

TURKEY-ARMENIA RAPPROCHEMENT AT RISK: TIME FOR VISION AND COURAGE

The international community hailed last year's October 10 signing of protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of bilateral ties between Turkey and Armenia as a turning point, but all were aware that the road to normalization would not be smooth, and the hurdles on the way demonstrate just that. Difficulties arise partly from the complicated nature of the problem since Turkey closed the border in solidarity with Azerbaijan when Armenia took control of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave following a war with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. If the involved parties leave the situation to its course, the relations, stuck at a standoff, will soon be deadlocked.

Yonca Poyraz Dođan*



*Correspondent with the English language daily *Today's Zaman* based in Istanbul. The views expressed here are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent any organization.

The beginning of last year saw increased diplomatic traffic between Turkey and Armenia, signaling intense efforts for normalizing ties between the two countries. But this year observers are witnessing only harsh statements, lack of trust and unhappy politicians from both sides about bilateral relations, despite the fact that they signed protocols on normalizing and developing their relations last year.

Emotions were on full display in Turkey on the night of March 4 when Turkish news channels broadcasted live a committee vote of the U.S. Congress to call the 1915 killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide. Officials in Ankara expressed outrage over the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs' 23-22 approval of the non-binding resolution and withdrew Turkey's envoy to the United States for consultations.

Only a week after the U.S. vote, the Swedish Parliament endorsed a similar resolution prompting Turkey to recall its ambassador in Sweden and cancel a scheduled visit by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Legislative branches of some other countries like Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece and Russia have adopted similar resolutions.

This time of the year is often tense for Turkey as April 24, the day the White House traditionally issues a statement concerning "Armenian Remembrance Day", is approaching, and concerns increase about whether or not U.S. President Barack Obama –who pledged during his election campaign, to use the word "genocide" to define what happened to Armenians in 1915– will indeed do so.

Marking the 95th anniversary of the end of the Battle of Gallipoli on 18 March, Prime Minister Erdoğan said that no country's parliament can "tarnish" the Turkish history in reference to the genocide resolutions.¹ Had Ankara ratified the protocols and faced its history by now, no country's parliament would deal with the issue with resolutions.

A Complicated Backdrop

Following the Armenian constitutional court's decision on 12 January this year finding the protocols signed with Turkey on 10 October 2009 in Zurich in

¹ "PM Erdoğan: No Parliament Can Tarnish Our History," *Today's Zaman*, 19 March 2010.

conformity with the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, the Turkish side has shown uneasiness due to the court's detailed grounds of decision saying that "the decision contains preconditions and restrictive provisions which impair the letter and spirit of the protocols."²

As the foreign ministers of the two countries met on 28 January in London on the sidelines of an international conference regarding Afghanistan, Turkey's Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said that "If we are not convinced that the process is being carried out properly, there is no possibility to carry it forward."³ In Yerevan, Turkey's moves have not been met with pleasure. Armenia's Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian said at a news conference, on 22 January 2010, that "Turkey puts artificial obstacles in the way to avoid ratification."⁴

From the Turkish Foreign Ministry's point of view,⁵ the heart of the matter is the court's reference to paragraph 11 of Armenia's Declaration of Independence which states, "The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia." The Armenian court's ruling states that the protocols "cannot be interpreted or applied" in a way that would contradict the provisions of the preamble to Armenia's constitution and the requirements of its Declaration of Independence.

Armenians say 1.5 million Armenians were killed during a systematic campaign in eastern Anatolia, while Turkey rejects the claims of genocide, saying the killings were a result of the Ottoman Empire's efforts to quell civil strife and that Muslim Turks were also killed during World War One.

In the protocols between Turkey and Armenia, there is no direct reference to the killings but an agreement "to implement a dialogue on the historical dimension with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations, including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations."

² "Foreign Ministry: Turkey Expects Same Allegiance from Armenia," *Anadolu Ajansı*, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/foreign-ministry-turkey-expects-same-allegiance-from-armenia.html/>, 19 January 2010.

³ "Turkey Warns Deal with Armenia Could Fall Through," *Reuters*, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKLDE60S-IDY20100129/>, 29 January 2010.

⁴ "Ankara's attempts to put the blame for frustrating reconciliation process on Yerevan won't gain understanding," <http://www.panarmenian.net/news/eng/?nid=41960&date=2010-01-22>, 22 January 2010.

⁵ Author's interviews with Turkish diplomatic sources, 20 January 2010.

However, Turkey's doubts might not be totally groundless regarding the wording in the Armenian Court's decision. The nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation Party (ARF or Dashnaksutyun), which continues its campaign against the protocols, released a statement following the Constitutional Court's approval indicating that the signing of the protocols was the "result of the poor performance of Armenia's Foreign Minister. . . Moreover the Constitutional Court did refer to the expressed concerns regarding the protocols and has provided enough legal basis for Armenia to express reservations regarding some of the points in the protocols."⁶

Though there is no reference to it in the protocols, Ankara conditioned normalization of relations with Armenia to the settlement of the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Had Yerevan withdrawn from some of the seven districts that surround Nagorno-Karabakh, this condition would have been lifted.

Nagorno-Karabakh Effect

Supporting Azerbaijanis who share close linguistic and religious ties with Turks, Turkey halted the process of establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia when Armenia took control of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and districts surrounding the enclave, following a war with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. Armenia continues to occupy around 17 percent of Azerbaijan's territory.

Ever since Turkey and Armenia have been signaling that relations would improve, Azerbaijan has expressed displeasure about the situation, prompting Turkey's prime minister to repeat the traditional line "one nation, two states" in Baku in solidarity with Azerbaijan.⁷ As a result, the optimism, which followed both countries' gestures in September 2008 when Turkish President Abdullah Gül accepted Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian's invitation to watch a game between their national soccer teams, has been replaced first with caution, then with disappointment in Yerevan.⁸ Armenian critics said at the time that if Turkey's relations with Armenia are linked to the relations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, that means that normalization of ties between Turkey and Armenia will stall, because a solution to the Karabakh problem is not imminent.⁹

⁶ "ARF Issues Statement on Constitutional Court Decision", <http://www.arfd.info/2010/01/12/arf-issues-statement-on-constitutional-court-decision/>, 12 January 2010.

⁷ "Prime Minister Erdoğan puts Baku's Armenia concerns to rest," *Today's Zaman*, 14 May 2009.

⁸ Yonca Poyraz Doğan, "Turkey, Armenia on tight rope over border opening," *Today's Zaman*, 25 May 2009.

⁹ *Ibid.*

More Problems but also Opportunities

After Turkey and Armenia announced their first agreement on a road map for the restoration of ties just before Obama's 24 April 2009 statement commemorating the World War I era killings of the Ottoman Armenians, ARF walked out of the country's coalition government because of "fundamental disagreement with President Serzh Sarkisian's policy of rapprochement with Turkey."¹⁰ Critics in Armenia and outside –especially the U.S.-based Armenian diaspora organizations– blamed the Yerevan government for the absence of the word "genocide" in Obama's address. (arguing it was obvious that Obama would not use the word after the announcement of a breakthrough in relations with Turkey). However, with the protocols, it is possible to say that Armenia had "an opportunity to mark an independent foreign policy victory, independent from the diaspora's preferences and interests."¹¹

It has not been easy on the Turkish side either. Critics of the government have pressured Ankara to press for Armenia's withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory. So even though this is not a pre-condition, it has become a political reality. The Turkish government could also not remain immune from criticisms of the Turkish opposition that it should also press for a change in Yerevan's policy of backing worldwide efforts to win recognition for claims of genocide.

A formal recognition by Armenia of the current borders has also been an issue, but with the "Protocol of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations", Turkey can claim that it obtained recognition of the existing border.¹² Even though the current protocols seem to be the closest both sides have come to overcoming their difficulties, ratification in their parliaments seems unlikely at this point. Armenia gave out the first signs in December last year that it can "rescind"¹³ the protocols if Turkey stalls and approved in February draft amendments to the country's Law on International Agreements, paving the way for Armenia to recall its signature on the two protocols.

¹⁰ Gayane Abrahamyan, "Change of Status: Dashnak coalition exit may shape new opposition lineup," http://www.armenianow.com/news/9760/change_of_status_dashnak_coalition/, 1 May 2009.

¹¹ Sabine Freizer, Director of Europe Program of the International Crisis Group, "Turkey-Armenia Reconciliation," speech given at NATO Parliamentary Assembly Rose Roth Seminar, 12 March 2010, Yerevan.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Armenia hints at rescinding protocols as Turkey stalls," http://www.reporter.am/go/article/2009-12-17_armenia-hints-at-rescinding-protocols-as-turkey-stalls/, 17 December 2009.

A Miraculous Breakthrough is Hard

The presence of the United States, Russia and France (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs brought together to encourage a peaceful deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the early 1990s) in Zurich was no surprise, although the protocols did not precondition normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia to the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

All sides recognize that the Turkey-Armenia and Armenia-Azerbaijan tracks do progress at different speeds, the second one being a more complicated and slower one. But the mere presence of the Minsk mediators during the process of signing of the Turkey-Armenia protocols showed that the tracks are parallel. There is in fact, a natural linkage between the two processes since without rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, years of diplomacy involving the Minsk mediation will bear no fruit.

However, while the Turkish side believes that a breakthrough on the Nagorno-Karabakh track will help Turkey's normalization of ties with Armenia, the Armenian side believes that Turkey's conditions will not help the parties within the Minsk process. In other words, from Yerevan's point of view, a breakthrough with Armenia and Turkey will only help the Karabakh process, mainly because it will make the Armenians who are skeptical of Turkish intentions more moderate and more prone to resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. From Ankara's standpoint, considering the domestic opposition's upper hand in society when it comes to the Azerbaijani issue, it has been too risky to deal with normalization with Armenia without some advance in the Armenia-Azerbaijan deadlock, even though the government has two-thirds parliamentary majority. Moreover, Prime Minister Erdoğan is more concerned with his approval ratings as the 2011 elections approach. Meanwhile, progress concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute is proving almost impossible.

Quick Steps Needed to Rebuild Trust

One day after the signing of the protocols in Zurich, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu spoke confidently on the state channel TRT that Turkey is no

longer isolated from most of its neighbors: “As we come to the point of opening borders with Syria, we can do the same with Armenia.”¹⁴ This was well in line with his “zero problems with neighbors” policy.

A campaign for the ratification of the protocols should have intensified following a quick clarification process with Yerevan over the issue of the decision of the Armenian Constitutional Court. A parliamentary approval of the protocols should have followed.

Even though neither of those happened, there might still be some other options if there is political will to obtain progress without focusing too much on the “genocide” issue. If Turkey was able to do this, it would not be so vulnerable to pressure from the diaspora Armenians either.¹⁵ It would be also very useful if Prime Minister Erdoğan kept cool for long-term interests of the country and gave space to the foreign policy makers at the Foreign Ministry. His remarks that Turkey could deport thousands of illegal Armenian immigrants if foreign parliaments continue to endorse claims of genocide have had a poisonous effect on Turkish-Armenian relations.

A visionary diplomat, Davutoğlu could seize the opportunity to show courage and erase suspicions that Turkey is not looking to create a new political pretext to withdraw from the protocols. Some steps like offering residency and work permits to illegal Armenian immigrants in Turkey would help restore trust between Turkey and Armenia. It might be even possible for the Turkish government to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia without opening the border.¹⁶ Reportedly Sarkisian told Davutoğlu most recently in Kiev that Turkey could open its border with Armenia before ratifying the protocols.¹⁷

Even though President Sarkisian submitted the protocols signed with Turkey to the Parliament, Yerevan is threatening to withdraw on the basis of the recently passed draft amendments regulating Armenia’s possible pullout from international treaties, and the Parliament did so.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Resmi Gazete*, <http://www.resmi-gazete.org/gundem/duyurular/disisleri-bakanligi/disisleri-bakani-sayin-ahmet-davutoglundun-turkiye-ile-ermenistan.html/>, 11 October 2009.

¹⁵ Neşe Düzel interview with Turkey’s former Ambassador in Moscow Volkan Vural, “Armenians and Greeks Should be Turkey’s Citizens Again,” *Taraf*, 8 September 2008.

¹⁶ Ömer Taşpınar, “From Zero Problems to Zero Progress,” *Today’s Zaman*, 22 March 2010.

¹⁷ “Armenia Again Threatens to Scrap Agreement with Turkey,” <http://www.asbarez.com/77843/armenia-again-threatens-to-scrap-agreement-with-turkey>, 26 February 2010.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The Future of the Protocols: Doomed?

As armed clashes have increased between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the past two months, the situation in the region may get worse if Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan continue with their current stances. Courageous steps and vision by the leaders of all three countries, and an international push might help to save the protocols may be the best option to promote peace and stability in the South Caucasus.

Turkey ratifying the protocols would not mean abandoning Baku if there are also assurances from the Minsk mediators that the negotiations will continue in an intensified mode and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will be resolved in a reasonable timeframe. Ankara can even say that closing the border with Armenia might become an option again if the status quo persists. In that regard, the hardest task here would fall on the Minsk mediators in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Minsk Co-chairs should also assure that extra steps by both Yerevan and Baku would follow in the framework of the basic principles document outlined by the OSCE Minsk Group in 2005.¹⁹

Yerevan has an opportunity to end the status quo. It can start by withdrawing from at least some of the Azerbaijani territories. Being dependent on energy supplies and most raw materials from other countries, Armenia should take advantage of the revived Minsk process. Yerevan often indicates that Ankara's step in the direction of ratification of the protocols will encourage them to resolve the conflict with Azerbaijan. Armenia will be expected to demonstrate this with concessions over Karabakh after normalization with Turkey.

Azerbaijan should stop seeing an advantage in the status quo. Yes, it is selling gas to Russia and Iran, and is seeking to increase the price of supplies to Turkey as it also relies on the fact that it is becoming a militarily stronger and self-sufficient country. It is time for Baku to show that its interests lie in not just getting money from oil and gas but also in the long-term stability of the region which is already rife with threats and military buildups. And a weak Armenia is not good for its neighbors either. Baku needs to concentrate on reaching a deal with Armenia and stop holding Turkish foreign policy hostage.

¹⁹ "Nagorno-Karabakh: Getting to a Breakthrough," *Policy Briefing of the International Crisis Group*, 7 October 2009.

Both Baku and Yerevan have adept politicians who could learn lessons from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. The conflict between them may thaw if they do not take the negotiations towards its resolution seriously. Yerevan and Baku –and Ankara too– should remember the saying: “Diplomacy is a matter of survival in the next 100 years. Politics is a matter of survival in the next 100 days.”

One upcoming platform where the U.S. can demonstrate support is the 12-13 April international nuclear security summit which will also host the Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian. A personal call from President Obama might convince Prime Minister Erdoğan, who hinted that he would not attend the summit unless the row with Washington over the genocide is resolved.²⁰

Watching the developments in the Caucasus carefully, the European Union should develop a comprehensive strategy for the transformation of the Caucasus, rather than concentrating on its thirst for gas. A visit of the European Union High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton’s visit to the Caucasus-Caspian region would be useful for example.²¹

Last but not least, confidence building measures should not stop between Turkey and Armenia, and Armenia and Azerbaijan. Donors should continue to support projects of cooperation to increase communication among people whose contacts have been increasing at various levels.

²⁰ “Erdoğan’s Visit to US in Limbo over ‘Genocide’ Tensions,” *Today’s Zaman*, 17 March 2010.

²¹ Amanda Paul, “Ashton Should Travel to the Caspian,” *Today’s Zaman*, 10 March 2010.
