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Turkey and Armenia Pave Way for Historic Accords

Neighbors' Bid to Open Border and Establish Ties Could Sideline Genocide Dispute, Improve Security for Fuel Pipeline to West

By [MARC CHAMPION](#)

BRUSSELS -- Turkey and Armenia could soon announce a deal aimed at reopening their border and restoring relations, according to diplomats, a move that could help stabilize a region that's increasingly important as a transit route for oil and gas.

The timing of the deal is being choreographed with the schedule of U.S. President Barack Obama, who visits Turkey next week, these people say.

The Turkish and Armenian governments have agreed on terms to open formal talks in three areas: opening and fixing borders, restoring diplomatic relations and setting up commissions to look at disputes, including one on the tense history between the two nations, according to the diplomats, all of whom declined to be named due to the sensitivity of the talks.

There is strong opposition to a deal in both countries, as well as in Armenia's neighbor Azerbaijan. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 to protest Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave in Azerbaijan, following a bloody war. That conflict remains unresolved.



Associated Press

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses the media at the headquarters of his Justice and Development Party, the AKP, in Ankara, Turkey, on Sunday.

But an accord would be seen in Western capitals as a major potential success that could help to open up and stabilize the Caucasus. The region is studded with unresolved conflicts and hostile borders, and saw war between Russia and Georgia in August.

Normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia would "create a new and positive dynamic" in relations across the region, "as well as in developing the economic and transport links we have been pursuing ever since the collapse of the former Soviet Union," said U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew J. Bryza, the State Department's point man in the Caucasus.

Mr. Bryza travels to Azerbaijan Thursday to discuss how a Turkish-Armenian agreement could help revive efforts for a settlement on Nagorno-Karabakh.

Announcement of a Turkish-Armenian pact is also being influenced by Mr. Obama's campaign promise to support a Congressional resolution that would recognize as genocide the Ottoman Empire's 1915 killing of up to 1.5 million Armenians in what is now central and eastern Turkey. Turkey fiercely denies the killings were genocide. The White House traditionally makes a statement to mark Armenian Remembrance Day on April 24.

Analysts say Turkey's government hopes progress in reviving its relations with Armenia could prompt the White House not to recognize the killings as genocide and to block the Congressional resolution.

If the U.S. proceeds with the genocide resolution, "I cannot imagine any Turkish government opening the Armenian border," said Özgür Ünlühisarcikli, director of the Ankara office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a think tank.

A Senior Turkish foreign-policy official said the U.S. is trying to facilitate the agreement with Armenia. Turkish and Armenian officials declined to comment on the status of their talks.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey said on Turkish television last week he would discuss Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian "genocide" and relations between Russia and Georgia with the U.S. president, among other issues.

Mr. Obama's decision to make Turkey the final, two-day stop on his European tour has been welcomed in Ankara as a sign of the country's strategic importance.

Turkey, a secular Muslim nation of 70 million people, is taking on a growing role as a regional player in the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Turkey opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and refused to let its territory be used for the assault. Now the U.S. again wants to use its bases in Turkey for Iraq, but this time to withdraw troops -- something much easier for Ankara to accept.

Turkey could also prove a helpful ally in the Mideast, where it has played a mediating role between Syria and Israel and has offered to mediate with Iran.

One date under discussion for signing the deal with Armenia, diplomats say, is April 16. But Mr. Ünlühisarcikli said he believes Turkey and Armenia won't be ready to sign the deal before April 24, and Turkey instead will "signal" its commitment to reopen the borders in the hope that will be enough for Washington.

Russia's invasion of Georgia last August opened the door for Turkey to become more heavily engaged in the Caucasus. The war showed the limitations of U.S. and EU influence in the region and exposed the extent of Armenia's isolation. When Russia cut Georgia's main East-

West railway by blowing up a bridge in August, it also cut off the dominant supply route to Armenia, a close Russian ally.

The war in Georgia also showed the vulnerability of pipelines that have been carrying oil and natural gas from Azerbaijan to Western markets via Georgia since 2006. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline carries 1 million barrels of crude per day to Turkey's Mediterranean coast. The pipelines were targeted unsuccessfully during the Georgia war.

—*Nicholas Birch in Istanbul contributed to this article.*

Write to Marc Champion at marc.champion@wsj.com

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