

The Monitor's View

Next Nobel Peace Prize: Turkey and Armenia?

By [the Monitor's Editorial Board](#) / October 10, 2009

Will the winners of the next Nobel Peace Prize be the leaders of adversaries Turkey and Armenia?

It's not every day that two neighboring but not neighborly countries agree to overcome a century of deep hostility, especially states that sit at one of the world's most strategic – and volatile – crossroads.

In Zurich, diplomats from both countries – one a Christian nation and the other Muslim – signed an historic agreement Oct. 10 to normalize relations and open their border. Included was a provision for a historical commission to look at the deeply divisive issue of up to 1.5 million Armenians killed during the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.

Impoverished Armenia, the tiniest of the former Soviet countries, hugs the southern tip of the tinderbox Caucasus region that lies between the Caspian and Black seas. It shares a border to the north with Georgia – invaded by Russia in 2008 – and to the west with Turkey.

Turkey, a member of NATO, seeks to become an oil-and-gas corridor connecting energy-rich Russia and the Caspian with Europe and the Middle East. As part of this goal, it is pursuing an ambitious policy of "zero problems" on its borders.

Regional stability could flow, and more oil and gas, too, if the parliaments of Turkey and Armenia ratify the agreement.

Ratification is iffy, however, considering the gaping historical rift that has separated these two neighbors all these years. Armenians call the deaths of their ancestors at the end of World War I a genocide. Turkey says it was a tragic result of war.

Another impediment: the "frozen conflict" of Nagorno-Karabakh, a separatist Armenian enclave in nearby Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has put considerable pressure on its friend, Turkey, to make normal relations with Armenia contingent on resolving the conflict.

These chest-high hurdles make it all the more remarkable that Turkish President Abdullah Gul and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan apparently want to walk the road to reconciliation. They started a year ago, when Mr. Gul attended a Turkish-Armenian soccer match in Armenia – an unprecedented and highly visible gesture. Mr. Sargsyan has been invited to a match in Turkey next week.

But years of quiet discussion among senior opinion makers and intellectuals on both sides preceded this public diplomacy. Armenians who want to break out of their landlocked and poor economy are looking for normal relations with Turkey. Turks are being driven by business interests and the "zero problems" policy.

Ankara and Athens, for instance, have entered a period of detente, and relations between Turkey and Syria have greatly improved. Ankara is reaching out to Tehran. Turkey has played the role (unsuccessfully so far) as negotiator between Syria and Israel. In the back of Gul's mind must be the calculation that normal relations with

Armenia could tighten Turkey's ties to Russia – which has backed Armenia in the post-Soviet period.

If Gul and Sargsyan succeed, that might point the way to resolving other so-called "intractable" disputes in the Caucasus, and perhaps even the Turk-Greek problem over a divided Cyprus. True reconciliation may rejuvenate Turkey's stalled bid for membership in the European Union by showing that Ankara is a security problem solver. And it could increase prosperity in the region by opening more trade to Armenia and perhaps making it part of the region's energy network.

The provision for a commission to "impartially" examine historical records and archives may not bridge the passionate disagreement about the Armenian massacre. But it can create an atmosphere of more open discussion – and that's needed in both countries. At the same time, international mediation continues on Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nationalist forces in Turkey and Armenia will try to derail the agreement, and prevent ratification. It will take skilled leadership on the parts of Gul and Sargsyan to sail past these political shoals – and perhaps all the way to Oslo to collect the next Nobel.