

NERVOUS NEIGHBORS: FIVE YEARS AFTER THE ARMENIA-TURKEY PROTOCOLS

Five years after the signing of the protocols that aimed at normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey, the author argues that the tension between Yerevan and Ankara has mounted to a level never seen before. He cites the protocols' attempt to resolve the historical dispute between the two countries and Turkey's linking the opening of its border with Armenia with the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as the reasons for this failure at normalization. He also points out that the failure of the protocols has helped Russia to increase its military presence and political leverage in the South Caucasus. He highlights that the resolution of issues between either Turkey-Armenia or Armenia-Azerbaijan would create real dangers for Russia, as the region would irreversibly break out of Russia's neo-imperial influence. The article concludes with reflections on why these two states do not need external mediation to normalize their relations.

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The evolution of the relationship between Turkey and Armenia has gone through various, and often contradicting, phases. The Republic of Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Armenia as an independent state in 1991. This was followed by the establishment of official contacts between Yerevan and Ankara. These contacts advanced both on a bilateral level and within the “shadow” format of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group’s five core member states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, the United States, Russia, and Turkey), even after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict developed into large-scale military hostilities. In November 1992, Turkey and Armenia agreed to an unmediated draft protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations. In 1993, Turkey sold wheat as humanitarian aid to Armenia and allowed its passage through the Kars-Gyumri railway connection between the two countries.

The 1992 war in Georgia’s breakaway region of Abkhazia closed the last operating railroad Armenia had with the outside world and it found itself in unprecedented dire conditions.¹ In March 1993, at the peak of the war between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, Turkey unilaterally and completely sealed its land border with Armenia in solidarity with Baku, thereby imposing a transport blockade on Armenia and also closing its airspace. Nevertheless, officially, Ankara and Yerevan continued to maintain bilateral contacts along with reciprocal visits. The newly independent Armenia’s foreign policy did not campaign for the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and, despite the absence of diplomatic relations, intensive contact between the two countries continued, even producing some diplomatic results such as the reopening of airspace in 1995. Following this, charter flights from Yerevan to Istanbul and Antalya began to operate on a regular basis.



The Armenia-Turkey relationship entered a new stage after the 1998 *coup* that brought Robert Kocharian to power in Armenia. Kocharian moved to revise some

¹ In February 1992, the Abkhaz railway line to Armenia was only operating on an inconsistent and unreliable schedule and, in August 1992, the Inguri section of the railway line was destroyed, making the line inoperable since.

key provisions of the country's foreign policy agenda, declaring the international recognition of the 1915 Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire as the axis of his foreign policy.

In 2005, then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wrote a letter to President Kocharian proposing that Armenia and Turkey establish a joint group consisting of historians and other experts from the two countries to study the developments and events of 1915. In a response letter, Kocharian wrote that “the joint group can study any unsettled issue between the two countries,” including historical issues. These two letters, in fact, bound the Armenia-Turkey relationship to the examination of Turkish-Armenian history. In the following years, various initiatives were implemented involving civil society representatives and experts, including the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission.

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A provision in the Zurich Protocols signed in 2009, which laid out plans to establish an intergovernmental bilateral sub-commission for “impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives,” was further proof that the Protocols did not aim at the future. Rather, they aimed at pursuing “the historical context” set up by the letters of Erdoğan and Kocharian to achieve a common assessment of the past.

Recent developments in Armenia-Turkey relations include a ten-page article by Ahmet Davutoğlu on Armenia-Turkey relations,² followed by a response paper by Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian.³ Given all of these developments, what is Turkey's current policy on Armenia? Turkey is trying to reach a common assessment of the past both with Armenia and its diaspora. That was the main message in Ahmet Davutoğlu's article. Unfortunately, Edward Nalbandian's response was in the same plane. As a policy pattern this approach is not constructive because seeking the present and the future of Armenia-Turkey relationship in history is impossible.

2 For then-Turkish Foreign Minister's article, see: Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkish-Armenian Relations: Is a “Just Memory” Possible?,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13 No. 1 (Spring 2014), <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/972/turkisharmenian-relations-is-a-just-memory-possible-spring-2014/>

3 For Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian's article, see: Edward Nalbandian, “Génocide des Arméniens: Erdogan doit dire la vérité” [Armenian Genocide: Erdoğan must tell the truth], *Le Figaro*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/2014/09/06/31002-20140906ARTFIG00010-genocide-des-armeniens-erdogan-doit-dire-la-verite.php>; for the full version of the article, see: Edward Nalbandian, “Turkey should reconcile with its own past,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*, 6 September 2014, http://mfa.am/en/interviews/item/2014/09/06/figaro_nalbandian/

“Seeking the present and the future of Armenia-Turkey relationship in history is impossible.”

The provision on the establishment of the historical sub-commission was the weakest link of the Zurich Protocols. Most importantly, as history cannot serve as the basis for state-to-state relations, history should not overly influence the present or future of relations between the states.

The basis for preferring the “historical” component in the Armenia-Turkey relationship to the political one was laid down after 1998, and made resolution of historical issues conditional on resolution of political issues. From the standpoint of rational policy this has significantly complicated the Armenia-Turkey relationship, which was already preconditioned by Turkey on third and fourth parties – Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Armenian diaspora. Adding the historical component to all this has actually exacerbated the problem.

Trying to resolve the “history” issue with the Armenian diaspora is of course Turkey’s problem. As for Armenia, it has been advocating an unconditional normalization of relationship with Ankara. However, Turkey’s authorities have failed to realize that Armenia’s influence over its diaspora organizations is very weak. Each of the organizations in the diaspora pursues its own political and business objectives independently from Armenian authorities. There is only one way for Armenia to increase its leverage on these processes: the establishment of diplomatic relations with Turkey and the opening of the border. This would authorize Armenia to declare that diaspora organizations do not represent its viewpoints and that their activities do not stem from the interests of the citizens of the Republic of Armenia. And Turkey must separate history from relations with the Republic of Armenia.

A new stage in the Armenia-Turkey relations began in 2008 and resulted in the signing of the Zurich Protocols on 10 October 2009. That process had started in August 2008 preceding the Russian invasion of Georgia by a statement Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian made during a visit to Moscow. Obviously, the Russian-Georgian War and a new phase in the Armenia-Turkey normalization process were interrelated. Moscow is trying to hold the management of the Armenia-Turkey relationship in its hands in an attempt to further increase its influence upon the South Caucasus’ domestic and external policies.

The Zurich Protocols failed to take into account two major circumstances. One was the provision on the establishment of the sub-commission of historians that was

the proof of the fact that the protocols were not aimed at future, continuing instead the “history path” for achieving a common assessment of the past. It was the above-mentioned letters by Erdoğan and Kocharian that prepared the ground for including the historians’ sub-commission issue in the Protocols.

Second, the factor of power politics, regarded as decisive in political processes, was underestimated. Both the international peace brokers and Armenia’s authorities tried to separate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict issue from the Armenia-Turkey normalization process, while for the officials in Ankara they were and are indivisible issues. From the very onset Turkey did not plan to implement the Zurich Protocols unless there was progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

Although the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was not incorporated officially into the Protocols – had they been, the Protocols would not have been able to emerge in the first place, due to the Armenian position that these issues should not be linked – it obviously remained a normalization precondition. This is the reason for Turkey’s blatant refusal to ratify the Protocols, in contrast to the officials in Yerevan who are ready for unconditional ratification and implementation.

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What do we have today, five years after the signing of the protocols? First, we can see that they had a negative impact on the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group to advance the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Second, we see that the reopening of the Turkey-Armenia border was deeply linked with progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. These are interrelated issues. Moreover, Turkey looks at them as a package. Third, the tension between Yerevan and Ankara began to mount after the signing of the Protocols to a level never seen before. Fourth, Moscow moved to exploit this tension to step up substantially its military presence in Armenia. (In 2010, Armenia and Russia signed an agreement to extend the deployment of the Russian military base in Armenia’s Gyumri until 2044. The agreement also expanded the base’s mission for resolution of regional issues). As a result, Russia has dramatically increased its political leverage in the region.

In general, Russia’s 150 year-long policy towards Armenia has been based on the discourse that “Turks are your [Armenians’] eternal foes, while we [Russians] are

your eternal brothers.” The normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations and the opening of the border have never been in Moscow’s geopolitical interest. There is no doubt that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution and the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border would make Russia’s position in the broader South Caucasus untenable. It would also make it obvious that the Caucasian mountains divide Russia from the South Caucasus rather than linking it with this region. Resolution of these two issues would create real dangers for Russia because the region would irreversibly be removed from its neo-imperial influence.

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It is wrong to believe that the extent of the build-up of Russian influence in Armenia is in line with Turkey’s national interest. Also, no one believes that if Azerbaijan attacks Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, the Russian military base in Gyumri would act to protect Armenian interests. The base would be used exclusively to protect Moscow’s interests – to build up its military presence in the region. This, perhaps, is the most serious outcome of the Zurich Protocols – the dramatic increase in

Russian military presence in Armenia, an intensive militarization of the entire region, and an enlargement of Russian influence across the South Caucasus. Ankara even announced that it would not object to Azerbaijan’s accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

Western sanctions imposed on Russia made Ankara realize very clearly its importance for Russia. Turkey is now trying to deepen its relations with Moscow and impact the entire South Caucasus. Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan now share common interests in the South Caucasus, the first one being to lessen the influence of the OSCE Minsk Group. Amid the growing tension between Russia and the West, Turkey’s support for Russia is creating a new field of opportunities that Moscow uses to neutralize the efforts of the Minsk Group in a bid to push forward its own initiative – namely, having its peacekeeping force deployed in the Karabakh conflict zone. But the question is whether in the next phase Ankara will ask itself if it needs Russian troops in the South Caucasus.

It is clear that Azerbaijan’s influence on Turkey, when it comes to the latter’s relationship with Armenia, is extremely large if not decisive. That influence was

not limited to just aborting the Zurich Protocols. Azerbaijan actually nullifies every step aimed at lessening the tension between Turkey and Armenia. Following his inauguration, the newly elected President Erdoğan and other senior Turkish officials declared that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is possible only in the event of the return of the occupied (Azerbaijani) territories. When it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue there is no difference between the positions of Ankara and Baku.

However, the current tension in Armenia-Turkey relations could be diffused by a string of steps in the humanitarian area, tourism, culture, the environment, and the media. Unfortunately, the authorities in Ankara today are unable to demonstrate independence in issues related to normalization of relations with Armenia. This is a text-book case of rejected political realism when a junior partner dictates its own will to its senior partner.

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There is a need to look into an important factor of the diplomatic arsenal – Azerbaijan’s distorted interpretation of the UN Security Council’s four resolutions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. All four resolutions demand the return of territories and end to hostile and military activities. Meantime, blockade is also regarded as a hostile activity, referring directly to Turkey. The difference in Azerbaijani-Turkish positions is that Ankara is tight-lipped about the UN Security Council because its own ongoing blockade of Armenia is a violation of the resolutions in question. In fact, Turkey acts as a conflict party.

With this position, Turkey will hardly ever be allowed to assume a mediation role. Incidentally, as a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, Turkey speaks against the conflict settlement principles put forward by its co-chairs.

In fact, Armenia and Turkey need no mediators in their state-level relations and other contacts. Turkey’s moves to sell wheat to Armenia in 1993 and the reopening of the air space for one another in 1995 happened without the involvement of mediators. President Sarkisian’s sensational statement in 2008 that initiated the period of so-called “football diplomacy” immediately brought about mediators – “accidentally” they were the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairing countries and Switzerland.

However, that experience also demonstrated that mediators failed to play an effective role. Turkey was going to announce through Foreign Minister Davutoğlu in Zurich that the Protocols would not be ratified as long as “Azerbaijani territories are occupied by Armenian forces.” Moreover, there is no single such demand in the UN Security Council’s four resolutions, and there is only one call on Armenia in the 884 resolution: “Calls upon the Government of Armenia to use its influence to achieve compliance by the Armenians of the Nagorny Karabakh...”⁴

In this sense we should highlight Edward Nalbandian’s visit to Turkey to attend the inauguration ceremony of President Erdoğan, as it served as a sort of unmediated contact. Unmediated contacts on the government level should continue. They are more likely to happen after the centennial of the Armenian Genocide to be marked on 24 April 2015. Unexpected and surprise developments on that occasion cannot be ruled out, but these would likely not ensure meaningful progress in the interstate relationship. We can be sure, at least, that Turkey will not make any serious step towards the opening of its border with Armenia or the ratification of the Zurich Protocols.

Because they were aimed at trying to produce agreement on the past from the onset, the Zurich Protocols could not serve as a basis for normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations. This was warned by many politicians and experts, including the author of this piece. In all likelihood processes of some sort may follow the 24 April centennial to mark the post-Zurich phase in Armenia-Turkey relations, but these would be effective only if generated through a direct and bilateral relationship, free of external mediation. Armenia-Turkey relations and efforts to reconcile issues of history should be clearly separated from Armenia-Turkey relations at the state level. The start of a real process of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation between societies, including the diaspora, can be possible only if diplomatic relations are established between the states.

4 See: “UN Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884,” *United Nations* (1993), <http://www.un.org/docs/scres/1993/scres93.htm>