinds of organizations with mutually exclusive positions and policies vis-à-vis Armenians and the Armenian Genocide. But Turkey can at least act as a single entity. It is reasonable to expect that one side of the Armenian-Turkish negotiating table would comprise the top political leadership of the Turkish state or its representatives.

The second major obstacle is the lack of a clear set of demands to be met. This is the key shortcoming from the Armenian side. The Pan-Armenian Declaration offers some wording, though vague. More strongly worded is a declaration by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation of the Western Region of the United States, published in June, 2014 -- a statement that includes, among other things, claims to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan

During the presidency of Robert Kocharian there was state-level support to include the Armenian Genocide on the official diplomatic agenda.

JULY 5, 2006
PHOTO: REUTERS,
RAHEB HOMAVANDI



and invocations of "Western Armenia" alongside "an independent Kurdistan," besides citing Woodrow Wilson's arbitral award (something which the Pan-Armenian Declaration also does).²⁸ On the more legalistic side -- though likewise with territorial demands -- is a declaration made by another California-based organization, the Armenian Bar Association.²⁹ But, of course, these can hardly be considered representative documents. Armenian demands might as well also go to the other extreme of a mere apology.

What exactly do Armenians want, then? It is safe to say that all Armenians would expect official recognition of the massacres as genocide by the Turkish state. As for concrete steps to follow, probably there would be no widespread objections among Armenians to demands, for example, for changes to be made to Turkish textbooks,³⁰ probably also for public commemorations, perhaps monuments. Opening the border with Armenia would also most likely feature on a representative pan-Armenian list of demands. In general, Armenians would be for increasing minority rights, whether in terms of language, religion, education or other aspects of culture for the country's Kurdish, Greek, Syriac, Jewish and Alevi citizens, and any number of other identities that currently make up the population in Turkey. When it comes to more far-reaching steps -- monetary compensation, property return, transfer of territory -- things become more murky. The perspectives in those matters in the organized Armenian diaspora, from Beirut to Buenos Aires, might not fully match with the points of view espoused by the government in Yerevan, to say nothing of Armenians living within Turkey itself.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS


It is worth considering some creative reconciliation packages. If any compensation is to be made, the incredibly large sum would be difficult to calculate exactly and the recipients hard to identify. An Ottoman-Armenian Fund could be established, financed for 100 years or more by the Turkish state, headed by a committee representative of government, academia, clergy and civil society in Turkey, Armenia and in the Armenian diaspora. The fund could spend

most of its money within Turkey itself -- investing in current Armenian schools and hospitals, renovating old churches, restoring Armenian-owned homes in the interior, etc. A part of such a fund could also go to schools or research institutes in the diaspora, perhaps even to Armenia as well.

Dealing with territory would be far trickier. There was a plan in the early 1990s, for example, led by a prominent member of the Jewish community in Turkey and a major Armenian-American businessman involved in land development, to lease a port to Armenia around Trabzon.³¹ That plan fell through. There has been talk in the past of a symbolic handover of the territory of Mount Ararat (Ağn Dagı), a national symbol for the Armenians, dominating the horizon over the capital Yerevan -- and/

or the territory of the ruined city of Ani, near Kars, one of the last capitals of Armenia, which is adjacent to the current border. Extra-territoriality could also extend to cultural landmarks, such as churches or cemeteries. If leasing ports comes on the agenda again, others could form part of the plan on the Mediterranean coast in Cilicia (Çukurova), site of the final Armenian kingdom. The symbolic nature of such steps would be

powerful. It would certainly send a strong message to the international community as well. But the exact details would be highly problematic to figure out. Both gaining a consensus within Turkey and doing so among Armenians would call for incredible political will. Turkish society is not really ready for any such projects today, of course, and the Armenian state and Armenian organizations might have their own objections, depending on the specifics.

Any meaningful, long-term resolution to the Armenian-Turkish issue -- and, indeed, it is not just an Armenian issue but a Turkish one as well -- has to involve meaningful, long-term planning. The more the Turkish leadership waits, the broader the spheres will be in which Armenian advocacy will play a role. Ultimately, this is a political issue. The legal sphere, civil society, academia, culture and religion and general principles of human rights can all play a role, no doubt. But are they enough to push the political leadership in Ankara to make meaningful, substantial, lasting changes in policy? 

ANY MEANINGFUL, LONG-TERM RESOLUTION TO THE ARMENIAN- TURKISH ISSUE HAS TO INVOLVE MEANINGFUL, LONG-TERM PLANNING

1. For an excellent account of the development of the Armenian Cause, even before the 1960s, and Armenian-American advocacy in particular, see Michael Bobelian, "Children of Armenia: A Forgotten Genocide and the Century-Long Struggle for Justice" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).
2. Tatul Hakobyan, "April 24, 1965, in Istanbul," *CivilNet*, March 9, 2015, accessed March 11, 2015, http://civilnet.am/2015/03/09/1965-april-24-istanbul/#.VP_Va_mUdtw (in Armenian).
3. For a very brief overview of the growth of Armenian Studies in the United States, see "History," *National Association for Armenian Studies and Research*, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.naasr.org/index.php/about-us-site-map-menu-93/history-site-map-menu-123>.
4. For one account of Turkish government influence on Turkish Studies in the United States, see Scott Jaschik, "Is Turkey Muzzling U.S. Scholars?," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 1, 2008, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/01/turkey>.
5. Tatul Hakobyan, "Armenians and Turks: From War to Cold War to Diplomacy" (Yerevan: Lusakn, 2013), 204-208.
6. "International Affirmation of the Armenian Genocide," *Armenian National Institute*, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/affirmation.html>.
7. Following the unprecedented statement by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in April 2014, then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu published an opinion piece in *The Guardian* that summarized well the new Turkish positioning. Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turks and Armenians -- we must follow Erdogan's lead and bury our common pain," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2014, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/02/turks-armenians-erdogan-condolences-1915-armenian-massacre>.
8. The suffering of Muslim deportees from the Balkans or the Caucasus -- the *muhacirs* -- could for their part be analogous subjects of formal, public memory. But, of course, it was not Armenians who forced their exile. In fact, the *muhacirs* were the ones to take over Armenian property as they settled in Turkey.
9. Bobelian, "Children of Armenia," 207-224.
10. Ugur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel, "Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property" (London New York: Continuum, 2011).
11. The figure is in 1990 US dollars. Dickran Kouymjian, "Confiscation of Armenian Property and the Destruction of Armenian Historical Monuments as a Manifestation of the Genocidal Process," (California State University, Fresno, Armenian Studies Program, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/faculty/kouymjian/articles/confiscation.htm>).
12. "Armenian Genocide Losses 2015," accessed April 1, 2015, <http://armeniangenocidelosses.am/>.
13. Ara Papian, The Arbitral Award on Turkish-Armenian Boundary by Woodrow Wilson (Historical Background, Legal Aspects, and International Dimensions), In: "Iran and the Caucasus," Volume 11, Issue 2 (Leiden; Brill, 2007): 255-294.
14. "Complete Report of the Armenian Genocide Reparations Study Group," *Armenian Genocide Reparations Study Group*, accessed April 1, 2015, http://www.armeniangenocidereparations.info/?page_id=229.
15. "RESOLUTION WITH JUSTICE: Reparations for the Armenian Genocide," *Armenian Genocide Reparations Study Group*, Sept. 19, 2014, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.armeniangenocidereparations.info/>.
16. Raffi Kalfayan, "2015: Focus on reparations for the Armenian Genocide," *REPAIR - Armeno-Turkish Platform*, Feb. 12, 2015, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://repairfuture.net/index.php/en/armenian-genocide-recognition-and-reparations-standpoint-of-armenian-diaspora/2015-focus-on-reparations-for-the-armenian-genocide>.
17. "Armenian genocide centennial commemoration commission begins its work," *ArmeniaNow.com*, May 31, 2011, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.armenianow.com/hy/node/30032>.
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20. "House Panel Passes Return of Churches Measure," *Asbarez*, June 26, 2014, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://asbarez.com/124453/house-panel-passes-return-of-churches-measure/>.
21. Harut Sassounian, "Zuart Sudjian Sues Turkey to Reclaim Her Family Lands - Diyarbakir Airport," *The California Courier*, Jan. 20, 2015, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.thecaliforniacourier.com/zuart-sudjian-sues-turkey-to-reclaim-her-family-lands-diyarbakir-airport/>.
22. "2012 Declaration: The Seized Properties of Armenian Foundations in Istanbul," *Hrant Dink Foundation*, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://istanbulermenivakiflari.org/en/>.
23. Much of the current projects in this regard receive European funding. The original Track II approach was spearheaded by the US State Department, however. See David L. Phillips, "Diplomatic History: The Turkey-Armenia Protocols," (New York: Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University, 2012), 83-85.
24. See the editorials at the Toronto-based *Keghart.com*, "Appraising Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation," *Keghart.com*, Dec. 8, 2014, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.keghart.com/Editorial-Appraising-Reconciliation> and "The Case for Self-Reconciliation," *Keghart.com*, Feb. 20, 2015, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.keghart.com/Editorial-Self-Reconciliation>.
25. "NCWA Edges Towards Final Strategy," *Keghart.com*, Feb. 1, 2015, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.keghart.com/Report-NCWA-Toronto-2015>.
26. More on the National Congress of Western Armenians and the conference held in Paris can be found on its website: <http://ncwarmenians.org/>.
27. A full list of members of that body could not be found. In any case, it seems that the Armenian patriarchs of İstanbul and Jerusalem have both been left out. Even though they are in principle subordinate to the Catholicos of All Armenians at Etchmiadzin in Armenia, their presence -- especially someone from the Patriarchate of İstanbul -- would have added weight to any declaration made in the entire body's name.
28. "ARF's Statement of Demands For Justice for the Armenian Genocide," *Asbarez*, June 23, 2014, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://asbarez.com/124379/arfs-statement-of-demands-for-justice-for-the-armenian-genocide/>.
29. "Armenian Bar Association on Justice for the Armenian Genocide," *Armenian Bar Association*, accessed Feb. 21, 2015, <http://www.armenianbar.com/news/47-armenian-bar-association-on-justice-for-the-armenian-genocide>.
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