

Prospects for Normalization between Armenia and Turkey: A View from Yerevan

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ABSTRACT

Since Armenia's independence in 1991, its three successive presidents have invariably expressed their country's readiness to normalize relations with Turkey without preconditions. This is despite unsettled historical issues between these two nations, namely the issue of the 1915 Genocide of Armenians by Ottoman Turkey, and the disappointing record of the last two decades in which Turkey sealed its borders to Armenia and failed to establish diplomatic ties with it. Should ratification fail, it will be very hard for the two countries, and especially for Armenia, to continue with normalization. By spring 2010, mistrust of Turkey grew significantly even among those political circles in Armenia that were originally very pro-rapprochement and argued in favour of it in discussions with nationalists and Diaspora actors. Armenian society's perspective on relations with Turkey is again moving closer to that of the Diaspora.

The current stage of the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement, culminating in the October 10, 2009 signing of the Armenian-Turkish Protocols in Zurich mediated by the Swiss, is consistent with Armenia's interests and commitments to ratify and implement the Protocols. However, in Armenia and especially among its large and influential Diaspora, public attitudes to rapprochement are controversial. Many people believe reconciliation should not take place unless Turkey recognizes the Armenian Genocide. Turkey's denial of the Genocide fosters general distrust of Turkey in Armenian society, as does the fact that Turkey backed Azerbaijan in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, including blocking land communication to Armenia.¹

The central aim of the rapprochement initiated by Armenian leaders in the summer of 2008 was full-scale reconciliation with Turkey. Armenia was prepared to compromise and

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take bold decisions. However, Yerevan insisted that any negotiations or agreements must stay within the bilateral format and steer clear of third party involvement, such as Azerbaijan. Armenia made it clear that attempts to tie the Armenian-Turkish normalization process to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh would frustrate the rapprochement.

For Armenia and Turkey, reconciliation holds many positive opportunities in the field of trade, communication and energy transportation. So far, trade between the two countries goes via Georgia. Open borders are expected to increase trade turnover and benefit people on both sides. In Armenia, opinions are divided concerning the potential economic benefits of opening borders with Turkey. While most businesspeople look forward to reaching international markets at cheaper tariffs, some politicians are concerned that Armenian businesses may be less competitive against their Turkish counterparts or become too dependent on transportation routes via Turkey.

The Regional Context

Ankara's relations with Armenia are linked to its relations with Brussels and Washington. Both Europe and the U.S. feel the pressure and influence of their respective Armenian communities in their policies directed at Turkey. While the Armenian Diaspora's lobby uses their host countries to exert pressure on Turkey, Washington and Brussels use the Genocide issue and Turkey's sealed border with Armenia to criticize and contain Ankara.

In late 2008 and early 2009, a unique opportunity emerged with regard to Armenia-Turkey reconciliation prospects. New obstacles arose for Turkey in its bid for EU accession, which made Turkey more vulnerable to pressures from the West to normalize ties with Armenia. With the election of President Barack Obama in November 2008, the issue of the Armenian Genocide gained prominence in U.S. policies due to Obama's campaign promises to the American-Armenian community.

The Russia-Georgia Five Day War in August 2008 led Russia to modify its attitude towards an Armenian-Turkish reconciliation from one of disapproval to a neutral and even somewhat positive stance. Today, the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement is one of the only projects in the post-Soviet space where the interests of the U.S., the EU, and Russia coincide.

Georgia, in turn, is concerned that Armenian-Turkish reconciliation may undermine its privileged position in regional communication projects. Nevertheless,

it expects this reconciliation to reduce Russian military and political presence in Armenia and the entire Southern Caucasus region, which would be a welcome development for Georgia.²

Azerbaijan remains the only country to unequivocally oppose the Armenian-Turkish normalization. Frustrated by losing a war, Azerbaijan tends to use zero-sum-game logic with regard to Armenia. Furthermore, since reconciliation with Turkey has clear advantages for Armenia, Azerbaijan seems only to see this prospect as detrimental to itself. Ever since the 1994 ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan has counted on the economic blockade against Armenia to weaken it and force it to make concessions. This strategy will no longer work once Armenian-Turkish borders are opened. Therefore, it is not surprising that Azerbaijan is concerned about the prospect of the Armenian-Turkish normalization, which has led to the worst series of crises in the history of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

As for Iran, it has politely kept its distance from the Armenia-Turkey developments although this relationship could potentially challenge Iran's communication projects with Armenia and may enhance U.S. position in the region. However, Tehran has not expressed any disapproval, partly because it would also like to see Armenia, with whom it has had invariably friendly relations, as a stronger player in the region and partly because of the recent positive shifts in Iranian-Turkish relations. Azerbaijan's intensifying contacts with Israel may also have affected Iran's stance.

The Genocide Issue

The Genocide is a very sensitive issue for Armenians in Armenia and in the Diaspora. For moral reasons, neither is prepared to discuss the Genocide. For Armenian society, international recognition of the Genocide is not only about moral compensation but also about security, i.e. recognition of the Genocide by various states, including Turkey, is seen as a pledge against future genocides and a way to reduce the feeling of insecurity still experienced by many Armenians.

However, in the late 1990s, Armenia began to implement a policy in which the Genocide recognition claims became an "unconventional weapon" used for exerting political pressure on Ankara.³ As Turkey used the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a resource for pressuring Armenia, Yerevan used the Genocide as an instrument in its foreign policy. Many actors in Armenia are convinced that in the framework of the rapprochement, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is not particu-

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larly sensitive for Ankara for a number of reasons, foremost of which is that it has to do with Turkey's relations to another country, Azerbaijan. They believe Turkey is only using the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh as leverage or a bargaining chip in

order to distract attention from a far more sensitive issue, that of the international recognition of the Genocide.

International recognition of the Genocide started before modern Armenia was created. The European Parliament passed its Resolution on the Genocide back in 1987 when no one could so much as imagine that Armenia would become an independent country four years later. The Diaspora will continue to lobby for the recognition of the Genocide, and Armenia will continue to use this as leverage until Armenia and Turkey normalize their relations. And, Turkey will continue to invest considerable resources into trying to offset the activities of the Armenian Diaspora rather than focus on its own foreign policy agenda. According to Osman Bengur, a Turkish-American expert and a former Congressional nominee, "By some accounts, approximately 70 percent of the Turkish Embassy's time in Washington is spent trying to persuade leading Americans to support the Turkish position on the Armenian question."⁴

Unsettled relations with Yerevan expose Turkey to pressure from world leaders such as the U.S. and the EU. Some actors in Brussels and Washington use the Armenian question as a tool to pressure Ankara on a range of issues from EU membership to the status of Iraq's Kurdish-populated Northern provinces. This is a growing concern for the Turkish political elite and society.⁵ As the 2015 centenary of the Genocide approaches, efforts to have the Genocide recognized will increase, creating an unfavorable atmosphere for Turkish-Armenian reconciliation efforts.

The Turkish domestic dimension is also important with regard to the Genocide issue. The murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Istanbul, the murders of Christian missionaries in Trabzon and Malatya and the Ergenekon case all point to the existence of entrenched nationalistic, anti-Armenian and anti-Western sentiment in Turkish society.⁶ The current state of affairs is criticized by moderate political actors and groups within Turkey's civil society and elite. Acute problems experienced by the Armenian minority in Turkey, combined with the historical legacy, have led some Turkish public activists and officials to call for a positive change in Ankara's policy towards Armenia.



Photo: A.A. Hikmet Saatçi

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The Nagorno-Karabakh Factor

Neither the Road Map declaration nor the Protocols contain any mention of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Protocols were signed by the Turkish Foreign Minister, which indicates that Turkey is committed to continuing the rapprochement based on the conditions negotiated with Armenia and without any additional preconditions. All efforts of Turkish officials to include any additional conditions for the ratification of the Protocols would only increase Armenia's mistrust of Turkey as a reliable and sincere partner. Essentially, as far as Yerevan is concerned, linking normalization with Nagorno-Karabakh puts the former process in jeopardy.

Many people in Armenia believe Turkish society is not fully aware of the importance that Nagorno-Karabakh has for Armenians. Many Turkish politicians continue suggesting that Armenia make concessions in the conflict in exchange for normalizing relations and opening borders with Turkey. Yet the 17-years of sealed borders have shown the futility of efforts to push Armenia towards conces-

sions over Nagorno-Karabakh as a precondition for reconciliation with Turkey. Had Armenian politicians had the mandate to make concessions over Nagorno-Karabakh in exchange for normalization with Turkey, they would have made them by now. There is a thin red line that Armenia can not cross during negotiations with Turkey; Nagorno-Karabakh is clearly not a bargaining chip that Armenia can use in its negotiations with Turkey concerning the potential normalization of bilateral relations. In fact, for almost two decades, Armenia has been prepared to pay a very high price for the independence and security of people living in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷

It is very likely that Turkey has a one-sided view of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, as seen from the perspective of Azerbaijan. This is largely due to the insufficient dissemination of information by Armenia itself as well as the prevalence and persistence of historical stereotypes. Contrary to what most Turks believe, the independence struggle of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh is similar to what happened in other parts of the world, e.g., in Kosovo or Northern Cyprus. The selective application of just one principle of international law, inviolability of borders, to Nagorno-Karabakh is also questionable. Because at least two more international law principles apply to the conflict: (1) self-determination and (2) the non-use of force in the settlement of international conflicts.⁸

From the perspective of Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, there is no historical precedent of a nation which won a war for independence and has been successfully building statehood for two decades suddenly renouncing everything it achieved. The Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh believe any negotiations with Azerbaijan must proceed from the existing *status quo*, be based on mutual compromises, and include participation of Nagorno-Karabakh in the talks. This position directly stems from the war experienced in the 1990s. Nagorno-Karabakh now has a fortified border well configured for defense and a buffer zone all along the former administrative border of the Soviet Karabakh. Because of the buffer zone, the potential contact line between the armies of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan is considerably reduced. In addition, this new border makes it easier for the Armenian forces of the Nagorno-Karabakh to fight off any potential attack by Azerbaijan's much larger forces. If Nagorno-Karabakh withdraws its troops from any of the regions that form the buffer zone, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh fears that its defenses will be weakened, giving Baku new hopes for a military solution. This apprehension is strengthened by the fact that Azerbaijan is building up its military budget and threatening a new war.⁹ Nagorno-Karabakh is not prepared to lower its defenses unless the final peace agreement will be sign

with Azerbaijan that defines the status of Nagorno-Karabakh based on mutual compromises.

In a meeting with Turkish journalists in December 2009, Armenia's Foreign Minister Nalbandian said that had Armenian-Turkish normalization originally been tied to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, rapprochement would never have begun.¹⁰ His words illustrate the understanding in Armenian society that attempts to tie the two together would be the best way to suspend the rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Yerevan is aware of the reasons for Azerbaijan's disproportionate reaction to the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, a reaction that led to the worst series of crises in bilateral relations between Baku and Ankara. As mentioned previously in this article, Azerbaijan's perspective is based on a zero-sum-game logic. Azerbaijan believes that if something strengthens Armenia, it proportionately weakens Azerbaijan. This logic is applied to the normalization process, since normalization is expected to benefit Armenia in many ways, it must, therefore, be detrimental to Azerbaijan. This is exacerbated because Azerbaijan is frustrated by losing the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia is aware that Turkey is trying to handle its problems by regularly assuring Azerbaijan that the rapprochement with Armenia will be to some degree dependent on the settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh to the advantage of Azerbaijan. However, this deadlocks the whole process. An analogy would be for Armenia to make normalization with Turkey dependent on the resolution of the Cyprus conflict.¹¹

Prospects and Challenges

Armenian-Turkish reconciliation began because circumstances were favorable: the U.S. and EU strongly endorsed reconciliation efforts; hopes for democratic change in Turkey made it possible from the domestic Turkish perspective; and the Russia-Georgia War secured Russia's blessing, speeding up the process. Should ratification be stalled, frustration could overtake the rapprochement and leave things worse off than they had been to start with. New factors will hinder normalization, including growing mutual distrust, mounting support for nationalist groups in both countries, and possible changes in the attitudes of external actors.

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Armenia has taken its initial step to ratify the Protocols by submitting them to the Constitutional Court. The Court judged the protocols to be in accord with the Constitution and submitted them to the Parliament exactly as signed in Zurich. However, Turkey's Foreign Ministry was disillusioned by the descriptive section of the Court's verdict on the as-

sumption that it affected the content of the Protocols. In turn, Armenia regarded the Turkish Foreign Ministry's statement as a means by some actors to use the Court decision as a pretext to stall ratification and laying all the blame on Armenia. However, from a legal perspective, the decision only means that the Protocols do not contradict the Armenian Constitution.

Should ratification fail, it will be very hard for the two countries, and especially for Armenia, to continue with normalization. By spring 2010, mistrust of Turkey grew significantly even among those political circles in Armenia that were originally very pro-rapprochement and argued in favour of it in discussions with nationalists and Diaspora actors. Armenian society's perspective on relations with Turkey is again moving closer to that of the Diaspora.

Amidst dwindling hopes that Turkey might ratify the Protocols, public attitudes in Armenia are becoming radicalized with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as well as to the Armenia-Turkey relationship. As Turkish officials make renewed statements tying ratification to Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian experts and politicians insist that Armenia require recognition of the Genocide as a precondition to negotiations with Turkey.¹² As more Armenians feel disappointed by the perceived failure of the efforts to normalize relations with Turkey, growing societal pressure and the opposition's criticism may push the Armenian government to toughen its stance on Nagorno-Karabakh. The official Armenian position in negotiations with Turkey may also harden, as Armenian leaders have already indicated they may recall Armenia's signature under the Protocols should they be persuaded that Turkey has no intention of ratifying the Protocols in a "reasonable time frame."¹³

Such developments will clearly lead to a vicious circle in the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement and very probably take it back to square one. In order to avoid new tensions, the two countries need to at least try to sustain relations at the present level and avoid damaging them by unnecessary radical statements and actions

by public officials on both sides. A source of hope is that although efforts to normalize diplomatic ties and open borders have not yet been successful, track-two diplomacy between the two societies is going well and has already reached a new stage where mutual ties are gradually shedding the legacy of stereotypes and phobias. The Armenians and Turks who worked to promote reconciliation through civil society contacts, debates, and exchanges are now past the point of no-return and have made considerable gains.

If rapprochement is still successful, it stems from the asymmetry of Armenians' and Turks' perceptions of their mutual relations and interests. Whereas relations with Turkey are a major security issue for Armenia, for Turkey, the Armenian question is an issue of historical liability that affects its international image and relations with its Western allies. For Armenia, rapprochement is a security and domestic issue, while for Ankara reconciliation with Armenia could yield major political dividends at the international level.

Endnotes

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