

# The Turkish-Armenian Debacle

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## ABSTRACT

*Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols on October 10, 2009 at Zurich University in Switzerland, with a view to opening a new chapter in bilateral ties, as well as improving the troubled relations between Turks and Armenians in general. But the signing ceremony in Zurich had started inauspiciously. The problem turned out to be the seemingly intractable issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, which cast its shadow over the process at the outset. After Karabakh, the second key issue that emerged was a ruling by the Constitutional Court of Armenia, which said that the protocols in question could not stop the government of Armenia from pursuing its duty of trying to get international recognition for the genocide allegedly perpetrated by Ottoman Turks against Armenians. These two topics effectively blocked the process enshrined in the protocols. But how could these problems not be foreseen? What were the two governments expecting in this respect when signing the protocols?*

Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols on October 10, 2009 at Zurich University in Switzerland, with a view to opening a new chapter in bilateral ties, as well as improving the troubled relations between Turks and Armenians in general. The historic nature of the step was evidenced by the presence of the world's premier foreign affairs dignitaries at the signing ceremony, such as US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the EU's Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana, and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. Also in attendance was Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey, whose country had played a key role in mediating what was hoped would somehow end the "Feud of the Century," and pave the way for better understanding between these two estranged nations.

Since the beginning of the negotiations, expectations were high. Talks, resulting in the

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signing of the protocols were held behind closed doors for over a year. It was assumed that both sides were carefully working out all the details of the Protocols, and that the roadmap for normalizing Turkish-Armenian relations would be laid out. Why else, would secret negotiations under the auspices of Switzerland continue for so long? And why would so many key countries be ready to oversee this 'historic' outcome?

Four months after the signing ceremony in Zurich, the two protocols – one proposing the establishment of diplomatic ties, and the other the development of ties between the two countries on every level possible – have floundered seriously. So much so that we are now at a point where Turkish-Armenian ties may be worse off than they were at the beginning of this diplomatic exercise.

### **An Inauspicious Start**

In fact, the signing ceremony in Zurich had started inauspiciously. At the outset, the ceremony was jeopardized as news filtered out that the content of the remarks by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and by Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian planned after the signing of the two protocols could cause disagreement. Circles close to the diplomats in Zurich indicated at the time that both sides were somehow trying to introduce “qualifications” to the Protocols, thus, signaling conditions for the proposed roadmap to progress.

The problem turned out to be the seemingly intractable issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, the mainly Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan, which was overrun by Armenian forces shortly after countries in the region declared their independence from the Soviet Union. As matters stand, the protocols do not mention Karabakh, and carry no indication that this issue is a “precondition” for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties. Sources indicated, at the signing ceremony, that Foreign Minister Davutoğlu wanted to reference this problem in his remarks, while Foreign Minister Nalbandian wanted to do the opposite and indicate that these protocols have nothing to do with the Karabakh issue.

Both foreign ministers were trying to appease the public outcry in their countries over these protocols, with nationalists in both cases calling the signing of the protocols a “sellout.” In Turkey, the accusation was that “brotherly Azerbaijan” had been betrayed in this process, and the sharp and unexpected outcry from Baku fed this perception. At the heart of Azeri discontent was the fact that the protocols in question proposed the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, closed unilaterally by Turkey in solidarity with Azerbaijan after Armenian forces

not only captured Karabakh, but also extensive Azeri lands outside the enclave. Baku made it amply clear before the protocols were signed that the opening of this border would represent a strategic blow to its efforts to put pressure on Armenia over Karabakh. Thus, Turkey's diplomatic game plan was spoiled even before the start of the normalization process in Zurich.

The protocols were, therefore, born under a black cloud, as Foreign Minister Nalbandian threatened to leave the ceremony without signing the documents, something that would have resulted in a diplomatic fiasco and an embarrassment to the foreign ministers gathered there to oversee this "momentous occasion." While Secretary of State Clinton shuttled between the sides to prevent such an outcome, reports indicated that it was Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov who pulled rank on Foreign Minister Nalbandian, telling him he had no choice but to sign the protocols in order to avert a diplomatic fiasco. The crisis was avoided when it was decided that neither foreign minister would make any statements in Zurich, and simply sign the documents. It was highly apparent, however, from Mr. Nalbandian's unsmiling face as he was putting his signature on the protocols, that there was something seriously amiss.

### **Baku Lobbies Turkish Nationalists**

The Karabakh issue, thus, cast its shadow over the process at the outset, and this problem grew when Baku sent deputies to Ankara to lobby the Turkish nationalists opposing the normalization process with Armenia. Needless to say, they found receptive ears in an opposition that has not missed any chance to criticize the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP.

The matter thus became a domestic issue overnight, angering Prime Minister Erdoğan, and causing an unprecedented chill in ties between Ankara and Baku. Seeing the political risk for himself at home, Erdoğan nevertheless travelled to Baku and in an address to the Azeri Parliament gave assurances that the Turkish Parliament would not ratify these protocols – as is required – until there was movement in talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue.

But this, in effect, amounted to saying that there would be no normalization of ties in the foreseeable future, since there is not much chance, even today, that the Karabakh talks continuing under the auspices of the OSCE are going anywhere. Feeling the international pressure, and worrying that the whole exercise would backfire on Turkey, the government started searching for a way to reduce this international pressure on Ankara by somehow trying to shift the blame on

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to Yerevan. Then on January 12, 2009, the Constitutional Court of Armenia pronounced its judgment on whether the obligations stipulated by the Protocols complied with the Armenian Constitution or not and provided the AKP government with the opportunity it was seeking.

The first official announcement from the Court was that the protocols were in line with the Constitution of Armenia. But when the Court's issued its eight page detailed verdict, there were a number of stipulations and restrictions concerning the implementation of these protocols. The main stipulation indicated that these protocols could not violate the government's duty, as inscribed in the country's founding document, to try and gain international recognition for the genocide Armenians say was committed against them by Ottoman Turks.

After Karabakh, this is the second key issue that emerged and it would bog down the protocol process for the foreseeable future. Ankara immediately responded to the Armenian High Court's decision by declaring it had "damaged the protocols." By doing this, Ankara tried in this way to shift the blame for the negative turn of events in the normalization process with Armenia on Yerevan.

### **Turkish Arguments Fall on Deaf Ears**

Ankara, subsequently, sent senior diplomats to Switzerland and Washington to convince those capitals that if there was a problem it was due to the Armenian side. The basic Turkish argument was that the Zurich Protocols foresaw the establishment of an independent commission of historians who will look into the events of 1915. Ankara said Armenia's Constitutional Court had preempted the work of this commission, making its establishment worthless. According to certain outsider observers, the reason that Ankara placed such importance on this particular aspect of the Court's ruling and that it had gone ahead with these protocols was to basically delay the annual emergence of Armenian genocide resolutions, especially in the US.

After all, the only real cost of the lack of diplomatic ties with Armenia for Turkey concerns the genocide issue. Otherwise, Armenian-Turkish relations do not hold an important impact on Turkey in other areas, even for trade and investment prospects, or energy and transportation issues. It was thought in Ankara that if

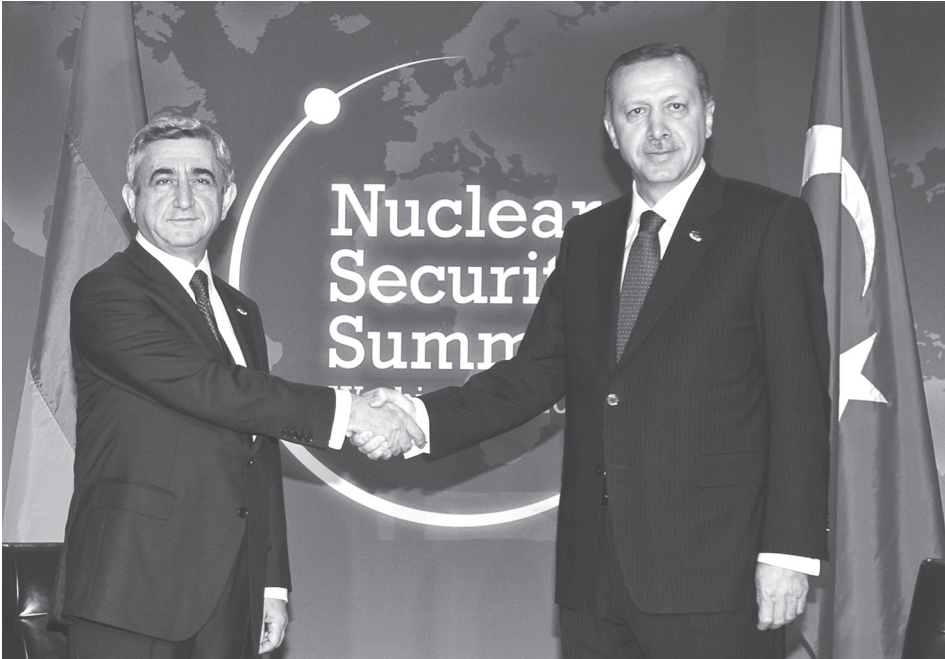


Photo: AA, Tolga Adanah

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these ties can be normalized, especially to the advantage of Armenia – which has been suffering greatly from its isolation in the Southern Caucasus – then the genocide issue in Turkish-Armenian ties will not have the prominence it has today.

If that was indeed the calculation, it was a naïve one since large portions of the Armenian Diaspora in the West and the nationalists in Armenia clearly hated the prospect of a rapprochement with Turkey, and were working to scuttle the Zurich Protocols right from the start. It was, therefore, more than likely that the Armenian lobby in the US would work overtime to bring a genocide resolution to Congress since the passing of such a resolution would clearly end all hope of the Protocols being implemented, given Ankara’s reaction.

But the problem for the Erdoğan government was that it could not convince its interlocutors in the West that the Armenian Constitutional Court had actually “damaged” the protocols. Actually, a counter argument was made, stating that Ankara was the one who had damaged the process, by using Karabakh as a precondition. No, it was searching for excuses to get out of this engagement with minimal diplomatic damage. The Constitutional Court’s ruling was a pretext.

A process that was supposed to normalize ties with Armenia has resulted in not only the souring of Turkish-Azeri ties, but also Turkish-US ties

Even Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov who some in Ankara were expecting would somehow balance the criticism leveled against Turkey from the West – given the positive ties developing between Ankara and Moscow – came out and said he saw nothing in the Armenian

Constitutional Court's decision preventing these protocols from being ratified and implemented. Lavrov went on to add that the link Turkey had established between the ratification of these protocols, and the Karabakh issue was an "artificial" one. Put another way, the general perception on the Russian side was also that Turkey was engaged in a "face saving" exercise, with its real intention being to actually back-pedal on the Zurich Protocols.

But the worst for Turkey concerning the perennial issue of Armenian genocide resolutions was yet to come because of the developments in the US Congress and the Swedish Parliament.

### **Turkey's Discontent with the US**

The Foreign Relations Committee of the US House of Representatives passed a resolution, on March 4, 2010, albeit by one vote, asking President Obama to honor the memory of the Armenians who had perished in the genocide in 1915. The focus shifted immediately from Turkish-Armenian relations to Turkish-American ties, with Turkey accusing the Obama Administration of "not working hard enough to prevent this resolution" in the Foreign Affairs Committee, and immediately recalling its Ambassador in Washington back to Ankara.

The frustration in Ankara towards the US was amplified since it was clear that Obama administration was trying to use the resolution in the Foreign Affairs Committee to put pressure on the Turkish Parliament into ratifying the Zurich Protocols signed with Armenia. In fact, these developments in Washington have had the opposite effect. They have, more or less, ensured that the Zurich Protocols will not be ratified anytime soon. The last thing the Turkish Parliament will do, given the highly charged political environment domestically, is to ratify any document under such international pressure.

In the meantime, the Erdoğan government is sending unprecedented terse messages to Washington, indicating that any assumption that Turkey can be "toyed around with" in this way is totally off the mark. Many in Ankara believe Washington should have known better than to take for granted that Turkey would

acquiesce in this resolution. The rejection by the Turkish Parliament in March 2003 of a government bill to allow American troops to invade Iraq via Turkey should have been a lesson for the US.

### **The Process Goes Awry**

A process that was supposed to normalize ties with Armenia has, therefore, resulted in not only the souring of Turkish-Azeri ties, but also Turkish-US ties at a time when the Obama administration was aiming for a “model partnership” with Ankara.

More trouble came Turkey’s way, however, when on March 11, 2010, the Swedish Parliament passed an Armenian genocide resolution with only one vote; a development which also made Ankara immediately recall its ambassador to Stockholm. Prime Minister Erdoğan also immediately cancelled a planned visit to that country, thus damaging what were considered to be otherwise excellent relations between Sweden and Turkey.

It must be said that a much softer tone was discernible in Ankara’s criticism of the Swedish government, when compared to the reaction to the US administration. This was due to the fact that the Swedish government had worked very closely with Ankara right from the start against this resolution, and did not use it to put pressure on Turkey to ratify the Zurich Protocols.

Some observers in Stockholm maintain that the resolution passed unexpectedly in the end, with only one vote, due to political maneuvering in the Swedish Parliament because of the upcoming elections. What made the result in Sweden even more unexpected was that, unlike the situation in Washington, the resolution in question actually failed to pass the Foreign Relations Committee of the Swedish Parliament as a result of close cooperation between the Turkish and Swedish governments.

Washington in contrast, as far as Ankara is concerned, stepped in only at the last minute after President Gül called to persuade President Obama to intervene in the matter because Turkey considered it a top priority. The American side is now trying hard to convince the Erdoğan government that the resolution passed by the Foreign Relations Committee has no hope of coming to the floor, as it did in Sweden. But Ankara wants to see how the situation evolves and to hear what President Obama will say on April 24, before it decides how to proceed with Washington.

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## What Went Wrong?

How could these problems – some of which arose immediately as soon as news of the protocols between Turkey and Armenia broke last year – not be foreseen? There are many similar questions that come to mind.

In the first instance, Ankara seriously underestimated the Azeri reaction and Baku's ability to mobilize nationalists in Turkey against the Erdoğan government. Because of this, relations between the two countries remain chilly today, despite the appearance of "all is well" between Baku and Ankara.

If Ankara thought that these protocols would end the international lobbying for recognition of the events of 1915 as genocide, then this was a seriously short-sighted and naïve view. It is unlikely that this issue will go away even if ties with Armenia are normalized, since there is a large international Armenian Diaspora with powerful political supporters over whom Yerevan has no control. Moreover, Armenia is beholden to the Diaspora because of its desperate domestic political and economic conditions.

The Judgment of the Armenian Constitutional Court confirms that the domestic political situation in that country is not simple. The somewhat muddled judgment of the Court's is contradictory within itself, which indicates clearly that the Court made an attempt to find a middle ground between Armenia's legal, political, and diplomatic needs. Instead, this effort created only further confusion. For example, while the Court says that the Zurich Protocols are in compliance with the Armenian Constitution it places unnecessary restrictions on the protocols, hence contradicting the Court's own opinion that the protocols are indeed "in compliance with the Constitution."

## Conclusion

The question now is "can the situation be saved" or "are we heading for an outcome that is worse than when the process began?" It is clear that both Ankara and Yerevan are focusing their diplomatic efforts on how to get out of these Protocols with minimal damage to their reputations and maximum blame placed on the other side for this failure.

It seems unlikely, therefore, that the situation can be repaired at the governmental level. This means that other players may have to enter the fray to change the atmosphere to a more positive one. Those players could end up being President Abdullah Gül and President Serge Sarkissian, who have been maintaining



a friendly dialogue now for over a year, since the former travelled to Yerevan for a Turkey-Armenian soccer match.

Otherwise the prospects for a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement appear slim at this time, and this whole issue has started to noticeably damage Ankara's ties with the West. This, in turn, appears to be pushing the Erdoğan government to seek friends and partners elsewhere, which raises questions about whether Turkey is abandoning its traditional Western orientation.

The bottom line is that this effort to normalize ties with Armenia has demonstrated how erroneous assumptions and miscalculations can have adverse effects on other aspects of Turkey's foreign policy, aside from making matters worse between Ankara and Yerevan.

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