

Turkish - Armenian Rapprochement: Renewed Interest?

The international media has shown renewed interest in the revitalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, which has spawned a number of conferences and meetings. It comes as no surprise that during the Annual Conference on US-Turkey relations on 31 October, U.S Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that progress in Armenian-Turkish relations[1] would be a positive step [if] the Turkish government ratifies the Armenian-Turkish protocol. Clinton's remark that "normalization takes bold choices and strong political will, not only on the part of Turkey, but on the part of all of the countries" indirectly underscored Azerbaijan's role in this process.

Two Years after the Protocols

The Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, which officially began in September 2008 with what became known as "football diplomacy", concluded in October 2009 in Zurich with two protocols, one on the establishment of diplomatic relations, the other on

the development of bilateral relations. This so-called "football diplomacy" has generated serious concerns in Azerbaijan, particularly with regard to how the improvement in Turkish-Armenian relations will affect the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It is well known that the main reason for the closure of the Turkish-Armenian border was the Armenian occupation of Kelbajar, one of seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region, in 1993. On April 22 2010, Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan issued a decree whereby the ratification procedure of the Armenia-Turkey protocols on normalization of relations between the two countries is "suspended". Accordingly, on April 26, the bill on ratification of these protocols was withdrawn from the agenda of the National Assembly. After that, the trajectory of developments changed, while Armenia signed an agreement prolonging the lease for Russian military bases in Armenia, which strengthened Russia's position in Armenia. The corollary of this development was the strengthening of strategic relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan; the two

countries agreed upon a strategic partnership in September 2010. One of the controversial issues right now, believe many in Azerbaijan, is that the protocols are strongly connected to the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia has officially denied this, but experts there accept this notion. Last year, the international community awaited tangible results from the OSCE Astana Summit, but Armenian experts acknowledged that the revival of the normalization process was strongly dependent on the outcome of further steps in the resolution of NK conflict.[2]

In fact, after two years, it is not so difficult to assess the miscalculations and failed assumptions that have occurred following the Zurich protocols.

Bullish forecasts, Miscalculations & Mistakes

Despite the hopeful forecasts by some analysts in the wake of the 2009 Turkish-Armenian protocols, an assessment two years on reveals the miscalculations and false assumptions that were made:

1. Turkish-Armenian rapprochement will enable Armenia's integration to the West

It was assumed both in the West and in Turkey that via the normalization process, Armenia

would turn its face to the West. In terms of geography, Armenia's only access to Europe is via Turkey, and opening the border will be facilitate politically integration to Europe. Improvements in relations between Ankara and Yerevan, most U.S strategists contended, would help not only to stabilize the volatile South Caucasus but also to reduce Armenia's political and economic dependence on Russia and Iran – which clearly serves American interests.

However, it is common knowledge that for as long as there are Russian military bases inside Armenia and along her borders, and Armenian airspace is under the protection of Russian forces, Armenia can easily resist any sort of pressure from Azerbaijan or Turkey, and can safely deter any threat to forcefully liberate the occupied territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. After all, it is clear to Russia and many others that peace with Turkey alone is not enough to integrate Yerevan to West or to reduce Russian influence in this country. This was proven, in part, when Armenia signed an agreement to prolong the lease for Russian military bases on its territory in mid-2010, a move which strengthened Russia's position in Armenia.

2. Armenia will recognize the territorial integrity of Turkey



Armenia's August 23, 1990 declaration of independence states that "The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia", which immediately complicates bilateral relations. According to the mainstream perspective in Turkey, the use of the term "Western Armenia" to refer to Eastern Anatolia implies territorial claims. One of the benefits Turkey saw in the 2009 protocols was Armenia's acceptance of Turkey's territorial integrity. However, although the Turkish-

Armenian protocols were approved by the Armenian Constitutional Court on 12 January 2010, the Court stated that the implementation of the protocols did not entail Armenia's official recognition of the existing Turkish-Armenian border established by the 1921 Treaty of Kars. In doing so, the Constitutional Court rejected one of the main premises of the protocols, i.e. "the mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries as defined by relevant treaties of international law".

Before the official Court decision, Armenian approach was consistent. The 22 September 2009 speech by Armenia's former foreign minister Vartan Oskanian demonstrates Armenia's position: In our region, even with our friendly brother country Georgia, we have not 'recognized current existing borders.' Demarcation is an ongoing issue between us. The same is true for Georgia and Azerbaijan. There, demarcation hasn't even begun. But there are diplomatic relations.[3]

3. Recognition of 1915 events as genocide would happen with the normalization of relations with Armenia

U.S President Barack Obama explicitly declared during his election campaign that the 1915 events should be recognized by U.S as genocide. Thus, in order to prevent "April Syndrome" – every year the U.S president makes a speech regarding the 1915 events, and Turkey always waits to see whether or not the term "genocide" will be used- the Turkish government chose a way to cooperate with the U.S-led peace and normalization process. The Obama administration played the role of a catalyst rather than a founder, since secret negotiations had already started between the two parties long before Obama was elected. While aiming to reduce international pressure regarding the genocide issue by improving relations with Armenia, Turkey risked losing its closest ally – Azerbaijan.

In Armenia, the January 12 2010 session of the Constitutional Court emphasized that Armenia will continue its effort to achieve international

recognition of the 1915 events as genocide - and indeed, on March 4 2010, the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S voted 'yes' with 23-22 votes to HR 252. This development reignited the debates in Turkey about the possible consequences of the U.S's genocide recognition, and the chances of salvaging the stalled "normalization process" with Armenia,

4. After signing the protocols, Armenia will be contribute constructively to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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When Turkey and Armenia signed the protocols, the main criticism came from Azerbaijan, on the basis that the agreements did not mention the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Perhaps Turkey's perceived obligation to link the normalization process to the Karabakh issue should have been indicated before the start of negotiations, given that the closure of the borders between Armenia and Turkey was itself the result of the occupation of Azerbaijani territory by Armenian forces. Nevertheless, due to the delicate nature of relations between Turkey and Armenia, which also caused problems during the signing of the protocols, this problem could not be put forward explicitly. However, opinions expressed by the Turkish media and in official statements suggest that during the signing of the protocols, Turkey

wanted to use the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to encourage Armenia on the one hand, and to urge the Minsk Group's Co-Chair countries to increase pressures on Armenia on the other hand. But after the signing of the protocols, which increased public tensions in Azerbaijan, Turkey can only link the ratification to the resolution of the NK conflict as such: "If the process [of Armenian and Azerbaijani negotiations] speeds up, the ratification of the protocols with Armenia will also accelerate,"[4] which is what the prime minister said the day after signing the protocols. In fact, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan called for the combination of the two peace processes when he met with U.S. President Barack Obama on December 7 2009, and with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on January 13 2010- but Armenia refused this component, and the Armenian Court rejected any connection between the new agreement with Turkey and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (January 12 2010).

Thus regardless of what is said about the resolution of the NK issue, Armenia is still far away from reaching a solid peace deal. The assumption- that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was

imminent, and that the signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols would provide additional stimulus for Armenia to expedite the resolution process, or at least 'return' some territories to Azerbaijan- failed to materialize.

5. The "Zero Problems" Policy will work in Armenia, and throughout the Caucasus

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, the author of the "Zero problems with Neighbours" or "Rhythmic Diplomacy" policy, wrote in his book "Strategic Dept" that any state willing to occupy a position of power in the Caspian Sea region - and in the Caucasus - should seriously consider Azerbaijan's position. In this sense, moving forward with Armenian relations at the risk of losing Azerbaijan seems both naive and ill-advised. The Turkish-Armenian rapprochement from the perspective of the "zero problems" policy showed that the Caucasus is not a playground for testing theories, but a vital global strategic hub. It proves that "zero problems" must be in place and assured first of all within the Caucasus, between neighbors. There were miscalculations on Turkey's part; it assumed that Armenia was so desperate for the reopening of the border that it would allow Turkey to call the shots in terms of the wording of the protocols.

6. Stability in the Caucasus and the role of the Cooperation Platform as an effective platform for peace

Turkey introduced the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, as a multilateral agreement between actors in the Caucasus, excluding the EU and US, in pursuit of peace across the region. The CSCP has not yet been implemented, because not all of the actors in the region can participate. Unable to establish a region-



al framework for conflict resolution in the Caucasus, the CSCP has been non-effective to date.

7. Turkey will happily go against Azerbaijani interests

The miscalculations on Armenia's part were based on the belief that Turkey would not balk at following policies running counter to Azerbaijani interests, and that the rapprochement would damage this strategic partnership. Turkish-Azerbaijani relations occasionally deteriorated, and sometimes were in crisis, but the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement has also had a positive impact on Turkish-Azerbaijani relations; last year, the two countries signed not only a Strategic Partnership Agreement, but also more recently an agreement regarding selling gas to Turkey. Additionally, NGOs, media, and educational institutions intensified and expanded their relations.

8. Azerbaijan is an observer and will react to the normalization process based on emotions


The opening of the Turkey-Armenia border has been subject to criticism from both the opposition and ruling party in Azerbaijan. When Turkey and Armenia agreed to begin negotiations on diplomatic relations, this raised concerns in government and amongst the Azerbaijani public, across extreme nationalist groups and moderates, giving rise to discussions of Turkey's policy aims in Armenia. Generally, the public dismissed Turkish attitudes as "naive". The government was not emotional and did not voice its position until the official declaration of the "road map" for Turkish-Armenian relations in April 2009, and the signing of the Protocols in October 2009. Then Azerbaijan appealed to Turkish public opinion, reaching out across Turkey's government, political parties, civil society, and population at large, calling upon them to take Azerbaijan's interests into account. The more nationalist members of Turkey's ruling party and the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) opposed the deal with Armenia, on the grounds that it would be

akin to selling out their Turkic brethren in Azerbaijan, and that absolutely no compromise should be made on the genocide debate. Thus, this process prompted Azerbaijan to exercise its regional veto power, revealing the changing dynamics of international foreign policy, to act in time to protect national interest.

The observer during the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process was Georgia, where public opinion saw the thaw between Turkey and Armenia as a U.S project whereby Georgia's position region was supposed to be taken over by

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Armenia. In general, Georgia believed that the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement would weaken its position as a major transit country in the region[5], and that Tbilisi would lose its place in energy projects. Secondly, Armenia's reduced dependency on Georgia would enable it to be more active in supporting Armenian nationalist groups active in the Georgian province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, thereby destabilizing the region.

There are additional assumptions about the possible benefits of opening the border, notably that it will boost economic development; however this seems limited to Armenia; Turkey will likely suffer from the deterioration of its strategic relations with Azerbaijan. 

Conclusion

In this context, it is of particular importance that the U.S. and the EU get more seriously involved in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict if they want to see tangible progress in the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. Turkish-Armenian negotiations brought about the signing of the protocols in 2009, in which the leaders of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs countries were involved; Azerbaijanis want to see same process for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In short: the protocol-based normalization process will neither end campaigns for the recognition of the 1915 events as genocide nor necessarily advance the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as long as the process remains in limbo. Overcoming the traditional way of thinking is necessary in order to change the status quo in the Armenian-Azerbaijani-Turkish triangle. Armenia must foresee the implications of its policy decisions in the context of the broader geopolitical agenda of the Caucasus. Starting in 2012, Azerbaijan will be a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and as such a new face in international arena. Baku will likely be gradually decreasing its war rhetoric regarding the liberation of Armenian occupied territories. This could be a big challenge for the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Armenia triangle. Azerbaijan will accept the opening of the Armenian –Turkish border, but because

the reason for closing it in 1993 was Armenia's occupation of the Azerbaijani district of Kelbajar, this move will not change the dynamics of conflict resolution; nor contribute to the foreseeable revitalization of Turkish-Armenian relations at the level of Track 1 diplomacy.

Notes:

* **Zaur Shiriyev** is a Foreign Policy Analyst at the Center for Strategic Studies in Baku, Azerbaijan and the Executive Editor of Caucasus International journal

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