

Turkish-Armenian Protocols: An Azerbaijani Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This commentary addresses Azerbaijan's position prior to and in the aftermath of the Turkish-Armenian Protocols signed in October 2009. It critically analyzes Azerbaijan's reactions to the Protocols, Turkey's diplomatic initiatives, and its perception of Turkey's position in this process. By signing the protocols, Turkey did nothing in practice against Azerbaijani interests except to reiterate the interdependence between any Turkish-Armenian rapprochement and Armenia's move on the NK settlement. The commentary argues that the inexperienced Azerbaijani administration failed to manage Azerbaijani society's reactions to Turkey's signing of protocols with Armenia. It also discusses the consequences of a possible opening of Turkish-Armenian border for Azerbaijan and the region, and concludes that the way out of the frozen conflicts is contained in Turkey's proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.

Azerbaijani society cautiously and closely watched the unfolding of the initial stages of Turkish-Armenian normalization efforts. The Azerbaijanis were familiar with Armenia's well-known intentions toward Turkey and Azerbaijan based on the well-established Armenian policy of the past 18 years. During this period, the top priority of Armenian foreign policy on the Turkish front was to establish relations with Turkey "without preconditions," meaning they could put aside the claims of genocide and territorial claims towards Turkey and save those issues to be the subject of future inter-state relations. On the Azerbaijani front, Armenia had been seeking to alienate Turkey from Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) issue with the purpose of isolating Azerbaijan in the international arena and leaving it lonely and desperate. By isolating Turkey from the NK issue, Armenia hoped that it would be much easier to prolong the status quo until its military gains could be

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legalized. Thus, Armenia had the following perspective: by having normal relations with Turkey and being in military political- alliance with Russia, Armenia would strive to survive economically and strengthen its position, while at the same time holding the occupied Azeri territories until the desired outcome on the NK negotiations.

While confidential negotiations between Turkish and Armenian diplomats had been going on for a long time, the real door opened after the Georgia-Russia war when Russia gave its support and approval for Armenia's ties with Turkey and a new environment emerged in the Caucasus. It was in this new setting that the complicated relationship between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey came to the fore.

Will Turkey Abandon Azerbaijan?

The negotiations between Armenia and Turkey gained momentum within the intensified peace efforts of Turkey and Russia in the South Caucasus region, thus raising expectations that the concerted actions of Turkey and Russia would change the situation on the ground. Within this context, the Azerbaijanis did not oppose Turkish-Armenian normalization, and indeed welcomed intensified Turkish involvement in the region. However, Azerbaijani support for Turkish intercession was based on the assumption that this process would not unilaterally benefit Armenia, but would rather contribute to the comprehensive peace and development of the entire region. Azerbaijan believed that any rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia would take time and that Turkey would not sign any agreement if the occupation remained in effect.

Naturally, the details and the tone of the secret negotiations between Turkey and Armenia were not well known to the Azerbaijanis, although Turkish officials – without going into details – made statements to the effect that “Turkey would not act against Azerbaijani interests. Azerbaijanis hoped that the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement would bring with it a “parallel processes on NK settlement,” and that “Turkish-Armenian relations would bolster the success of both tracks.” Over time, despite the exchange of consultations between Azerbaijani and Turkish officials, the occasional, more dubious statements of Turkish officials, in tandem with the climate of the Turkish media and the foreign press, intensified suspicions among Azerbaijanis regarding the real situation.

For example, from the live interviews on Turkish TV of then Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, it was clear that Turkey was determined to sign an agreement with

Armenia. Babacan essentially claimed that “there were no problems remaining to delay an agreement between Armenia and Turkey.” However, responding to questions on the Azerbaijani track he argued that the issue of “Azerbaijani occupied lands were very complex and complicated and we should focus on our track.” Such remarks implied that Turkey could in fact separate the Azerbaijani issue from the Turkish-Armenian normalization process.

Azerbaijan expected that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue would be inserted into the protocols since it has been the major obstacle in closing borders and the non-establishment of diplomatic relations

Following these developments, beginning in February 2009, the Armenian president also changed his language and position in his negotiations on NK with his Azerbaijani counterpart. He was apparently encouraged by the approaching agreement and the content of the agreement between Armenia and Turkey.

The formulation of the so-called road map by Turkey and Armenia announced in April 2009 led to the belief that the Turkish side had made a firm decision to sign the agreement with Armenia. This development led to the further deterioration of Azerbaijani perceptions of Turkey, causing disappointment among Azerbaijani society.

The widespread public disappointment in Azerbaijan in part resulted in the Turkish prime minister’s visit to Baku in May 2009, during which he addressed the Azerbaijani people and reaffirmed Turkey’s commitment to the Azerbaijani cause and Turkey’s determination to stand together with Azerbaijan until the lands under occupation are freed. Indeed, the visit gave greater hope to both the public and the government. Consequently, more consultations followed between Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, the signing of October protocols in Zurich quickly revived the previous suspicions among Azerbaijani society.

The aftershocks both in Azerbaijan and Turkey following the signing of these protocols turned the issue into a matter of Turkish internal politics. The Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute has become an issue of Turkish politics due to the popular opposition to Armenia of both Turkish and Azerbaijani societies. This turn of events could be considered a major achievement from the Azerbaijani side, since for the past 20 years of the conflict, the issue had never been part of internal politics and had never been a subject for extensive debate in Turkish society.

By signing the protocols, Turkey did nothing in practice against Azerbaijani interests except to reiterate the interdependence between any Turkish-Armenian rapprochement and Armenia's move on the NK settlement

In any case, Azerbaijan accepted the protocols signed in October 2009 with calm and hoped that the process would lead to change in the entire region. It expected peace and reconciliation signals from Armenia in return. But instead, the Armenian officials have launched a domestic and international media campaign, spending their energy not on

harmonizing peace efforts but to persuade the international community that the Turkish-Armenian protocols have nothing to do with the Azerbaijani occupied lands. Watching these moves unfold, Azerbaijan concluded that the Armenians had at long last merely disclosed their genuine intentions; this conclusion provoked Azerbaijani and Turkish societies to move together and raised enormous opposition towards the protocols.

The Azerbaijanis naturally asked, if Armenia did hold a genuine desire for peace in the entire region, then why would it start a surprisingly hysteric campaign in an effort to "prove" that these two naturally interconnected inseparable issues are separate? What was the purpose behind this campaign? One thing is clear for the Azerbaijani public: through this behavior, Armenia has been trying to convey a message to the international community that they have no desire to leave these territories by peaceful means. Among the Azerbaijanis, this is a strongly-held belief proceeding from the nature of the Armenian policy. In their view, this point was unequivocally proven by the statements of Armenian president S. Sarkisyan in London before a Chatham House audience in early February 2010, where the entire speech was based on "arguments" to justify Armenia's aggression and the country's intention not to leave the occupied lands. Ironically, the blatant nature of the speech has served to strengthen Azerbaijan's arguments and heightened opposition to the protocols on the grounds that they are one-sided.

The Possible Opening of the Turkish-Armenian Border

My prediction is that if the Turkish-Armenian border is opened, the Azerbaijani people will find themselves in a hopeless, desperate situation, and will lose faith in Turkey. Interstate relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey would devolve from their current, most trusted allied relationship, into relations such as those shared by Azerbaijan and any other country. Moreover, the nature of the authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan could produce unpredictable and unacceptable actions towards Turkey such as the introduction of additional tariffs on trade, supply, and



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transportation, or the emergence of economic and educational projects aimed at restricting Turkish influence in Azerbaijan.

Under such circumstances, the gap between Azerbaijan and Turkey would widen and Armenia could take advantage of Azerbaijani frustration towards Turkey. This would allow Armenia to continue its occupation, since the potential “threat” from Azerbaijan’s powerful Turkish brethren would cease. In this event, Azerbaijan would expect that the occupied territories could be held more easily by Armenia. Turkey would be seen as giving tacit approval to the Armenian occupation. Under such conditions, the term “occupation” would lose its sense and the so-called peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia would last for decades. Any international sanctions or condemnation of Armenia and demands for withdrawal would be forgotten. The end result: Azerbaijan would be forced to accept surrender.

Due to Armenia’s current, unacceptable behavior, the Azerbaijanis do not support the argument that if Turkey would ratify the protocols the situation could be changed in a positive direction within a short period.

If the borders remain unopened, Armenia is likely to harden its already uncompromising position on the NK settlement process, and prolong the issue for an uncertain period. Armenia will try to present the failure of the protocols as a pretext for stalling the Azerbaijani track. Armenia will continue to make more international diplomacy, blaming Turkey for the failure of the protocols and for the failure of the NK settlement process. Second, it would intensify the genocide recognition campaign in the US congress and elsewhere, and by this means try to exert pressure against Turkey, triggering reciprocal animosity.

What Do the Azerbaijani Government and People Think?

The disappointment and consequent reaction of Baku's government over the football events in Bursa, the unacceptable attitude towards the Turkish flag in Baku, and the aftermath of these events, have shown how inexperienced Baku is and how unprepared Baku's leadership was for any change in the region.

In expressing its disappointment with the Turkish signature of the protocols, the Azerbaijani government went far beyond a response to the real situation. Azerbaijan's reaction made it appear that Turkey's decision was part of a long-expected pretext to distort bilateral relations, creating uncertainty in bilateral communication. The surprising and irresponsible actions of Ilham Aliyev's government, characterized by an increased distance from Turkey, triggered anger, frustration and outrage among the political opposition, independent experts and the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijani society.

As a matter of fact, by signing the protocols, Turkey did nothing in practice against Azerbaijani interests except to reiterate the interdependence between any Turkish-Armenian rapprochement and Armenia's move on the NK settlement. In reality, as many people argue in Azerbaijan, what Turkey was striving to do was to change the stalemate that had lasted for the past 15 years, since Azerbaijan's corrupted government had done absolutely nothing to bring about the removal of the occupation, except for issuing propagandistic statements. The main disadvantage of the protocols was that they did not fully embrace the existing realities in the region. Moreover, Azerbaijan expected that the NK issue would be inserted into the protocols since it has been the major obstacle in closing borders and the non-establishment of diplomatic relations.

This development has shown that the Azerbaijani regime's political capacity and capability are incredibly insufficient to address the stakes and act in tandem with Turkey in an effort to handle the gentle diplomacy taking place in the region. While the key was in Turkey's hand, the proper coordination of timely steps

from both sides could have yielded the desired outcome for both countries. Instead, the steps Azerbaijan did take were incredibly naïve, contrary to Azerbaijani national interests and harmful to the Turkish-Azerbaijani allied relationship. Unfortunately, such steps continue to be made, leaving the future of bilateral relations uncertain.

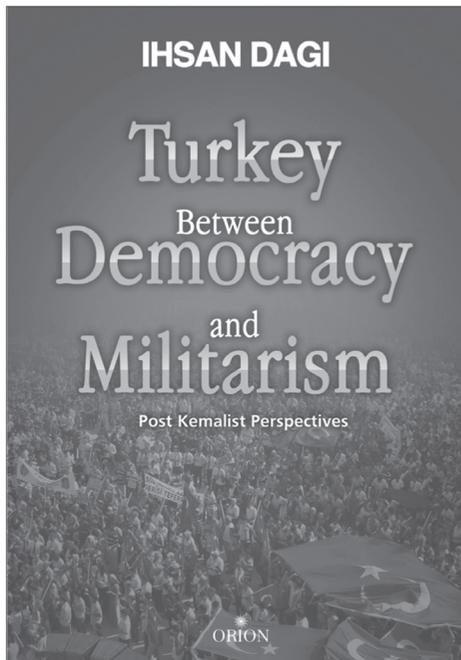
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Meanwhile, the people of Azerbaijan have a solid faith that Turkey would never betray them, and they hope that Prime Minister Erdogan will keep his word and fulfill his promises to the Azerbaijani people. The Azerbaijani people do not want Turkey to play the role Egypt played in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since Turkey for the past 18 years has not established relations with Armenia purely due to Armenian aggression. Any step contrary to this policy would lead to hopelessness in Azerbaijan and a loss of trust toward Turkey. The statements and interventions from the outside world that Turkish-Armenian relations could contribute to the creation of a good environment and confidence in the region for the removal of the Armenian occupation sounds eerily similar to the environment that existed on the eve of the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty in the mid 1970s concerning the Palestinian issue. It is telling to recall that the expectation that the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty would lead to a speedy resolution of Palestinian issue did not come true for decades.

Conclusion

As a step to promote the environment for the ratification of the protocols and establish comprehensive peace in the whole region, Azerbaijan, despite great challenges to its sovereignty, has accepted the OSCE sponsored “Madrid Principles” for ending the conflict, while Armenia has to date rejected the peace plan, indicating once again its intentions not to end the occupation peacefully. The real way out was proposed by the Turkish leadership when it offered the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform which could allow all nations in the region to enjoy the benefits of mutual cooperation.

Hope remains that the Turkish-Armenian protocols could be the path to this Platform. However, Armenia’s effort to use the protocols unilaterally for the realization of its aggressive nationalistic agenda is doomed to failure from outset, and is not compatible with Turkish initiatives. So the ball is in Armenia’s court, since, both Turkey and Azerbaijan are waiting to see what Armenia’s response will be to good will proposals contained in the Caucasus platform idea.



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