

Monastery Meeting May Lead to Turkish Thaw

Author: [Tigran Avetisian](#)

Armenian and Turkish specialists are stepping up their collaboration, despite scepticism on both sides.

An unprecedented meeting between a group of Armenian and Turkish scholars at a 10th century Armenian monastery on Lake Van in Turkey marks a step forward in Armenian-Turkish cooperation – but political suspicions remain high on both sides.

The Surb Khach (Holy Cross) Monastery on Akhtamar island is famous for its carvings and frescoes but was last restored only in the early 1900s. At the end of last year, Armenian and Turkish specialists met there to study the building and make recommendations about how it can best be restored.

The initiative was sponsored by the International Peace and Conflict Resolution Programme at the American University in Washington DC, which has supported a number of Armenian-Turkish dialogue projects.

“In the course of our work together we found out that a host of problems exist between Turks and Armenians, including issues of a cultural and historical nature,” Gagik Gurjian, deputy minister of culture of Armenia and a member of the group, told IWPR.

Turkey and Armenia have not established diplomatic relations since the end of the Soviet Union. The issue of the 1915 Genocide under the Ottoman empire still divides them and the border between the two countries has been closed since 1993 because of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, as Turkey has kept up a close alliance with Azerbaijan.

However, there have been small signs of a thaw in relations over the last year, strongly supported by the United States, mostly in the cultural sphere. Musicians have exchanged visits and a joint women’s magazine has started publication.

Another recent development was that the general staff of the Turkish armed forces gave permission for the photographing and videotaping of historical landmarks located in restricted areas. The new rules cover not only Surb Khach, but also the extensive ruins of the ancient capital of Armenia, Ani, close to the Turkish-Armenian frontier.

“The church, and Akhtamar Island itself are located in a beautiful place with good prospects for the tourist industry,” Gurjian said.

The next step is for the project to get the approval of the culture ministries of both countries. However, political relations are still cool between the two governments.

Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was lobbied on the issue by US politicians and Armenian activists on a trip to America last month. He responded by saying, “We are ready. It’s up to Armenia to make the first move.”

Ankara says that for the frontier to reopen, Armenia must abandon its genocide claims against Turkey.

The Armenian government believes opening the frontier will boost trade. Political analyst Agasi Yenokian agrees, saying, "An open border would certainly deal a heavy blow to the economic monopolies, which are ruled by our political leaders and business tycoons."

However, the leaders of the nationalist Dashnaktsutiun party, currently part of the governing coalition in Armenia, are much more suspicious. The Dashnaks say opening the border would bring in a flood of Turkish products that would threaten domestic manufacturing.

Dashnaktsutiun's Armen Rustamian, who chairs the parliamentary commission on international relations, said, "We should not oversimplify the Turkish-Armenian issue by reducing it to the reopening of the border."

Kiro Manoyan, office manager for Dashnaktsutiun's Hai Data (Armenian Issue) department, said, "Armenia did not seal its border - Turkey did."

"Turkey only talks about resumed dialogue with Armenia and border reopening for propaganda purposes. There is nothing in it for us."

And Armenian foreign minister Vardan Oskanian argued, "In our relationship with Turkey, we should stick to a policy of minor, but consistent improvements."

Tigran Avetisian is a reporter for Aravot newspaper.

Location: [Turkey](#)
[Karabakh](#)
[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Azerbaijan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/monastery-meeting-may-lead-turkish-thaw>