

TURKISH-U.S. RELATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE ARMENIAN ISSUE

Although several broad geopolitical issues have contributed to a fundamental shift in strategic relations between Turkey and the United States, the Armenian issue represents one of the more complex challenges facing Turkey today. Specifically, the Armenian issue comprises a daunting set of unresolved problems, ranging from the genocide issue to the Nagorno Karabagh conflict. The significance of the Armenian issue goes well beyond the confines of the Caucasus, as the current stage of Turkey's transition will be particularly impacted by its approach to relations with Armenia and its handling of the deeper aspects of the Armenian issue.

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The long history of bilateral relations between the Republic of Turkey and the United States has not been without occasional divisions and disputes. In recent years, however, the very foundation of Turkish-U.S. relations has been altered by the dynamic changes in the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape. Although the crisis in relations between the two countries was most evident in the public display of differences over U.S. policy related to Iraq, we have seen deep and profound tension become an underlying trend in the relationship.

A long-standing factor shaping the course of Turkish-American relations has been the “Armenian issue.” Specifically, the Armenian issue comprises a daunting set of unresolved problems, ranging from the genocide issue to the Nagorno Karabagh conflict. At the current stage of the Turkish transition, the Armenian issue has garnered an enhanced significance, with direct implications for the course of Turkey’s evolving role and mission as a NATO member and an aspiring member state of the European Union (EU).

The policy choices and political challenges now facing the Turkish leadership, therefore, pose unique questions regarding the trajectory of the modern Turkish state. But perhaps most importantly, there is also a unique opportunity for a new Turkish approach to relations with Armenia and its handling of the deeper aspects of the Armenian issue. Moreover, the depth and scope of the transition within Turkey today offers an important opportunity for reevaluation and modification of Turkish-Armenian relations. The real test for Turkey, in terms of its relations with Armenia, is actually a tangible reward, although new Turkish policy must emerge as a result of sophisticated design, for it will not happen by default.

The Development of Turkey’s Approach to Armenia

The last decade and a half has seen an evolution in Turkish foreign policy. This evolution has been matched by a related, yet secondary trend of internal change as well. Stemming in large part from the broader pressures of strategic geopolitical change on a global scale, the course of Turkish foreign policy has also been subject to the more concrete pressures of modernization from within Turkish society itself. These pressures have resulted in shifts in both Turkish “security culture” and its approach to regional security.¹

The most profound change for Turkish foreign policy was the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. The abrupt end to the Cold War led to an immediate questioning of Turkey’s decades-long role as a front line NATO state defending Western interests. Turkey was quick to adapt to the new geopolitical realities, however, and quickly redefined its role as a “proxy power” for Western, NATO and U.S. interests in the security vacuum that emerged in the former Soviet regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia. This Turkish power projection was welcomed by the U.S. and the NATO alliance, which saw an opportunity for Turkey to counter both the traditional Russian dominance and to check any potential Iranian bid for influence and power in these regions.

This new Turkish initiative was not confined to merely the Caucasus and Central Asia, however, as Turkey also targeted the Black Sea region, the Balkans, and the Middle East. During the early 1990s period, Turkey also launched a new multilateral engagement in the

¹ Ali Karaosmanoglu, “The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey,” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, No.1 (Fall 2000).

arena of regional security structures with a new emphasis and even took the initiative, as in the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, for example.²

The course of Turkish relations with Armenia was, therefore, rooted in this broader context of activism and engagement. The Turkish approach toward Armenia has also been subject to the demands of the overall Turkish engagement with the other former Soviet states, with an obvious and natural preference for the Turkic states. And given the conflict over Nagorno Karabagh, the dominant role of Azerbaijan within this Turkish strategy was an inherent impediment to the establishment of a normal or stable relationship with Armenia.

The Özal Initiative

The Turkish initiative to engage the new states of the Caucasus and Central Asia was driven by then President Turgut Özal. Under Özal's direction, Turkish policy went beyond even the parameters of the former Soviet Union, however, and garnered greater geopolitical gains by positioning Turkey as an integral element in the planning and execution of the U.S. military's Gulf War that drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. This move also confirmed Turkey's engagement in the Middle East and strengthened the evolving military partnership with Israel.

But, it was the newly independent Turkic states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan that were the centerpiece of Turkish policy in the early-to mid-1990s.³ As the president of the first nation to formally recognize the independence of these states, President Özal attempted to consolidate Turkish patronage by hosting an inaugural summit of Turkic states in 1992. This was followed by a flurry of commercial overtures, pledges of diplomatic support and an early effort to revive the historic "Silk Road" trade route connecting Central Asia via Turkey to the West.

This Turkish bid for regional power and influence in Eurasia only exacerbated Armenia's sense of isolation and insecurity. Consumed by the daunting demands of sudden independence, conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh, and the collapse of the Soviet economic system, Armenia was caught between what it perceived as a threatening revival of pan-Turkism and a Turkish refusal to even respond to Armenian overtures for normal relations. This was most evident in the Turkish refusal to extend diplomatic relations to Armenia, despite its recognition of Armenian independence in January 1992.

Turkish Ambition Turns to Frustration

By the time of his death in 1993, President Özal's ambitious initiative seeking Turkish dominance in Central Asia and the Caucasus had dramatically stalled. Although several factors contributed to the demise of the Özal strategy, the most important factor was the disappointment experienced by the Turkic states. In the initial post-Soviet period there were inflated expectations of the wonders and riches of the capitalist system, and with the early flurry of Turkish promises of trade and pledges of aid, there was a pronounced disappointment with the meager results.

² Karaosmanoglu (2000).

³ The other Central Asian state, Tajikistan, was seen as too distant from Turkey due to its stronger links and affinity with Iran. The civil war in Tajikistan was also a serious obstacle to Turkish initiatives during that time.

The new independent leaders saw Turkish patronage as attractive but arrogant, and despite the appeal of a fellow Turkic and Islamic counter to Russian domination, the Central Asian states were particularly angered by a Turkish approach that was perceived as more condescending than partnering. And for Azerbaijan, the disappointment was rooted in more than the dimension of economic gain, as it looked to Turkey for much more in terms of military and political support against Armenia.

Despite the frustrations and limitations of the Özal initiative, it did, however, succeed in building a solid foundation for Turkish influence among the newly independent states. But by the mid-1990s, the focus had shifted considerably, becoming dominated by energy and the complicated pipeline politics of exporting oil and gas from the Caspian Sea. For Turkey, the Caspian energy issue served to solidify its geopolitical value as the sole Western power able to effectively outmaneuver both Russia and Iran as the principal partner for Azerbaijani energy development plans.

Leveraging Energy as Strategic Power

As the energy issue also spurred a deepening of strategic relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia was quickly overwhelmed by a sophisticated Turkish geopolitical strategy leveraging energy for regional power. This strategy was two-pronged: the first was to establish Turkey as the dominant energy player in the region, while forging greater energy dependence on Turkey, and secondly, to isolate both Russia and Iran. An important, yet secondary benefit from this two-pronged strategy was the exploitation of Armenia's energy insecurity.

This strategy was executed by exploiting its own position as regional proxy for the United States, and to a lesser degree, for Europe, offering an attractive route for the export of energy from the Caspian Sea. By positioning itself as a reliable alternative to both Russia and Iran as a main export route, Turkey secured Western backing for a plan to construct a new oil pipeline from Baku to its Ceyhan port on the Mediterranean Sea.

By assuming the leading role in the development of Azerbaijan's Caspian reserves, Turkey was also able to construct an even more effective policy of isolating Armenia. The Baku-Ceyhan project, although stressing its exclusion of Russia and Iran, also resulted in the *exclusion and isolation of Armenia from the development of regional energy*. This new pipeline also ensured Georgian participation and, in fact, heightened Georgian dependence on the Turkish-led project.

Energy has also served as the central driver in the recent warming of relations between Turkey and Russia. This development is driven by the "Blue Stream" project, which supplies a significant amount of Russian natural gas from the Black Sea. This is a vital part of addressing Turkey's mounting demand for energy but it also bolsters the recent expansion in trade between Turkey and Russia. This also offers Turkey an important strategic advantage for advancing its longer-term agenda for the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Azerbaijan as Strategic Partner

Another result of the activism of the Özal period was the deepening of the Turkish strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. As this relationship expanded in the mid-1990s with a convergence of both countries' energy needs and goals, it also became a fundamental factor in driving Turkey and Armenia farther apart. The tension existing between Turkey and Armenia over the Armenian genocide was not the only cause of this widening gap. Turkish geopolitical considerations, including its growing partnership with Azerbaijan, the impact of Russian relations with Armenia, and the course of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict did more to impede the development of normal relations than any Turkish displeasure over an Armenian campaign for genocide recognition.

The Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan was one key factor directly impacting Turkey's Armenian policy. As the only direct border between Azerbaijan and Turkey and separated from Azerbaijan proper by Armenian territory, the inherent vulnerability and strategic importance of the Nakhichevan exclave became a priority concern with the eruption of armed hostilities between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in 1992. From the Turkish perspective, Nakhichevan posed a test for Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, stemming from a 1921 treaty stipulating a joint Soviet and Turkish role as the guarantors of security in Nakhichevan. Most significantly, it brought the Nagorno Karabagh conflict directly to Turkey's border.

With other Armenian gains in Nagorno Karabagh and the establishment of a narrow land corridor connecting Armenia with Nagorno Karabagh, senior Turkish military planners became increasingly concerned. By 1993, as Armenian military gains mounted, Karabagh forces seized several Azerbaijani districts beyond the borders of Nagorno Karabagh. Turkey responded by massing 50,000 troops along its border with Armenia and Prime Minister Tansu Çiller "threatened to go to the Turkish parliament to declare war on Armenia."⁴

The Turkish Embargo of Armenia

Following Azerbaijan's significant military losses, Turkey imposed an embargo on all goods to Armenia in April 1993, which marked the beginning of one of the most strained periods in modern Turkish-Armenian relations. The embargo, initially halting the delivery of wheat and some agricultural products, was further expanded to a virtual blockade, as Turkey cut all rail, road, and air links, closed its border with Armenia, and suspended humanitarian aid to Armenia, as the Turkish government decreed its intention "to terminate all the facilities granted for the routing of aid through our territory."⁵

As Azerbaijan had already imposed its own blockade on all trade, transport and energy links with Armenia, this Turkish move only enhanced the impact of an East-West encirclement of Armenia. The immediate effects on Armenia were profound, as Armenia was seriously energy-dependent and over-reliant on imports from the Russian Federation. Mounting instability in Georgia further disrupted Armenia's sole external link, exacerbating the initial shortages and energy crisis and leading to a growing exodus of Armenians from their country. But, the Armenian economy quickly adapted so that it was able to cope with the

⁴ Michael Bishku, "Turkey, Ethnicity, and Oil in the Caucasus," *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol.18, No.2 (Fall 2001).

⁵ Republic of Turkey government declaration, 3 April 1993; cited in Burcu Gültekin, "The Stakes of the Opening of Turkish-Armenian Border," *Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC)*, October 2002, p.2.

impact of the embargo and the most serious crisis, the embargo on energy supplies, was dealt with by restarting the country's nuclear power plant.

Although the blockade's long term economic impact on Armenia was marginal, the political, diplomatic and security implications of a closed border and the related trade embargo was far more successful in applying consistent pressure on Armenia. The Turkish blockade, although seemingly rooted in Turkey's role as Azerbaijan's strategic ally, offered its own threat to Armenian national security well beyond the framework of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict or its relations with Azerbaijan. In fact, the Turkish role in the twin blockade of Armenia was driven as much by its pursuit of regional power as by its support for Azerbaijan.

There is an interesting economic dimension to the Turkish embargo and blockade of Armenia. Over the past several years, the Armenian economy has adjusted and adapted to a closed border with Turkey, most notably demonstrated by the impressive rate of economic growth in Armenia. Thus, the Turkish embargo has long since lost its economic efficiency. Yet there is a second economic aspect of the blockade that offers an incentive to improving Turkish-Armenian relations.

This economic incentive is the driving force behind the efforts of the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC), a group advocating the lifting of all Turkish restrictions and bans on trade and commerce with Armenia. The current level of bilateral trade is limited in scope, as Armenian and Turkish goods must be rerouted through Georgia, and though limited in scale, is roughly \$120 million annually. According to the findings of a World Bank study,⁶ the economic benefits for all countries in the region is a clear, but often underestimated, lost opportunity for greater economic development as a step toward regional reintegration.

For Armenia, the most significant economic incentive for the lifting of the embargo lies in the potential for reducing unnaturally high transport costs. For Turkey, an added economic incentive is based on the need for job creation and trade-driven development in the country's poorer, underdeveloped districts of eastern Turkey. Overall, the World Bank has concluded that a normalization of trade relations would save Armenia between \$6-8 million in transport costs for non-energy products, and would potentially double Armenian exports.⁷

In the event of a reopening of its border with Turkey, Armenia also has the potential to expand its role as energy exporter. Specifically, Armenia has the largest capacity for surplus electricity production in the region and regularly exports electricity supplies to Georgia and Iran. If there were an open border with Turkey, Armenia might become a key platform for similar electricity exports to eastern Turkey. This potential has also driven Russian energy planning in the region, seeing Armenia as a convenient avenue for market expansion.

Most interestingly, the most vocal advocate of an end to the failed Turkish blockade of Armenia emanates from within Turkey itself. The Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC) argues that "Turkey's politics toward Armenia... seem to conflict with the vital interests of the country, so the efficiency of this embargo is being questioned" and the

⁶ Evgeny Polyakov, *Changing Trade Patterns after Conflict resolution in the South Caucasus* (World Bank, 2000.)

⁷ Polyakov (2000).

“efficiency of resorting to economic sanctions in order to satisfy political objectives is disputable.”⁸ The importance of having an organized group advocating the need to reform and refine Turkey’s policies regarding Armenia within Turkey is a crucial first step in garnering a new attempt to spark a breakthrough in the troubled relationship. The powerful influence of a Turkish voice, rather than external foreign pressure, is the key to bringing about a change in Turkish policy.

There has, however, been a degree of wariness within Armenia over the implications of a reopening of the closed border with Turkey. Although government ministers have long argued for reopening of the closed border, the junior member of the ruling coalition in Armenia, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), for example, has argued that an end to the blockade will result in “a flood of cheap Turkish products” and would foster a new economic dependence on Turkey.⁹ This view is also held by some Armenian academics, such as Yerevan State Economic Institute Professor Ashot Yeghiazarian, who concluded that while the economic benefits for Armenia are “exaggerated,” the real danger is a “sharp deterioration of Armenia’s food security and an invasion of the Armenian markets by Turkey’s agriculture and light industry.”¹⁰

The Shift in Turkish-U.S. Relations

This deterioration of the strategic Turkish-American relationship in recent years has been exacerbated by a trajectory of diverging national interests centered around two related elements: the changing dynamics of the global “war on terrorism” and the aftermath from the war in Iraq. The first element was tied to the transformation of the Turkish role within the U.S.-led global “war on terrorism,” as the traditional reliance on Turkey as a proxy power in the region was abruptly displaced by a new American preference for direct engagement with the countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This was marked by a series of unprecedented deployments of U.S. troops to former Soviet states and the implementation of a new U.S. basing strategy involving a number of new allies and partners. In military terms, this not only substantially reduced the American reliance on Turkish facilities, but also bypassed Turkey as a patron for U.S. interests in these regions. For Armenia, this presented an opportunity to expand its military ties with the United States, particularly as Russia was distracted by the implications of the presence of U.S. troops in Georgia.

The second, much more significant, element in the diverging interests between Ankara and Washington was rooted in U.S. policies toward Iraq, which rapidly escalated to clash with Turkey’s own national interests in the region. Well in advance of the actual invasion of Iraq, there was a widening divide over a subset of issues such as the implications of the Kurdish and Turcoman issues in a post-Saddam Iraq. As pointed out in an internal study at the U.S. Army War College by a U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, “no problem of the past decade has

⁸ Gültekin (2002), p.11.

⁹ “Aftereffects of Open Border with Turkey Discussed,” *Armenpress News Agency*, 30 September 2004; Atom Markarian, “Transport Minister Hopes for Open Border with Turkey,” *RFE/RL Armenia Report*, 4 February 2004.

¹⁰ Ashot Yeghiazarian, “Prospects of Armenian-Turkish Economic Relations,” *Yerkir Online*, 18 July 2003.

created more tension in U.S.-Turkish relations than Iraq, and no problem currently carries more potential for damage to those relations.”¹¹

The division over Iraq was also fueled by mutual misperception. Although there was an immediate reaction to the Turkish parliamentary vote in March 2003 to deny U.S. forces the right to use Turkish territory as a northern front in the invasion of Iraq, Turkish opposition to the war in Iraq was already well known to U.S. policy makers. However, one reflection of this mutual misunderstanding was that the U.S. had assumed that Turkey would eventually assent to American wishes. Even more serious, however, than the political tension, was the direct criticism of the Turkish military.

For the first time in decades, bilateral friction has surpassed the political sphere to affect the military one. In an interview with CNN Turk, U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz referred specifically to the Turkish military’s stance on Iraq by stressing that “for whatever reason, they did not play the strong leadership role on that issue that we would have expected.”¹² When pressed by the interviewers for a further clarification of the statement, Wolfowitz added that, “all I’m saying is that when you had a issue of Turkey’s national interest and national strategy I think it’s perfectly appropriate, especially in your system, for the military to say it was in Turkey’s interest to support the United States in that effort.”¹³

The most damaging effect of this tension over Iraq has been in military relations. From the U.S. perspective this is especially significant, as it marks a turning point in Turkish-U.S. relations, with serious repercussions for the future of the strategic alliance. For the first time in decades, U.S. policy toward Turkey is driven primarily by the State Department, not the Pentagon. This is a reversal of traditional U.S. policy, as the military aspect of the Turkish alliance has generally taken priority over the diplomatic and political arenas. This has also marked the usual U.S. stance on the Armenian issue, as all recent instances of a softening of the U.S. State Department’s diplomatic position on the Armenian genocide were routinely negated by the Pentagon’s invocation of overriding military considerations.

Over the past few months, however, there has been a gradual improvement in relations between Ankara and Washington. This change stems from a fresh American recognition of the potential of a “Turkish model” in bolstering Washington’s newest initiative to “spread democracy” to the Middle East. As Omer Taspinar has correctly analyzed, “perhaps the most important changing parameter in Turkish-American relations is that a relative decline in Turkey’s geo-strategic indispensability for the United States is now more than compensated for by the appeal of its democratic and secular political system. In that sense, it is the tendency to perceive Turkey as a source of inspiration for Middle East democratization that is likely to become the “new” dimension of Turkey’s importance for Washington.”¹⁴

The Armenian Factor in Turkish-U.S. Relations

¹¹ Donald MacWillie, “The Increasing Importance of Turkey for U.S. Security,” *U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project*, (April 2002), p.20.

¹² Interview of U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz by CNN Turk, 6 May 2003.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Omer Taspinar, “Changing Parameters in U.S.-German-Turkish Relations,” *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies* (AICGS), Johns Hopkins University, Policy Report 18, 16 February 2005, P.29.

The decline in the bilateral Turkish-U.S. relationship was also examined in a March 2005 hearing convened by a Committee of the U.S. Senate, with Bruce Jackson, the President of the Project on Transitional Democracies, testifying that “in foreign policy, during the term of Prime Minister Erdoğan, Turkey has quietly broken off its strategic relationship with Israel, refused to negotiate with Armenia on the opening of their common border (thereby obstructing negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh, and demanded of the United States a draconian treatment of the Kurdish population of Iraq. In diplomatic parlance, Turkey has become unhelpful.”¹⁵ In Jackson’s view, the refusal of Turkey to open the border with Armenia actually strengthened the hardliner Armenian circles and thus made it more unlikely that talk on Nagorno Karabagh with Baku would begin.

Jackson also recommended that Washington “must also communicate frankly to Turkey that we expect our friends and allies to support other democratic states and to work for peaceful resolution of conflicts in their region” and noted that “just because Turkish officials become indignant at the mention of a genocidal campaign conducted by Ottoman authorities against Armenian civilians in the early years of the last century does not mean that coming to terms with history should not be discussed between democratic allies.”¹⁶ Although this confirmed the linkage of the Turkish-Armenian relations with the overall Turkish-U.S. relationship, there are other outstanding issues as well. In testimony at the same U.S. Senate hearing, Zeyno Baran of the Nixon Center also highlighted a “growing mistrust of the U.S.” in Turkey and warned that “the level of anti-Americanism in Turkey today is unprecedented.”¹⁷

Concerning the Armenian genocide issue, Baran noted “that this year is the 90th anniversary of the tragic 1915 massacre” but warned that any move by the U.S. Congress to commemorate the genocide “would be very damaging” and would “play into the hands of the growing set of anti-Americans and ultranationalists in Turkey” and “mostly hurt Turkish-Armenian rapprochement.”¹⁸

One of the core limitations inherent in Turkish policy regarding the Armenia issue is the exaggerated perception of Armenia as a threat. There were two important examples of the mistake of such threat misperception. The first error was with Turkey’s handling of the “Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission” (TARC). Formed in July 2001, this body was a private, closed body comprised of several prominent Turkish members and self-appointed Armenians seeking to spur a new “second track” effort of private diplomacy aimed at launching a non-official dialogue.

Although this “second track” initiative quickly encountered both suspicion and derision, it was more seriously hindered by the lack of ‘first track’ official, state-level negotiations. Within the context of Turkish-Armenian relations at the time, the TARC group, therefore, represented a “privatization of foreign policy” Although it was short-term attempt at testing

¹⁵ Testimony of Bruce Jackson in a hearing on “The Future of Democracy in the Black Sea Area,” before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 8 March 2005.

¹⁶ Jackson (2005).

¹⁷ Testimony of Zeyno Baran in a hearing on “The Future of Democracy in the Black Sea Area,” before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 8 March 2005.

¹⁸ Baran (2005).

policies with little or no political and diplomatic accountability, it actually contributed to a further delay in official talks.

The error in this case was one of tactics, as it only served to weaken the legitimacy and credibility of the Armenian state as an interlocutor. It also demonstrated a mistaken Turkish belief that it could subvert the Armenian government through a private channel with no accountability or transparency, but the demise of the TARC effort came after it commissioned an independent study that concluded that the mass killings and deportations of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire constituted genocide.¹⁹ The report served as the key point of disagreement between the two sides, as the Armenians saw it as vindication, while the Turkish side saw it as affirming that the events of 1915 had not direct linkage to modern Turkey. The second error in Turkey's assessment of the Armenian issue was in its magnification of the threat posed. The Turkish National Security Council (NSC) went so far as to define the Armenian genocide as a threat to Turkish national security. Ironically, this only served to elevate the genocide issue to a level that not even the Armenian government accepted.

Yet there has been a subtle, albeit hesitant, softening in Turkish-Armenian relations in recent years. Most importantly, despite the occasional political posturing and rhetoric on all sides, there is much more flexibility on the Armenian side than is normally assumed. The recent trend of a softening began with a move by Turkey to ease visa restrictions in early 2002, a decision that was immediately welcomed by the Armenian authorities. However, it was the launch of a series of direct talks between Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul and Armenian Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian in June 2003 that offered new promise for an opening in relations.

This effort at ministerial dialogue was an important first step and a new sense of Turkish flexibility was matched by Armenia's willingness to discuss a normalization of relations "with no preconditions." By July 2003, press accounts revealed that the talks were advancing with a focus on "small steps" toward normalized relations. These "small steps" included the consideration of a set of incremental moves of symbolic significance, such as the restoration of the Kars-Gyumri railway link connecting Turkey to Armenia. The overall approach was also important, as it looked to the possibilities offered by separating the issues of reopening the border from that of diplomatic recognition.

By 2004, the momentum of the Turkish-Armenian ministerial dialogue stalled abruptly, however, as Azerbaijan pressured Turkish officials to maintain its blockade of Armenia. The Azerbaijani government protested that with no progress in the Nagorno Karabagh talks, any move to reopen the closed border would only reward Armenian intransigence. Unfortunately, the pressure succeeded in derailing the opening and Turkey lost a significant opportunity for normalizing relations with Armenia. Perhaps most interestingly, the experience revealed that one of the more daunting obstacles to improving Turkish-Armenian relations is not posed by Ankara or Yerevan, but is wielded by Baku.

Europe as Turkey's New Imperative

¹⁹ Emil Danielyan, "Armenian-Turkish Commission Continues to Push for Rapprochement," *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, 13 June 2003.

Despite a set of looming challenges and obstacles, the December 2004 European Union (EU) summit officially resolved to begin Turkey's formal ascension talks in October 2005. Although the process is to take approximately ten years, the decision represented a watershed for Turkey's application for EU membership. One of the more serious challenges for Turkey, however, depends less on developments in Ankara than on the course of U.S. relations with the European Union. As Omer Taspinar noted in February 2005, "probably for the first time in Turkish diplomatic history, the EU and the United States face the risk of becoming mutually exclusive alternatives. Unless the transatlantic rift proves temporary, Ankara may find itself in the undesirable position of having to choose between the United States and the EU."²⁰

In terms of the Armenian issue, there are three important repercussions. First, despite the inflated sense of importance attributed to the Armenian genocide by some in Turkey and Europe, the Armenian issue is not a serious factor in Turkey's ascension to the EU. There are two far more serious priorities: the Kurdish issue and Cyprus. Moreover, from the Turkish perspective, none of the various obstacles to EU entry involve Armenia. For example, the most important obstacles pertain to a general European wariness over the size and nature of Turkey, and will most likely lead to restrictions on the free movement of labor travel and limits on agricultural subsidies and regional aid.²¹

The second implication for Armenia is the internal reform already underway within Turkey as it moves closer toward EU membership. As Turkey's ten-year path to the EU will be marked by a series of incremental changes to the very foundation of the Turkish state, Armenia will border an increasingly stable and secure Turkey, in effect containing any impulse for aggression or tendency for intimidation.

Further, as part of the process of EU compliance, Turkey has initiated a number of revolutionary reforms in a wide range of hitherto "off limit" areas. These reforms, although preliminary and still somewhat limited, include new measures lifting restrictions on Kurdish-language education and programming and consolidating a more stable civil-military relationship. The extent of the reform can also be measured in two ways: the fact that in 2004 for the first time, the state budget allocated more money to education than to defense, and the fact that the Turkish military actually consented to such a move.

Thirdly, the net effect of a Turkey who is a member of the European Union offers a degree of promise for Armenia, in terms of both economics and security. For Armenia, gaining a border with the European Union is a substantial economic opportunity. There is also a significant security guarantee that comes from having the extensive Turkish armed forces confined to EU oversight and tutelage. Thus, both the Turkish process of entering the EU, as well as its eventual membership, is very much in Armenia's national interest.

Conclusion

²⁰ Taspinar (2005), p.36.

²¹ George Parker, "Brussels to Welcome Turkey Reluctantly into the Fold," *Financial Times*, 17 December 2004.

The twin trends of Turkish internal reform and the start of its integration to European Union (EU) offer new optimism for radical change in Turkish-Armenian relations. The reform movement underway within Turkey offers an opening for a mature reexamination of many previously restricted topics and issues. Such a reexamination of “taboo issues” has already begun, even including a fresh look at the Armenian genocide by such prominent figures as Turkey’s best-selling novelist Orhan Pamuk and Professor Halil Berktaş of Sabancı University.

Assessing Turkish-Armenian relations reveals a missed opportunity. From the Turkish perspective, the missed opportunity stems from the tendency to inflate the significance of the Armenian issue well beyond realistic bounds. It also stems from a mistaken Turkish policy that allows Azerbaijan to dictate and direct the course of Turkish national interests. Thus, the only threat to modern Turkey posed by the Armenian issue comes from Turkish overreaction. Furthermore, these self-inflicted wounds are actually the result of Turkish policy. As the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC) has argued, “Turkey’s politics about Armenia restricts its maneuver in the Caucasus and prevents it from undertaking a mediator role in the settlement of conflicts.”²²

However, Turkish-Armenian relations are no longer defined as a zero-sum game, as there is a convergence of national interests between the two countries. There is also a significant degree of flexibility and maturity in the Armenian position. This flexibility has been consistently articulated by Armenian officials and, most eloquently, by Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian. According to Oskanian, “Armenia has never and will never set any condition for normalizing talks with Turkey,” and regarding genocide recognition, the foreign minister has publicly stated that it is “not a precondition” but is “an agenda item.”²³ Moreover, as clarified by Oskanian, the Armenian position holds that “it is our moral obligation to raise the genocide issue and to have it on our foreign policy agenda, but having it on the agenda and making it a precondition are two separate things.”²⁴

As Turkey embarks on a complicated journey toward European Union membership, it faces an unprecedented stage of reform, endowed with a mixture of peril and promise. Due to the fact that Turkey stands at a crossroads, there is an important new opportunity for recasting the course of Turkish-Armenian relations. The real question is whether there will be a visionary approach which looks to the future rather than staying locked in the past.

²² Gültekin (2002), p.11.

²³ Public speech by Armenian Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, DC, 14 June 2004.

²⁴ Ibid.