

Summer 2008 - From the Desk of the Editor

The ARI Movement's 10th Annual Security Conference: "Looking Ahead: Managing Turkey's International Relations in the Coming Decade" took place in Istanbul this past September. It was held in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. This issue of TPQ includes perspectives from a number of the speakers at the conference as well as additional views that complement the analysis of regional developments and Turkey's positioning.

Richard Giragosian, who we are delighted to welcome to our Editorial Board as Advisor, provides an analysis of the closed session of the conference in the following pages. A former US Senate staffer, Giragosian is an analyst based in Armenia, offering us different perspectives and insights regarding a range of issues, from Turkish-U.S. relations to the challenges facing Turkey in the neighboring regions of the South Caucasus and the Middle East. In this issue you will also see a new section prepared by Giragosian with which we hope to keep our readers abreast of official developments in our neighborhood as well as relevant think tank events and analysis in Washington and Europe. We hope to make this a regular section- this issue's coverage spans June 2008-September 2008.

We devoted an issue of TPQ earlier this year to Turkey's role in international organizations, with a particular emphasis on Turkey's candidacy for a rotating non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the term 2009-10. Elections took place in October, and indeed, Turkey gained a seat with 151 votes. With this exciting achievement comes new responsibilities and challenges, analyzed by a number of the authors in this issue.

With the advent of the Georgian-Russian War, the Caucasus has again figured high on the international agenda. Heartening developments regarding the mediation efforts seeking to resolve the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and the potential for a normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia have also brought the region back into the spotlight – however optimism here is a cautious one, no less because both issues have been seen to be on the brink of breakthrough time and again for the past 15 years. The fact that Russia appears to be playing a dominant role in both tracks is another factor that raises eyebrows.

Much speculation surrounds Russia's role in the recent initiatives between Turkey and Armenia that led President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan on September 6th on the occasion of the world cup qualifier football match. Skeptics point to the fact that a premature rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia will lead Azerbaijan into the lap of Russia, will allow for Russia to stir unrest in Georgia without concern that Armenia would be ever more isolated by crisis to its north, and that Russia, if it holds the reins, will ultimately constrain Turkey's maneuvers in the region. Advocates point out that only through open borders with Armenia can Turkey play a meaningful role in the region and weaken the monopoly of Russia, oligarchs and hawkish political actors. A new consensus is being struck in Turkey: only through cooperation with Russia in the Caucasus and

Central Asia can we gain enough ground to pursue our interests without being dependent on any one bloc of power.

European Union membership for many in Turkey seems less and less viable. This, coupled with the perception that its interests with the United States are diverging; and that U.S. influence in the region has waned- at least until a new president is elected- a search for alternatives has been articulated by representatives of the security bureaucracy, the foreign ministry and members of the AKP government alike. Representatives of countries that have long-standing experience dealing with Russia, however, fear that Turkey is missing an opportunity by not using its “pivotal position” to tilt balances in favor of the Western bloc and that Turkey could be “led on” by Russia’s tactful statecraft.

Clearly the conflict between Georgia and Russia in August offered Turkey the ability to package its initiatives with Armenia as an issue of its own foreign policy agenda -as opposed to one dictated by Europe or the US- alongside its suggestion of a platform that brings together the countries of the region.

For Turkey it is clearly optimal that the resolution of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict inch forward in parallel to progress in opening the border with Armenia. Is an agreement of basic principles with regard to Nagorno-Karabagh really on the brink this time around? And if that process gets derailed, will the process which was launched with Armenia end up leading to yet more disillusionment for those who long for a normalization in Turkey-Armenia relations? There is still a year to before President Serzh Sarkissian’s planned visit to Turkey. If there is little to show for the initiative that Sarkissian’s invitation triggered, will Sarkissian’s hold on power in Armenia dwindle? How will Turkey ensure that momentum in recent initiatives is not lost, yet again? The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform Turkey proposed may need to be phased out or modified. Could Turkey be taking steps that it can not follow through with?

Historical hurdles still loom large in Turkey-Armenia relations. If Turkey is indeed hinging progress in rapprochement with Armenia on an agreement based on historical terms - ranging from the establishment of a commission mandated to come up with a shared understanding of history to the cessation of genocide resolutions by the Armenian diaspora in legislatures of third countries - this will prevent progress. Turks and Armenians cannot in the short term be expected to agree on history given how disparate their perspectives stand today. The best that can be hoped for is a free environment for historical studies to be conducted, for the power of persuasion to play its course, for taboos to be challenged and for different perspectives to be voiced, tolerated, and respected. Ultimately, it is the people that need to find peace with each other, and that is a long-term process that only openness can foster.

Geostrategic calculus and domestic democratization are obviously two separate issues, being pursued by different teams in Turkey. If there is reason to move slowly regarding the former, there is none regarding the latter. Ensuring full freedom of expression need not wait. And taking steps in this direction can help prevent a backlash from delays in

ongoing negotiations for establishing normal, official relations between the Turkey and Armenia.

On October 15th, election day in Azerbaijan, a panel organized by the Jamestown Foundation in Washington DC discussed these issues. In response to Armenian criticism that Turkey links normalization of relations with Armenia to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, Paul Goble reminded the audience that the practice of linking one foreign policy item with another is the “way business is done” in policymaking; in a world where every country has multiple and crosscutting sets of interests, leveraging the issues that its counterparts want, is how countries make leeway on their own priorities. He also warned against the assumption that most actors have an interest in the resolution of the thorny issues between Turkey and Armenia, “many people benefit from not having a solution” he added.

Armenia-Turkey relations, as they are played out in Washington, are traditionally marked with “blame games.” At the symposium, I underlined that Turkey should recognize and restore Armenian heritage in Anatolia and wholeheartedly agreed with my Armenian colleagues that freedom of expression limitations in Turkey was a significant problem. It was disappointing that this was perceived as a “sell out” of Turkey by some of the participants of Turkish origin. As, if not more disappointing, was the fact that there was little or no interest among the Armenian diaspora participants to honestly discuss the challenges Armenia now faces in overcoming its deficits in democracy and good governance. Strengthening our country’s credentials and benchmarking higher standards of democracy and pluralism should be our priorities.

The victory of Barack Obama in the U.S. Presidential elections was being announced as this TPQ issue went to print. A much needed wave of motivation sweeps through not only the U.S., but the world. Faced with economic crisis, mounting tension and dissatisfaction on many other fronts, people needed this excitement and source of optimism.

We would like to extend a special thanks to the Friedrich Naumann Foundation Turkey Office for supporting the publication of this issue of TPQ. We are also grateful for the contributions of Yapı Kredi Bank, Finansbank, Borusan, Yapı Kredi Koray İnşaat, and Fortisbank.

As always, looking forward to your feedback,

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