

Mesrob II: Diaspora deaf to Turkish Armenians (2)

Friday 28 September 2007, by [Yonca Poyraz Dogan](#)

“The ‘Armenian genocide resolution’ pending in the US Congress disrupts both the relations between Turkish people and Armenians in Turkey and between Turkey and Armenia,” said Patriarch Mesrob II (Mutafyan), the spiritual leader of Turkey’s Armenian Orthodox community.

“We had big problems in the past. I especially find the approach of the İttihat Terakki’s (the Committee of Union and Progress) collective punishment of Armenians quite wrong. It wasn’t the whole Armenian community who took up arms against the government, but I believe the Turkish Republic should not be accused of what happened then. The diaspora would say that it should be accused as long as there is a denial of what happened,” Mesrob II said.

Armenians claim up to 1.5 million of their kinsmen died in a genocide campaign by Ottoman Turks around the time of World War I, but Ankara rejects the charge, saying both Armenians and Turks died in civil strife when the Armenians took up arms for independence in eastern Anatolia, siding with Russian troops that were invading the crumbling Ottoman Empire.

There is currently a non-binding “Armenian genocide resolution” pending at the US Congress. “We are the ones here living with our Turkish friends everyday. The resolution’s passage would have a cooling effect on our relations,” Mesrob II said, adding that the diaspora doesn’t care about Turkish Armenians’ sensitivities and that “it’s a political issue for them.”

Turkish Armenians are the biggest Christian community in Turkey with approximately 70,000 people living in Anatolia. Mesrob II said that since they lack schools of theology, the number of clerics is only 26 and bringing religious services to the community is tough.

For Monday Talk, **Mesrob II** told Today’s Zaman that the Armenian community hasn’t been represented in the Turkish Parliament, even though some of them have been interested in politics. The community’s attitude toward the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) is generally positive, and the main reason behind this is the “aggressive attitude” of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), especially regarding the law of foundations.

As the Turkish-Armenian religious leader, Mesrob II has a different stance from that of some Turkish circles regarding the secularism debates. “I don’t think that secularism is under threat in Turkey. Secularism has been so entrenched in the society since the time of Atatürk that I don’t think anybody will be able to remove it,” he stated.

We’ve been trying to interview Mesrob II since Today’s Zaman was founded on Jan. 16, but due to some unfortunate events — such as the Jan. 19 assassination of Hrant Dink, editor of the Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper Agos, we were unable to until now. The Patriarchate closed its doors to the media then after receiving many threats. Nevertheless, the patriarch started to open up recently and discuss the Turkish-Armenian community’s problems more.

For Monday Talk, we had a sincere interview with the patriarch, ranging from politics to his personal life, beliefs and hobbies.

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Do you think the investigation into the murder of Hrant Dink has been conducted thoroughly?

I'd like the real perpetrators behind this crime to be found. Otherwise justice won't be served.

Are you worried?

I'm worried about radical nationalist movements. We need to exercise more tolerance in society. The same applies to relations with Armenia; we need academics, young people and artists from both sides to visit each other's country more.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has suggested the formation of a committee of historians from both sides plus other countries to study the history of the relations, but has not gotten a response from Armenia.

His suggestion was quite positive. I don't understand why the Armenian side did not respond well to such a positive approach to study the events of 1915.

You said 'the events of 1915.' Do you think there was a genocide?

We had big problems in the past; I find in particular the approach of İttihat Terakki's collective punishment of Armenians quite wrong. It wasn't the whole Armenian community who took up arms against the government, but I believe the Turkish Republic should not be accused of what happened then. The diaspora would say that it should be accused as long as there is a denial of what happened

What do you think of the 'Armenian genocide resolution' pending in the US Congress?

It's quite negative because the Armenian genocide resolution pending in the US Congress disrupts both the relations between Turkish people and Armenians in Turkey and between Turkey and Armenia.

How so?

We are the ones here living with our Turkish friends every day. The resolution's passage would have a cooling effect on our relations.

Doesn't the Armenian diaspora in the US think of these sensitivities that you've just talked about?

I don't think they care about our relations here. It's a political issue for them.

Do they have any contact with you?

No, they don't.

Do you have any contact with them?

No, I don't. There was a conference about the genocide issue in Dallas that I was invited to attend and I did go. Armenian-Americans protested my speech.

Why?

I presume that they see my approach to the whole issue as a denial of the genocide. They do not understand the sensitivities involved.

Doesn't your religious identity mean anything to them?

It seems like it doesn't.

Would you go to such a meeting again?

I would go again.

So you resist protests...?

I say what I believe is right.

What is the worst scenario if the resolution passes?

Anything can happen. We receive threats every day.

Have you been provided enough protection?

Yes, there are quite a few security personnel around me.

What should Turkey be doing regarding the 'genocide issue'?

Turkey has been changing in that regard. The issue has been discussed much more. Turkey has been doing what it can do right now.

Should Turkey open the border with Armenia?

I'd like that because the relations of Turkey and Armenia have been held hostage to the issue of genocide.

What else can be done?

Both sides need to improve relations among their people. They should look at the future and not be restricted by history so much.

What can the Turkish government do for the Armenians living in Turkey?

First of all we need schools to be able to have clerics. We have a shortage of clerics. We have to either send people to Armenia or Jerusalem to study theology. There are no schools here. I suggest a faculty of theology in one of the universities in İstanbul. We also need a school of philology here to study the Western Armenian language, which is different from the Eastern Armenian language.

And the issue of foundations?

Yes, our former president vetoed it.

Do you expect the new president to approve it?

I hope he does.

What is the population of the Armenians living in Turkey?

Approximately 70,000 — the biggest Christian community in Turkey, living in 23 cities in Anatolia. There are only 26 clerics. With so few clerics it's very difficult to bring religious services to the community. Most of the community, especially in Anatolia, lacks churches and when the clerics visit the community, they have to pray in homes.

You've been working to have a faculty of theology in İstanbul, right?

I've been working on this issue with the Higher Education Board (YÖK), but it wasn't possible to move forward until after the elections. I have to follow up on it.

You visited Gen. Yaşar Büyükanıt recently. Why?

He is the head of the Turkish Army. I mentioned our communities in Anatolia and our desire to visit those

people. Without a doubt he assured us that the gendarmerie forces would provide protection during such visits. He was quite open and friendly.

What have been your observations during the election process regarding the secularist-Islamist debate?

I don't think that secularism is under threat in Turkey. Secularism has been so entrenched in the society since the time of Atatürk that I don't think anybody will be able to remove it.

Has the issue been discussed in the Armenian community?

Our community has been very secular; they do not mix up religious and civic life at all. Some erroneous reports indicated that I directed the community to vote for the AK Party, but our community would not take directions from me about whom to vote for.

The end

[PROFILE]

Who is Mesrob II ?

Mesrob II became the 84th patriarch of Turkey's Armenian Orthodox community in 1998 after Patriarch Karekin II passed away. Mesrob II studied theology in 1979-1982 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel. He held several positions in Turkey's churches including bishop, chairman of the Religious Council, patriarchal vicar for Ecumenical Affairs, overseer of the Theological Auditorium, vice-president of the Patriarchal Advisory Council and archbishop. He is the editor-in-chief of the Shoghagat Theological Review. He has academically worked on the "Vanakan Vartabed's Commentary of Davoush on the Book of Job." He is bilingual in Turkish and English and uses classical Armenian, Hebrew, French and Italian in his academic studies.