

Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap

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SUMMARY

- Armenia and Turkey have embarked on a historic normalization process, but it is now in trouble and the United States needs to take a lead in rescuing it.
- If Armenia and Turkey succeed in opening their closed border it will transform the South Caucasus region. But Azerbaijan, Turkey's ally and the losing side to Armenia in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, has understandable fears. The international community must invest more resources in resolving the Karabakh conflict and breaking the regional deadlock it has created.
- The annual debate over the use of the word *genocide* to describe the fate of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 has turned into an ugly bargaining process. It is time to take a longer view. President Obama should look ahead to the centenary of the tragedy in 2015 and encourage Turks to take part in commemorating the occasion.

THE ARMENIA–TURKEY PROTOCOLS

In October 2009 Armenia and Turkey began a historic rapprochement, signing two protocols on normalizing their relations that showed them a way to escape their tragic past. In 2010, the process has run into trouble. Ankara appears highly unlikely to ratify the protocols in parliament, saying it will not do so without progress in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan—even though that conflict is not explicitly mentioned in the agreements. The Armenian leadership is suggesting that, if the Turks do not act quickly, Yerevan should cut its losses and annul its signature on the agreement in April. At the same time the United States' capacity to mediate was eroded after

the House International Affairs Committee voted on March 4 to call the 1915 killings *genocide*, causing Turkey to recall its ambassador from Washington. Turkey's outspoken Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan further undermined hopes for normalization in a March 17 BBC interview in which he threatened up to 100,000 Armenians working illegally in Turkey with deportation.

This looming crisis will reach a head by April 24, the date commemorated as Armenian Genocide Day. Both Armenians and Turks will seek to influence President Obama to use words on that day that support their position, while the Armenians will continue to press Congress to pass a resolution calling the 1915 killings genocide. This puts the normalization process under strain. A “hard landing” for the



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Armenia–Turkey Protocols will be the cause of recrimination and introspection on both sides. It will reinforce an unhealthy siege mentality in Armenia, with Armenians opposed to the process saying their skepticism about Turks is vindicated. Turkey’s relations with the United States and the EU will suffer, as they will blame Ankara for its role in the failed process. The already troubled peace process over Nagorny Karabakh could shut down further, increasing the threat of violence across the cease-fire line separating the Armenian and Azerbaijani armies.

There is now virtually no hope that the two protocols will be ratified soon, but there is time for the parties to agree to a “soft landing” that would allow each to make small steps affirming their faith in the process. This will allow the parties to re-engage with the substance of the agreements at a later date—probably after the 2011 Turkish elections.

A persistent curse of the Caucasus is that its leaders focus on short-term agendas and their own political survival and lack the will and political space to think strategically about the long term. The Turkey–Armenia process briefly but heroically defied that trend. It was the most positive initiative in the South Caucasus in years and still has the potential to transform the region. If the process is to get back on track, all involved parties, including the United States, should articulate a strategic vision for the region, and for resolution of the Karabakh conflict. They must set their sights on larger goals several years hence and “make haste slowly” toward them. The centenary of the Armenian tragedy in 2015 is a good reference point by which to set the goal of Armenian–Turkish normalization.

A TRAGIC HISTORY

Armenian–Turkish relations live under the shadow of the mass deportation and killing of the Armenian population of Eastern Anatolia by the Ottoman Young Turk regime in the years following 1915. The allied powers at the time called the killings “crimes against

humanity and civilization,” and many historians agree that more than one million Armenians died. For the Armenian diaspora, most of whom are grandchildren of surviving Anatolian Armenians, this issue defines their identity. Since the 1960s they have lobbied internationally for the killings to be termed a genocide. Modern Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, consistently denies that there was a genocidal policy toward the Armenians and points out that hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Muslims died in deportations and killings during the same period.

Turkey recognized the newly independent Republic of Armenia after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. However, bilateral relations quickly became captive to Armenia’s escalating war with Ankara’s new ally Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh. In April 1993 Armenian forces extended their military campaign beyond the borders of Nagorny Karabakh capturing the Azerbaijani province of Kelbajar. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in protest; seventeen years later, the border remains closed.

Over the past decade, however, people-to-people Armenian–Turkish relations have improved. The mayors of Kars and Gyumri have lobbied jointly for a re-opening of the border. Armenian tourists visit Turkey regularly, and thousands of Armenians live and work illegally there. There are weekly Armavia (Armenian Airlines) flights between Yerevan and Istanbul. In Turkey the taboo about talking about the Armenian issue has been lifted. Celebrated author Orhan Pamuk has publicly challenged his countrymen to break their silence on the fate of the Ottoman Armenians. The Istanbul editor Hrant Dink—an ethnic Armenian and Turkish citizen—played a key role in bridging the divide. Dink’s assassination in 2007 by a seventeen-year-old nationalist fanatic triggered grief and outrage. At his funeral tens of thousands of mourners walked the streets of Istanbul, some chanting “We are all Armenians.”

This small but vocal civic movement backed Turkish President Abdullah Gül as he and Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian moved this rapprochement to a state level. Gül accepted Sarkisian's invitation to an Armenia–Turkey soccer match in Yerevan in September 2008, and the two sides began working on measures to normalize relations. Both took advantage of a changed geopolitical environment: Russia, Armenia's strongest ally, backed the initiative and has dramatically improved its own relationship with Turkey in recent years.

For Turkey's governing AK Party, holding out an olive branch to Armenia fit within the new “zero problems with neighbors” policy devised by its chief foreign policy strategist, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who is now Turkey's foreign minister. Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian also saw an opening. His legitimacy had been damaged by the violence which accompanied his election in February–March 2008, and his courageous decision to invite Gül to Yerevan opened a new credit line of international support. The Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers eventually signed two protocols on normalizing their relations at a ceremony in Zurich on October 10, 2009, supported by, among others, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Both sides gave themselves extra room to maneuver by requiring their parliaments to ratify the Zurich protocols. Once they are ratified, the documents stipulate that diplomatic relations must be established and the Armenia–Turkey border opened within two months.

OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS

The Zurich Protocols opened up hopeful vistas for both countries. For Armenia they promise an end to regional isolation and long-term economic transformation. Even with the border closed, Turkey is Armenia's fifth biggest trading partner via Georgia, with an annual trade turnover of more than \$200 million. The country manager of the World Bank in Armenia, Aristomene Varoudakis, cites figures predicting that when the border

with Turkey re-opens, imported goods will be cheaper and their volume will increase by 13 percent over five years; transportation costs will be cut by 20 percent. Armenia will benefit from sharing an open border with a country that since 1996 has had a customs union with the European Union for trade in non-agricultural products.

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For the Turkish government, a successful rapprochement with Armenia will allow it to engage in the South Caucasus as a disinterested power. Ratifying the protocols would also be a major step toward ending the perpetual humiliation of foreign parliaments passing genocide resolutions that condemn Turkey. For four decades Ankara has expended time and resources fighting the Armenian diaspora on this issue, yet the parliaments of nineteen countries, including Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Poland, Russia, and Sweden, have passed resolutions on the 1915 massacres, with most designating the killings as genocide.

However, neither government received a groundswell of domestic support for the Protocols. In Armenia, public opposition was not fierce: Armenia's veteran nationalist party, the ARF or Dasnaktsutiun, left the governing coalition in protest but did not convene more than a few token street protests. But popular enthusiasm for the Protocols has not been strong either. Much of the public expresses short-sighted concerns about the shops of Yerevan being flooded with cheap Turkish goods or more general worries that Turks cannot be trusted. There is a consensus that Turkey must open the border but that nothing should be expected from Armenia in return.

Sarkisian faced much stronger criticism when he visited Lebanon, France, and the United States to sell the Protocols. Some critics within the diaspora accused him of selling

out Armenia's heritage by promising to recognize the current border with Turkey, agreed with Moscow in 1921. Former foreign minister Raffi Hovannissian, a major critic of the Protocols, described accepting it as "ratification of the existing boundary as negotiated by the Bolsheviks and Kemalists behind Armenia's back in 1921." Others have denounced the pledge to establish a sub-commission "on the historical dimension to implement a dialogue

wording of the court's commentary, asserting it added new conditionality to the Zurich Protocols. The Turkish objection looked like caviling over details—after all, Armenia's policy is no secret—but it would help the normalization process if Sarkisian would state openly that Armenia attaches no extra conditions to the protocols.

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with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations." The wording here appears to leave the Armenian government freedom of interpretation, but many diaspora Armenians reject the idea of a dialogue with Turkey over the events of 1915 on the grounds that it provides an opportunity to question what they say is a confirmed and well-documented genocide.

This criticism caused Sarkisian, who is not a risk-taker, to proceed with caution. He ignored the advice of some aides to have the Armenian parliament ratify the Protocols at the end of 2009 (as the pro-government party has a majority in parliament, the vote would be a foregone conclusion). Instead Sarkisian insisted that Armenia and Turkey ratify the Protocols in tandem, a strategy that now leaves him unable to assert any pressure on the Turkish side. Sarkisian also sought the cover of sending the Protocols for an expert judgment by Armenia's Constitutional Court, which added a new complication to the process. In January 2010 the court ruled that the documents were in accordance with Armenia's constitution and 1990 Declaration of Independence, Article 11 of 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 Turkish foreign ministry seized upon the

THE KARABAKH FACTOR

For the Turkish government, the major obstacle to proceeding with normalization is the damage this does to its strong relationship with its Turkic ally, Azerbaijan. Baku accuses Turkey of plotting to sell the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh to the Armenians.

The conflict over Nagorny Karabakh is the deepest problem facing the South Caucasus. The dispute erupted in 1988 when the Armenian majority population in Karabakh, an autonomous region inside Soviet Azerbaijan, tried to secede from rule by Baku and join Soviet Armenia. A low-level conflict gradually escalated into a full inter-state war with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fighting ended in 1994, when Armenian forces won a military victory that saw them secure control not just of Nagorny Karabakh itself but, partially or wholly, of seven Azerbaijani regions around the enclave which they called a "security zone." Since then the Armenians have built up a small, unrecognized statelet in Karabakh behind a 110-mile-long cease-fire line, with the two opposing armies deployed on either side. Protracted negotiations on the conflict invariably get stuck on the issue of the final issue of Nagorny Karabakh itself. For the past five years the talks, mediated by the three co-chairs of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have centered on a draft Document of Basic Principles ("The Madrid Principles"), which seeks to resolve this issue through creative formulations. As talks drag on, Azerbaijan in particular expresses frustration with a status quo that leaves around one-seventh of its *de jure* territory under Armenian military control.

Azerbaijan (population almost nine million) is a junior partner to Turkey (population 70 million), but has ways of influencing its domestic politics and is also a major supplier of its gas. On a popular level solidarity between the two Turkic states is strong. Several months before the Protocols were signed in October 2009, Erdoğan explicitly linked the normalization process with Armenian concessions over Karabakh. Speaking in Baku in May 2009, he said, “The occupation of Nagorny Karabakh is a cause, and the closure of the border is an effect. Without the occupation ending, the gates will not be opened.” So why did Turkey commit itself to opening the border with Armenia in a document that never explicitly mentions the Karabakh conflict?

Part of the answer is that President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan put different priorities on this issue. It appears that Gül and others hoped to see progress on the Karabakh dis-

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pute in the months after the Zurich ceremony, giving them political cover to ratify the protocols. Turkish officials, perhaps as a result of undue U.S. assurances, had an overly optimistic impression of how well the Karabakh peace negotiations were going. When the officials learned in December 2009 that the talks were

MAP Nagorny Karabakh: The Heart of the Matter?



Credit: Christopher Robinson

deadlocked, they found themselves boxed in.

More broadly, Turkish officials have displayed naivety about the Karabakh issue. They have derived their information on the conflict from Azerbaijani sources. They underestimated how fundamental the Karabakh question is to Armenians, believing that Yerevan could be prevailed upon to cede several of the occupied regions around Karabakh in exchange for the re-opening of the Armenia–

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Turkey border. Yet there is almost no chance that Sarkisian, a Karabakh Armenian, would give up conquered territory for the sake of the Turkish border. Even if he wanted to—which is doubtful—domestic opinion simply would not allow it.

Azerbaijan sees the Armenia–Turkey issue through its own fearful spectacles: It worries that opening the Armenia–Turkey border would remove a lever on Armenia and make it more intransigent in the negotiations over Nagorny Karabakh. Many Armenians probably share this view and were the border with Turkey to open, in the short term Armenians might seek to consolidate the status quo in and around Karabakh. Yet the longer-term dynamic is almost certain to work the other way: with its border to the West open, Armenia would begin to lose its siege mentality and be more ready to give up occupied land in order to emerge from international isolation. Azerbaijan would likewise be under pressure to soften its aggressive posture on the Karabakh issue and join Turkey in seeking to normalize relations with Yerevan. Turkey would enter the South Caucasus as a neutral player and begin to exert a more positive role.

It is difficult for the local actors to move first to break the deadlock of the Karabakh dispute. International players need to help them to do so by promising more international resources to the resolution of the conflict. Rather than seek to bend the will of the parties even further, it makes sense for the American, French, and Russian mediators of the Minsk Group to declare a pause in the talks over the Basic Principles and work on other areas of the peace process that will underpin a final agreement. In contrast to the healthy Armenian–Turkish civil society dialogue, there is virtually no “Track II” between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. There is also very little planning for the post-conflict settlement—the de-mining, reconstruction, economic rehabilitation, and security measures that will be required to make a peace work on the ground. The European Union is well-suited to play this latter role, as it did in the Balkans, but thus far it has been shut out of the overly secretive and narrow Karabakh peace process. A third area that needs more attention is the Line of Contact dividing the Armenian and Azerbaijani armies. The cease-fire along it is basically self-regulating, monitored by just six OSCE officials with a weak mandate. In 2009, a relatively quiet year, there were nineteen casualties along the cease-fire line. This year, with high-level talks stalled, there have already been two bad shooting incidents.

As a full settlement on Karabakh remains elusive, the two sides can also consider smaller steps that will build confidence and change a negative dynamic into a positive one. One potential “win-win” area is the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, which is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenian territory. In Soviet times, Nakhichevan was a major junction on the Moscow–Tehran railway. It relied on neighboring Armenia for gas, electricity, and railroad connections. As the Karabakh conflict escalated, Armenia cut off all supplies to Nakhichevan, leaving the exclave in a desperate condition. All sides would win if Armenia were to agree to open up communi-

cations and rebuild shared infrastructure with Nakhichevan in tandem with the opening of the Armenia–Turkey border. Azerbaijani citizens would benefit in a tangible way; Armenia would have secured the opening of its western border without ceding captured territory, and Turkey could hail the initiative as a success.

THE ROAD TO 2015

The current Armenia–Turkey crisis needs both short-term fixes and a longer-term strategy. Turkey has dragged its feet and now needs to make goodwill gestures toward Armenia to keep the process alive. Possible gestures include:

- An opening of the Armenia–Turkey border for noncommercial travelers.
- A limited opening of a zone next to the Armenia–Turkey border that contains the medieval Armenian city of Ani, now just inside Turkish territory. This would allow Armenian tourists to visit the ancient site.
- A Turkish initiative to fully open and digitize the Ottoman archives containing the official Ottoman records of the events of 1915 to 1921.
- A Turkish government initiative to invite diaspora Armenians to visit the ancient Armenian heritage sites of Anatolia.
- The opening of a Turkish Airlines route between Istanbul and Yerevan.

Although the Armenian leadership will maintain that the Karabakh issue and normalization of relations with Turkey are not formally linked, Yerevan can allay Turkish concerns on this issue by pledging to end the isolation of Nakhichevan once the Turkish–Armenian border opens. The Minsk Group mediators can play their part by issuing a new joint statement that pledges extra international resources to resolution of the conflict.

As it seeks to help bridge these differences, the United States is hobbled by what could be called the “April 24 question,” the issue of how to describe the 1915 tragedy while

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describe a great historical tragedy has devolved into grubby political bargaining. On April 24, 2009, President Barack Obama adopted a dignified formula, foregoing the word *genocide* in favor of the most common Armenian phrase to describe the tragedy: the *meds yeghern*, or “great catastrophe.” Turkish liberal intellectuals have begun to use the same phrase—and might have been Obama’s inspiration. Many of them have taken up the cause of the late Hrant Dink, arguing that Turkey must come to its own reckoning with what happened to its missing Armenians, without pressure from foreign parliaments.

In order to move away from this annual agony, it makes sense to reframe the Armenian–Turkish issue within a longer perspective. The coming centenary of the Armenian holocaust in five years’ time in 2015 and the growing debate within Turkey on the “Armenian question” gives impetus to this approach. In 2015—whether the Turks like it or not—the world will mark the anniversary of the Armenian tragedy. The president could deliver a message on April 24, 2010, in which he notes that the centenary commemorations are now five years away and pledges that, if still in office, he will join in those events (perhaps even in Yerevan), but in which he also promises the Turks a little peace until then by affirming his faith in the internal debate in Turkey. Obama could say, “We hope to mark this tragic date with our Turkish friends, and not without them,” and aspire to be a catalyst for Armenian–Turkish reconciliation. ■

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RESOURCES

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