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# Using historic preservation as a para-diplomatic agent in cross-cultural conflict resolution in international border areas: A case study in the Kars province in Turkey

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The preservation of cultural/historic resources in international border areas can have far reaching consequences beyond the mere preservation of historic sites. They have the potential to act as “olive branches” between countries which have experienced long term conflicts and negative cultural memories. In the case of the Kars Province, in the northeastern portion of Turkey, this area was occupied by various ethnic groups and empires (Armenian, Russian, Byzantine, Ottoman etc.) that were present before the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Tensions in this area are still persisting as the border between Turkey and Armenia, including the Kars border-crossing, has been closed by Turkey in protest to the occupation by Armenia of Nagorno-Karabakh which was previously under the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. These monuments, when they exist along national borders particularly carry very strong possibilities to be vehicles of reconciliation that will lead to long term improved economic, social and political conditions between countries which have experienced negative cultural memories. This paper will investigate the efforts of historic preservation in the Kars Province in Turkey by local governments and non-profit organizations - NGOs and its potential as an informal diplomatic or para-diplomatic vehicle between Turkey, Armenia and Russia.

**Key words:** Historical/Cultural values, historic preservation, tourism, border area conflicts, para-diplomacy, political geography, conflict resolution, Kars, Turkey.

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the eastern portion of Anatolia has been inhabited by a host of different empires, nations and ethnic groups. The study area, the Kars Province in Turkey, is located near the countries of Azerbaijan, Iran, Armenia and Georgia (Figure 2). The Kars Province has had a significant presence of Armenians for over one thousand years. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the province was transferred from the Ottoman Empire to the Russian Empire for approximately forty years after the

Russo-Ottoman War (1878 to 1879). It became a part of the Republic of Turkey after the Turkish Independence War in the early 20th century. The Russian population returned to Russia after this area's annexation into the Republic of Turkey. Also, at the turn of the last century, the Turkish and Armenians were embroiled in a civil war resulting in a large decrease in the Armenian population in the province. The houses, churches, commercial buildings and street patterns attest to the presence of

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**Figure 1.** Kumbet Mosque (formerly Armenian Church of the Apostles).

these populations (Shaw and Shaw, 1977).

Until recently, many historic Russian and Armenian structures were neglected related to a complex mixture of political, sociological and economic factors. Within the last ten years, there are efforts by the Provincial and local governments and international non-governmental organizations to document, protect and promote these historic structures. Tourism and economic development is a major impetus for the preservation of these structures. However, the historical structures and ruins are not merely objects, but have deep cultural meaning to several populations, particularly Turkish, Russian and Armenian. The Russian occupation evidence is prominent, but the cultural attachment by the current Russian population is weak or non-existent. Of all the historical structures in the area, there is none that carry as much cultural controversy as that of the ancient ruins of Ani, which borders Turkey and Armenia in Turkish territory. Of importance also is the 1,000 year old Armenian Church of the Apostles, now a mosque (the Kumbet Mosque) (Figure 1). There is significant tourism from the Armenian Diaspora and from Armenia to this monument. According to local Directorate of Tourism and Culture, almost 50,000 tourists visit the ancient city every year, mostly from France, Britain and Japan. Local Authorities are attempting to have Kars included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The international political environment surrounding

Kars casts a 'long shadow' over its potential for tourism growth and preservation of historic structures and in the Kars Province. This is primarily due to the tense relationship between Turkey and Armenia stemming from the closure of the borders between the two countries in 1993 due to the invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan by Armenia. (However, air transport is still ongoing between Istanbul and Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Transportation by bus is still allowed between Armenia and Turkey via Georgia.) Another issue which has accelerated is the controversial issue of the "Armenian Genocide" claims. This has been accentuated by calls of resolutions in various legislatures to recognize the "Genocide", including the U.S., initiated by groups related to the Armenian diaspora and encouraged by groups in the Armenian government.

Caught in the middle is the economic development of the Kars region, the border region of the area adjacent Kars and the entire national economy of Armenia. With the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., Kars stood at the brink of being a major transit point for goods and people, not only between Armenia and Turkey, but Central Asia and China. In addition, this area was the most logical for natural gas and petroleum pipelines coming from Central Asia. Kars was geared to be a regional center for shopping and business which incorporated the border regions of Armenia. These roles were ended with the closing of the Armenian/Turkish border-crossings. The

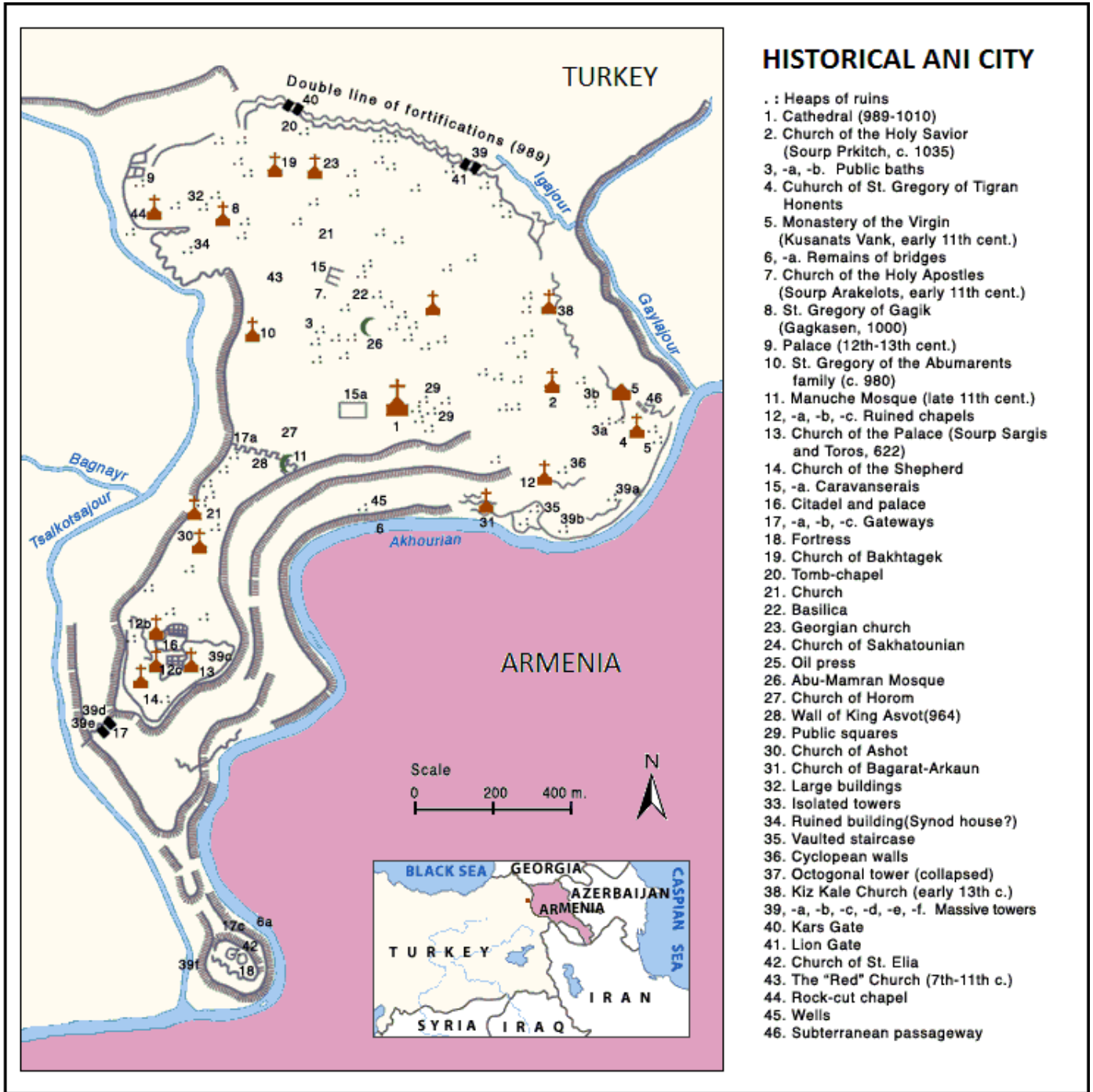


Figure 2. Location map of historical Ani City (Created from Wikipedia Maps).

area is now a "dead-end." The entire national economy of Armenia has been severely hampered by the closing of the border-crossings. To access international markets, Armenia must go through Georgia (at considerable cost) or Iran. The situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan is also problematic. Azerbaijan and Turkey are important strategic partner, connected each other historical, cultural

values and ethnical. Recently there have been a few attempts to normalize relations between Turkey and Armenia. Talks continue between Armenia and Turkey about opening the border between Kars and Gyumri, promising a significant step towards warmer relations between the two countries and a more integrated economic system in the South Caucasus region that cuts

across traditional geopolitical fault lines. However, the protocols signed with Armenia in 2009 to normalize relations are still not ratified being stalled due to disagreements about conditions of negotiation and ratification by both the legislatures of Turkey and Armenian. (Champain, 2004; Davutoğlu, 2011; Ozey, 2002; European Commission, 2011) Operating within this environment are several actors at different levels such as business associations, regional governments, municipal governments, and international NGOs. These organizations are attempting to make agreements, contacts, open up dialog and create an overall non-hostile atmosphere, despite an international policy stalemate. The historical monuments stand in as either barometers or catalysts for cultural interchange between the Armenian and Turkish populations (Ohanyan, 2007).

### **PARA-DIPLOMACY ROLE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION WITH FOCUS ON KARS REGION**

Para-diplomacy is the process of international exchanges through informal or unofficial means through regional, city, non-governmental organizations, business associations or other organizations not directly under the control of a national governmental agency which officially deals with matters of foreign relations. In a globalizing world where there are multiple interests and in situations where state actions are contrary to the interests of certain parties, various organizations are making contacts on an international scale to pursue non-violent actions. Often these para-diplomatic agents can be seen as more viable to resolve issues than state actors. They could also be twined with the concepts of “hard” and “soft” power. These para-diplomatic agents do not use “hard” power such as state actors (treaties, formal meetings, diplomatic exchanges or sanctions etc.), but “soft” power (cultural/educational exchanges, informal and multi-agenda meetings, websites, etc.) The “new kid on the block” for para-diplomatic agents are individuals who are linked by social networking software (that is, Twitter, Facebook, Blogs etc.) and cell phones equipped with digital cameras (Mingus, 2006; Matthew, 2002; McAdams et al., 2010; Sola and Garcia, 2011).

Para-diplomatic agents can enter places that state organizations can not in terms of physical space and in the direction of negotiation. This could be because they are not involved in direct policy making or implementing state policy. This makes them neutral or at least harmless to parties that they are intervening. This may also be because they have other goals which may not be that of any nation-state or the organizations which they are having a dialog. Para-diplomatic agents rely on consensus building and “soft” power and do not have to deal with multiple parties. Examples of well-known para-diplomatic agents are Amnesty International, American Friends’ Service Committee, and Greenpeace

Professional organizations, also function as para-diplomatic agents in some instances.

The negotiations have been stagnant between the governments of Turkey and Armenia. Meanwhile, the Kars region has experienced slow or negative growth due to the economic climate. Part of the stagnation could be attributed to the border being closed between Turkey and Armenia effectively eliminating any economic or cultural interaction between this area and the immediate border area in Armenia and Armenia itself. Before, Kars was one of the chief entry points from Armenia to Turkey. There was also customs office in Kars, which has now been transferred to Erzurum. The population of this region is acutely aware of this situation, but is unable to persuade the government of Turkey to open the border. It should be noted that this is not a trade restriction between Turkey and Armenia as there are still airplane flights between Istanbul and Yerevan, and commerce can be conducted via transit from Georgia and Iran.

There have been several major actors in attempts to ease the tensions between the two countries. One major actor was the former mayor of Kars, Naif Ailbeyoğlu, who made several attempts to act as a go-between the two countries. He also encouraged historic preservation of the Russian and Armenian structures in Kars. One of Ailbeyoğlu’s major actions for amelioration of tensions between Turks and Armenians was the construction of the highly controversial ‘friendship statue’ on a hill outside of Kars, depicting a Turk shaking hands with an Armenian. In January 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan made a speech in Kars in which he called this a ‘freak’ and an insult to the people of Turkey, as the statue is nearby the tomb of Hasan Harakani, a renowned Turkish Muslim scholar, located within the adjacent Kars castle. Soon after Erdoğan’s speech, the Kars Municipality demolished the monument, presumably at the request of the Turkish Prime Minister. There was also party political pressure, as The Mayor of Kars, Nevzat Bozkuş, and Erdoğan are both members of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). The artist responsible for designing the monument is presently suing the regional government (Lagendijk, 2011; Economist, 2011). Presently, the new mayor’s priority is infrastructure and has a lesser emphasis on historic preservation.

An ongoing effort has been quietly on led by the Turkish–Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC.). This organization is one that is jointly operated by representatives in Turkey and Armenia. There have been numerous meetings between business interests in both countries and are also academic interchanges. Their webpage has numerous documents concerning their efforts including one on the effect of the border crossing on the Kars Region. Other than these organizations there have been sporadic efforts by various parties in Kars. However, these could not be seen as on-going organizations aimed at ameliorating the situation between the Kars Area and Armenia (Turkish-Armenian Business

Development Council, 2013).

## **THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND PARA-DIPLOMACY IN THE KARS PROVINCE OF TURKEY**

Historic sites are not value-less in societies. In the purest form they represent exploration into past societies to give greater understanding of past civilizations. They can represent rallying points for current issues. As a symbol they can be used in a nationalistic manner, but can also be used for reconciliation of current social problems. On a local, regional and national level they can be used as a source of public pride. The touristic value cannot be ignored-economically and aesthetically. There are many organizations involved in archaeological digs, restoration, preservation, museums, and promotion. These are important venues for interaction at all scales. These organizations could be associated with national governments, but also with regional/local governments. Many of the non-profits governments have specific aims which are not directly political in nature. However, they do interact with many levels of government. The soft social capital of these organizations cannot be discounted, nor can their inadvertent role be as para-diplomatic agents.

The city of Kars and the region have numerous historic structures, ruins and archeological sites stretching back thousands of years. The earliest site that has been located dates back to pre-historic times. The most prominent site which is recognized as one of the most prominent archeological sites in the world is Ani, a major city on the Silk Road and capital of the ancient Armenian Empire. It was once the rival to Constantinople (Istanbul) and at its prominence major influence in global culture. It was captured by the Seljuk, the Byzantine Empire and then the Ottomans. Eventually, because of decreasing importance of the Silk Road and the turmoil due to constant raids against the city, it was abandoned. Now, all remains are ruins with a few partially intact structures still standing (Figure 2). This archeological site in recent times has further deteriorated because of neglect. Since the site is on the border of Armenia and Turkey and a key location during the Cold War, it was designated a special security zone. There was minimal amount of restorations of the standing structures during this period. The harsh climate in the region resulted in many structures being exposed to the destructive forces of nature. Because of security measures tourism was highly regulated resulting in few tourists venturing to see Ani (Hoskan et al., 2010).

In the last ten years, tensions have eased and the archeological site has been opened to unrestricted tourism. The authors talked to some of the officials at the site and apparently there is sizable representation of Armenia tourists, either as part of the diaspora or from Armenia that visit it. There is no knowledge of an official count of the national origins of visitors. Even though, the

site has been in ruins for over one thousand years, it still carries present cultural significance to Armenians as being one of its historic capitals. It is of such importance that the 10,000 dram American coin is imprinted on one side with an image of one of the churches in Ani.

There is an on-going rapprochement between the Turkish governments with the Armenian people (despite the diplomatic impasse) as with the case of the over thousand year old Armenian Church of the Holy Cross (in Armenian Surb Khach) on Akdamar Island in Lake Van in southeastern Turkey. From 2007 to 2008, the church was restored with funds from the Turkish Government and turned into a museum. On 19 September, 2010, the first Armenian Church mass in ninety-five years was celebrated with subsequent masses held in 2011 and 2012 with thousands attending (Schleifer, 2010), while, some view this sign of reconciliation from the Turkish Government to Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, others in nationalistic Armenian groups view it as propaganda. There has been some controversy about the absence of a cross on the top of the Church and its status as a museum.

Various Armenian groups are also requesting that Armenian Church mass should be allowed in the Holy Apostles Church (Kumbet Mosque) in Kars. Some local groups also are supporting this for both business and as a sign of good will between Turks and Armenians, who have a long related history in the area. Although it cannot be quantified, there are frequent tour groups to Kars specifically to the site, apparently made of mostly composed of those with Armenian ancestry, indicating there is already interest. The authors observed one such group while doing research at the mosque/church. A regularly scheduled yearly mass as on Akdamar Island may have the potential to further ease reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia (Kars Governorship, 2009).

In the city of Kars there are large areas which have a mixture of Ottoman, Russian and Armenian houses and structures, most dating from the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but some much older (Figures 3 to 5). These represent a snapshot of Kars at this period of time almost without intrusion of modern buildings. The condition of the houses are from well preserved to those that are being neglected. The evidence of preservation is sporadic. Outside the city are fortifications and other structures dating back to when Kars was part of the Russian Empire. Due to the lack of interest for historical structures that were not Ottoman, many Russian and Armenian historical buildings have been left to crumble. Some were physically removed and others collapsed. The city at one time had more houses dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but again they were left to deteriorate. The one church that was left standing was the Church of the Holy Apostles dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, but was turned into a mosque recently (Kars Governorship, 2009). Regardless, there are still enough houses to be considered a representative composite of the life during





Figure 3. A view from Ottoman House in Kars.



Figure 4. A view from Russian House in Kars.



**Figure 5.** A view from Armenian House in Kars.

the 19th century, particularly the Russian era and to be designated a historic district.

## CONCLUSION

The situation in Kars and the relations between Turkey and Armenia is a complex one that is developing, but presently stagnating due to impasse between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. This was the chief reason for closing the physical border between the Turkey and Armenia. While it was encouraging that Turkey and Armenia agreed to establish diplomatic relationships and presumably to reopen the border, this effort is also stymied by not only the issue of the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also failure of Armenia to recognize formally the border between Turkey and Armenia and the disagreements about the Armenian “so-called genocide” claims. In the meantime, Kars and Kars Province have been left in limbo as to their status.

On the local scale there is no doubt that economic development is important. This is particularly true for tourism. Kars city is a living museum of the cultures that have passed through this area: Seljuk, Ottoman, Russian and Armenian. The historic city of Ani in Kars province is particularly noteworthy; Tourism would increase

significantly if the borders between Turkey and Armenia were opened again.

There is a developing role for para-diplomatic agents. But, exactly how they fit in with policy development is still developing. Mixing in the role of historic preservation brings in another factor which is value laden in the case of para-diplomatic agents having an impact in Kars, there is a great deal of complexity in the issue, the historic sites and buildings are objects for para-diplomatic agents in Kars which are value laden for the modern populations of Turkey and Armenia. As opposed to being vehicles of reconciliation, they are being used by nationalists on both sides of the border for their own current political aims. There has been limited involvement of national or international groups interested in promoting the preservation and documentation of historic sites in the province. Regional organizations such as the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council are most visible group which is directly involved in the attempt to ease tensions between the two countries.

The present situation is one where there are multiple factors in play which are resulting in an atmosphere of stagnation. While para-diplomatic agents could have a positive role in preserving historic sites and facilitating dialog between Turkey and Armenia, the overall tension between Turkey and Armenia is overpowering any attempts to move the process forward. This inaction

means that the economy in the area is declining, historic monuments are not being preserved and protected in a suitable manner, and the potential role of para-diplomatic agents is being suppressed. This situation is on-going, but its resolution does not appear to be forthcoming in the near future.

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