

TURKEY AND ARMENIA: A SECOND CHANCE?

The Armenia-Turkey normalization process which began in 2008 was the most promising development in the South Caucasus for years but its stalling in April 2010 has made the situation there much worse. Although there is a heavy weight of history around the Armenian-Turkish relationship the most important driver for the process was Turkey's desire to play a greater role in the Caucasus. A revival of the process would actually be in the long-term interest of Azerbaijan and there is still a chance that it can be restarted after the coming Turkish election if certain conditions are met.

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For the last 20 years, the conflicts of the South Caucasus have been stuck in a series of vicious circles. In 2009, in an environment of predictable gloom, the Armenia-Turkish rapprochement suddenly offered the prospect of something different and positive. Unfortunately, however, when the normalization process stalled in April 2010, it left the region in an even worse position than it was before, with the situation over Nagorno-Karabakh more dangerous than it has been for a number of years. The challenge for 2011 is to see if the process can be revived and a negative dynamic can become a positive one again.

The process broke down primarily, although not exclusively, because the Turkish side made an explicit linkage between normalization with Armenia and progress in the peace talks over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Although the Turkish government made no secret that it wanted to see Azerbaijan get something from the process, the Karabakh issue was deliberately not mentioned in the two Protocols signed in Zurich in October 2009.

Whatever Ankara's intentions, by first moving forward and then hitting the brakes on the Protocols, it managed to tie the outcome of a difficult process (Armenia-Turkey) to an even more difficult process (Nagorno-Karabakh) and both suffered. Armenian President Serzh Sarksian had used up much of his already modest domestic political capital on the Turkey process and had nothing new to put on the table in the Karabakh talks. This was a major reason why 2010 was a particularly bad year for the Karabakh peace talks, with only three meetings between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, no progress in the substance of the negotiations, an increase in bellicose rhetoric and a rise in violence on the ceasefire line between the two armies. Unfortunately, we can only expect more of the same, or even worse, in 2011.

It is worth reviewing why Turkey went into this process and what can it expect to get out of it. I see there having been three main drivers for Armenia-Turkey normalization on the part of Ankara.

The first is the most nebulous, but also perhaps the most fundamental. This is an identity issue for Turkey. The Armenian issue is the most painful one in modern Turkish history and it is simply not healthy to pretend it does not exist. Put plainly, there were around two million Armenians in eastern Anatolia in 1914 and a few years later there were none. Around two million people had been either killed, deported or assimilated.¹ To suggest that the Armenians somehow left their

¹ These figures are of course disputed and there is no space to enter into a detailed debate here. The official Armenian figure is that 1.5 million Armenians died and a great number were deported. The recently published "Black Book" of Talat Pasha, his notes written during the events, says, "[The] true number of Armenians in 1914 can be taken as 1,500,000 and the number of Armenians remaining in the provinces...to be around 350,000 to 400,000." (This comes from an Ara Safarian article in the Armenian Reporter. I can find you the reference or you can go back to the original Turkish).

homeland voluntarily is as naïve as suggesting that the Azerbaijanis who fled their homes during the Karabakh war did so willingly. This of course is the question which troubles Turkish intellectuals. It is not so much about genocide – after all the word “genocide” post-dates the actual tragedy of 1915 by 30 years, having been coined in 1944 in a book written by Rafael Lemkin (and published by my employer, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). The issue is one of the identity of the modern Turkish state and the argument that Turkey will be stronger by confronting its past and the truth about what its minorities in general, and the Armenians in particular, suffered during the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. However, with the exception of a few thoughtful individuals, this is an issue more for the professional classes than for the political elite.

The second motivation is the one that the Armenian diaspora is keenest to talk about. A successful rapprochement with Yerevan would more or less kill off the campaign to have international parliaments call the 1915 Armenian “Great Catastrophe” a genocide. It would be foolish not to see this as a motivation for the Turkish government. Successive governments in Ankara have spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours, battling against this campaign, aggrievedly withdrawing ambassadors, issuing statements – all with only limited effect. But times have moved on. The “G-word” is no longer taboo in Turkey itself and is uttered at conferences in Istanbul and Ankara. The American-Armenian lobby had identified the election of Barack Obama as its best hope in years for a U.S. president to pronounce the word “genocide”. As a candidate, Obama listened to the views of advisers such as Samantha Powers and obviously made up his mind to use the word. In the event, on being elected, he was evidently persuaded that it was politically too explosive to utter the word, but his 24 April statements have gone much further than his predecessors. His use of the phrase “Great Catastrophe” takes the dignified route of calling the 1915 killings by the name that Armenians themselves use.

In other words, warding off genocide resolutions was definitely a motive for Ankara but it is misleading to think of it as the only one. The genocide recognition campaign, which first got going in the 1960s, has surely passed its high-water mark and the debate is moving to a different place. If that were not the case, the Turkish government would surely have approached Washington to be its mediator with the Armenians, as this would be where the battle would be fought. In

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actual fact, in 2007 they approached the Swiss foreign ministry in order to talk directly to Yerevan. The U.S. State Department only became actively involved in the process in early 2009. Arguably, American involvement made things worse because the domestic U.S. political timetable, with the looming question of what would or would not be said about 1915 on 24 April, interfered with the slower diplomatic process being chaired by the Swiss. Ankara and Yerevan were pressured into releasing a statement in April 2009 just before 24 April. Then in 2010 the two sides were again put under pressure to resolve their differences, once more in advance of a 24 April deadline, and the Armenian side decided to withdraw.

The fact that the normalization process was led by Swiss and not Americans underlines that the third motivation driving the Turkish side was probably the most important one. This was that Turkey was seeking a role in the South Caucasus. Turkey was frustrated that it was a bystander and not a direct player in this neighboring region and realized that it could not engage there properly without normalizing relations with Armenia. As Alexander Iskandarian observes, Ahmet Davutoğlu's celebrated foreign policy slogan was not "no problems with nice neighbors," it was about resolving issues with the neighbors Turkey had problems with. Furthermore, Iskandarian points out, having an open border with your neighbor in the 21st century should be a norm, not a privilege.

Along with Russia, Turkey is the biggest economic player in the South Caucasus. It is the chief trading partner of both Georgia and Azerbaijan and does at least 200 million dollars worth of trade with Armenia via Georgian territory despite the closed border between the two countries.² But, politically, Turkey has punched way below its weight for many years.

Turkey has played a surprisingly small role even in those parts of Georgia in which it has a historic interest. Ajaria on the Turkish border was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878 and briefly tried to secede from Georgia and join Turkey in

² This is a conservative figure, based on World Bank reports. Unofficially the trade may be higher than that.

1918. In the 1921 Treaty of Kars, Turkey won provisions from the Georgian side that the people in Batumi would be allowed autonomy and that the Turkish side would have free access to the port. However, those provisions lapsed in practice during the Cold War and Turkey played almost no role in the politics of Ajaria after 1991. When the region was in crisis in 2004 it was the Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov who flew in to negotiate; Turkish diplomats were nowhere to be seen.

In August 2008, Turkey again watched in alarm as two countries with which it had friendly relations, Georgia and Russia, went to war, with the conflict touching Abkhazia, a place with which Turkey also has historic ties. Turkey knows that it would stand to lose catastrophically –along with everyone else– if the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were to reignite. It would be in the unenviable position of being put under pressure to give military help to Azerbaijan, while possibly seeing conflict in Nakhichevan, an area on its direct border, and damage to Caspian Sea oil and gas pipelines.

The war in Georgia helped persuade Turkish President Abdullah Güл to make his historic visit to Yerevan on 6 September 2008, to watch the Armenia-Turkey football match. It coincided with Turkey's attempt to launch the well-meaning but vaguely formulated Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Platform. But the initiative went ahead without a clear strategy as to how Azerbaijan's inevitable objections should be handled. Would Baku just be told that this process was good for them anyway and that they had to swallow it? And if so who was going to do the hard talking to Baku? Or would the Turks proceed in the expectation that a breakthrough could be made on the Karabakh issue and that they could use the need for parliamentary ratification as an escape clause to back out of the process, if they wanted to?

Whatever is the true story here, Azerbaijan moved to block the process and succeeded in doing so. The sad irony is that there is actually good reason to believe that Armenia-Turkey normalization would be good for Azerbaijan and good for the Karabakh peace process. Azerbaijan would of course suffer a symbolic short-term blow by seeing Armenia open its border with its “Turkic brother”. They would see this as a defeat for their foreign policy strategy of the last few years. But the longer-term dynamic would surely work the other way and make the resolution of the Karabakh dispute more possible. Turkey would get much more leverage over the Karabakh process, having an embassy in Yerevan and relations with both sides of the conflict. Through normalization, Armenia would begin to lift its siege mentality and over-reliance on diaspora groups. This in turn would focus attention on the continuing Armenian occupation of the seven Azerbaijani territories around Nagorno-Karabakh and put more pressure on Yerevan to be flexible and cut a deal with Baku.

In my view, the major flaw in the Protocols process was that none of the international players involved –and the United States was best placed to play this role– made the case sufficiently strongly to Azerbaijan that it should not fear Armenia-Turkey normalization and talked to Baku on that basis. Had U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the South Caucasus not in July 2010, but in January and publicly stood in Baku and told the Azerbaijani president and public, “We support this process but we also support you and we think that this process will be good for you,” she would not have deflected all the criticism, but she could have blunted the aggrieved (and successful) Azerbaijani campaign to halt the Protocols.

As it stands, the current situation holds nothing good for anyone. Armenia and Turkey do not derive the domestic and international benefits of a successful normalization process. Azerbaijan has won what could be called a “PR victory”, having successfully blocked the normalization process. But it has only received in return greater Armenian intransigence on the country’s “number one issue”, the Nagorno Karabakh dispute, and had to watch as a fearful Armenia signed a new military deal with Russia in August 2010. That can hardly be counted as a great success.

All is not lost however. The Protocols process is suspended, not dead, and there is a chance that it can be revived after the Turkish election in June 2011. For this to happen I see four pre-requisites. First, the AKP wins a new majority. Second, it sets reviving normalization with Armenia as a priority, as it reviews its many foreign policy challenges. Third, the Armenian side makes a statement reaffirming that it attaches no pre-conditions to the Protocols process, thereby satisfying Turkish concerns about the Constitutional Court commentary.³ Fourth, Azerbaijan is given something which symbolizes “progress” in the Karabakh conflict but falls short of the unrealistic demands that the Armenian side withdraw troops from territory in return for the opening of the border – a bargain that no Armenian politician would ever accept.

This is a tough list but not an impossible one. There may be an inclination to remain very cautious on this issue but Turkish decision makers should also consider that doing nothing also has its cost. Turkey faces the prospect of suffering greatly if the situation over Nagorno-Karabakh continues to deteriorate. Whereas, if it manages to press forward with the Protocols process, in coordination with renewed efforts by the Minsk Group over Nagorno-Karabakh, the positive effects could be tremendous.

² In January 2010, the Armenian constitutional court issued a ruling on the Protocols, declaring them to be in accordance with the Armenian constitution. The accompanying commentary said that the Protocols were also in accordance with the country's 1991 declaration of independence, which sets recognition of Genocide as a goal. This disturbed many in Turkey who saw it as adding a new precondition to the process.