



THE RUBIK'S CUBE OF TURKEY – ARMENIA RELATIONS

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Abstract:

“Secret talks” and diplomatic efforts towards “normalizing relations” – which is a term commonly used to refer to the establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of the common border – have continued on and off between Turkey and Armenia since the latter’s independence in the Fall of 1991. These efforts culminated with the signing of two protocols in October 2009, establishing diplomatic relations and paving the way to start examining their troubled history. The initiative attracted much public attention and came close to change the nature of the bilateral relations. This article examines the main sticking points between the two countries, the incentives for reconciliation on both sides, and the reasons why the recent efforts came as far as they did – as well as why a stalemate has ensued since then.

Keywords: Turkey, Armenia, “normalizing relations”, “secret talks”.

Resumen:

Las “conversaciones secretas” y los esfuerzos democráticos para la “normalización de relaciones” (que es un término comúnmente usado para referirse al establecimiento de relaciones diplomáticas y la apertura de la frontera común) han proseguido intermitentemente entre Turquía y Armenia desde la independencia de ésta última en otoño de 1991. Tales esfuerzos culminaron con la firma de dos protocolos en octubre del 2009, estableciéndose relaciones diplomáticas y estableciendo el camino para empezar a examinar su turbulenta historia. La iniciativa atrajo mucha atención pública y estuvo cerca de cambiar la naturaleza de las relaciones bilaterales. Este artículo examina los principales puntos de encuentro entre los dos países, las iniciativas de reconciliación a ambos lados y las razones por las que los esfuerzos actuales llegaron tan lejos (así como por qué se asiste a un bloqueo desde entonces).

Palabras clave: Turquía, Armenia, “normalización de las relaciones”, “conversaciones secretas”.

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1. Old Tensions and New Problems

The Nagorno Karabagh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had been brewing since the Armenian-majority parliament of the enclave expressed its intention to secede from Azerbaijan in 1988. The following tension turned into a full fledged military confrontation in the winter of 1991/92. With Armenian forces occupying districts beyond Karabagh in Azerbaijan proper and more specifically with the occupation of Kelbajar in April 1993, Turkey decided to halt its ongoing talks with Armenia to establish relations. The train that had run once a week during the Soviet era between Gyumri in northwest Armenia and Kars in Turkey was also stopped. Turkey has since kept the border with Armenia closed, hoping ‘to level the playing ground’ by leveraging the prospect of an open border as an “incentive” for Armenia to reach a compromise at the negotiating table for the solution of the Karabagh conflict with Azerbaijan. Though a ceasefire was signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994, various attempts to bring about resolution of the problem, most notably by the OSCE Minsk Group, have not yielded tangible results.

Besides the closed border and Karabagh problem, *history* is a major stumbling block for normalization of ties between Armenia and Turkey. Clashing narratives on how and why Armenians were driven out of Anatolia by the Union and Progress government of the crumbling Ottoman Empire runs deep in both countries’ conceptions of their history. Whether the massacres and deportations of Armenians in 1915 should be referred to as ‘genocide’ or not is still a very emotionally and politically charged issue. The pursuit of international “genocide recognition” campaigns is largely viewed as a hostile act in Turkey.

The third issue of contention between the two countries is the recognition of Turkey’s border. The declaration of independence of the Republic of Armenia which states that “The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia”² complicates the bilateral relations. According to the mainstream Turkish perspective, the use of the term “Western Armenia” (referring to Eastern Anatolia) implies territorial claims. Though officially Armenia has not expressed territorial claims from Turkey, for Armenian politicians there is a “political cost” in explicitly recognizing the common border with Turkey due to expectations in the Armenian society regarding their “historical homeland.” The direct and indirect involvement of the Armenian Diaspora in Turkey-Armenia relations has rendered the bilateral relationship even more complex.

The thorny issues in the Turkey-Armenia relationship have remained more or less the same over the years: history – the pursuit of genocide recognition by Armenian groups and the Turkish state’s efforts to prevent this-, the occupation of Azerbaijani lands by Armenia and Turkey’s support to Azerbaijan to prevent this from turning into a *fait accompli*, and the recognition of Turkey’s borders by Armenia. These three issues have been weaved together by Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the US over the years in an effort to break the intertwined deadlocks in a way that serves their own interests: Ankara holds in its hand cards such as its strategic position and ability to open the border with Armenia; Baku leverages its energy resources and close ties with Turkey; Yerevan utilizes the resource of its Diaspora and the districts of Azerbaijan it occupies; and Washington comes to the brink of recognizing the 1915 events as genocide on an annual basis.

² “Declaration of Independence”, *Armenian Foreign Ministry* (23 August 1990), at <http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/htms/doi.html>.



2. The Taboos and Domestic Politics of Bilateral Relations

The approach for decades of the Turkish state to the tragedy experienced by Armenians during World War I in the Ottoman Empire has entrenched the problems between the two nations substantially. Generations of Turks have been educated with little or no information about this page of Turkish history, and laws have been used to penalize different interpretations of that era as an “insult” to “Turkishness”.

Turkey, in particular after it was granted candidacy status by the EU in 1999, has taken significant democratization strides. The increased freedoms have been reflected positively in the intellectual debate pertaining to Armenia as well. Improvements in both the legal and social arena have allowed historians to challenge the official versions of the history of Armenians in Anatolia. One example that stands out is the conference titled “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy” held on 24-25 September 2005 at Bilgi University. The participants discussed the fate of the Armenians during the final days of the Ottoman Empire with previously unimaginable openness. Another event that shook the debate in Turkey was the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink on 19 January 2007 by a 17 year old nationalist who was arrested thereafter. Founder and editor-in-chief of the weekly *Agos*, Dink was a voice calling for change in Turkey and appealing to the hearts and minds of not just intellectuals but ordinary Turks. He had been targeted by nationalist circles for years, receiving death threats and prosecuted under article 301 of the Turkish penal code. Following the assassination, over 100.000 Turks gathered in front of *Agos* newspaper to mourn his loss and protest the incident, carrying banners of “we are all Hrant Dink, we are all Armenian” as a sign of solidarity. Dink’s funeral on 23 January 2007 was attended by several thousands of people.

A third development shaping the debate in Turkey in a new direction was the signature campaign launched by Cengiz Aktar and other liberal Turkish intellectuals on 15 December 2008, with the following text: “My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.” Increased contact between Turks and Armenians fostered through bilateral NGO projects also positively influenced the mutual perception and understanding between the two nations.

Bilateral NGO projects began on a systematic basis in 2001 with the support of the US State Department funds coordinated by the American University Center for Global Peace. The resultant 13 projects lasted until early 2005. Of these, the most high profile was the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) that existed between 2001 and 2004. An evaluation report of the implemented projects was prepared by the Yerevan based International Center for Human Development (ICHD) in 2006 with Eurasia Foundation support.³ David Phillips (who was not only the facilitator of TARC, but also led the planning phase of the rest of the projects that the American University subsequently supervised) authored a book focusing primarily on the experiences of TARC (*Un-silencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation*) in 2005. The second round of multiple parallel projects was again funded by the US State Department (USAID) and

³ “Track 2 Diplomacy, Armenian-Turkish Track 2 projects: Assessment of Best Practices”, *International Center for Human Development (ICHD)*, (2006), at http://www.ichd.org/files/pdf/T2D_Book.pdf.



implemented this time by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation,⁴ beginning in fall 2007. In recent years, the range of donors for bilateral projects widened to include the Swiss and British Embassies, the German foundations (such as Friedrich Naumann and Friedrich Ebert), and Open Society Institute.

Constructive steps taken by the Turkish government complemented this changing atmosphere. On 29 March 2007, the restoration of an ancient Armenian Church on the Ahdamar Island of Van province, Surp Khach built in the 10th century was celebrated with a ceremony. An amendment to the Foundation Law of Turkey in 2004 lifted some of the restrictions to the restoration of other Armenian churches in Turkey and increased the rights of the Armenian minority living in Turkey. While article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, restricting freedom of speech on the grounds of “insulting Turkishness” was amended to limit instances of prosecution on the basis of such grounds, charges were dropped against many who were facing trial for statements they had made regarding the 1915 events. Though in the early 2000s orchestrated intimidation of Turks who challenged the nationalist conceptions of history took place, including court cases being opened against intellectuals such as Elif Safak and Orhan Pamuk, these initiatives subsided with the arrest in 2008 of the key figures of the ultranationalist networks in Turkey.⁵

These positive developments were overshadowed by “politically incorrect” statements from leading members of the Turkish government that aggravated Armenian distrust and the perception of an unchanging Turkey. For example in February 2008 Prime Minister Erdogan said: “The character of this nation does not allow it to commit such crimes,” then in December 2009 he said: “my ancestors can not have committed genocide”. Using the existence of Armenian illegal labor migrants in Turkey to “prove” Turkish goodwill and threatening to deport them as the Prime Minister did in mid March 2010 has been seen to reduce the perception of his sincerity. Moreover, Turkish Defense Minister in November 2008 made an improper comment implying that had the Greek and Armenian minorities stayed in Anatolia, the creation of a Turkish nation state would not have been possible in the early 20th century. While in May 2008, the then Economy Minister said, “We don’t need them, they (the Armenians) need us.”

Besides rhetoric, there are continuing institutional arrangements in Turkey that do not conform with the progressive developments, though reactions to such acts from the Turkish society have been strong and effective, and this has instilled confidence on a sustainable change. Though there is still deep distrust in Armenia towards Turks⁶, and this is regularly exploited by Armenian opposition parties, the positive changes in Turkey have come a long way in breaking the monolithic view of Turks in Armenia.

⁴ Eurasia Partnership Foundation can also be referred to as EPF or Eurasia Foundation or Eurasia throughout this file.

⁵ Detailed information available at www.esiweb.org (“Noah’s Dove Returns, Armenia, Turkey and the Debate on Genocide”, *European Stability Initiative (ESI)* (21 April 2009), at http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=108).

⁶ Depicted also in ESI research of Armenian press coverage of the apology campaign, Surp Khach church renovation, and the murder –and then funeral - of Hrant Dink



3. The Context of the Football Diplomacy

The most recent round of talks which began in August 2007/April 2008 was Swiss mediated. These negotiations are also known as “football diplomacy” because they gained a high public profile with the trip of Turkish President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan for a World Cup qualifying match between the two countries’ national football teams on 6 September 2008.

The motivating factors on the Turkish side for venturing into an ambitious attempt for reconciliation was the result of a number of separate dynamics that coincided. In view of the changing realities of Turkey’s neighborhood, the AKP government that had come to power in 2002 conceptualized a new foreign policy. The party program laid out the approach as follows: “The dynamic circumstances brought about by the post cold war period have created a suitable environment for developing a foreign policy with several alternatives. In this new environment Turkey must [...] rearrange and create its relations with centers of power with alternatives, flexibly and with many axes.”⁷ The vision of the foreign policy set out in the AKP platform was “multifaceted”, “free from prejudices and obsessions”, “based on mutuality of interests”, “promising more initiatives in solving regional crises, advancing regional cooperation, and increasing [...] attempts to maintain good relations with its neighbors.”⁸ Our goals, said Gul in 2005, are “to promote good neighborly relations with all, to replace disagreement with cooperation, to seek innovative mechanisms and channels to resolve regional conflicts, to encourage positive change in our region, and to build cross-cultural bridges of dialogue and understanding.”⁹ The motto “zero problems with neighbors” has been frequently used by the AKP government to communicate their motivations. To maximize its influence in the Caucasus and to play a role in the resolution of the Karabagh conflict, Turkey needed to normalize its relations with Armenia.

Another development that from a Turkish perspective could make a contribution in the reconciliation process was the change of president in Armenia with the February 2008 elections. Though Serzh Sarkisian had been the favored candidate of the outgoing president Robert Kocharian, his name did not carry a “negative charge” in Turkey. Kocharian, who served as President of Armenia from 1998 to 2008 had headed Karabagh’s defense and security structures and served as Karabagh’s Prime Minister and President. Once he became President of Armenia, contrary to the position adopted by his predecessor President Levon Ter Petrosian, the international recognition of the 1915 events as “genocide” became one of Armenia’s foreign policy aims. Serzh Sarkisian, like Kocharian, was from Nagorno-Karabakh and his track record did not set him apart from the “establishment”. He had been involved in the Karabagh movement to secede from Azerbaijan, had led the Karabagh defense forces and served as Defense Minister and Prime Minister of Armenia (during Kocharian’s presidency). Nevertheless, from the start, Sarkisian took a more proactive and bold role in reaching out to Turkey. Some analysts have argued that this was because he needed a foreign policy victory to compensate for his waning legitimacy due to his inability to deliver the economic and political benefits expected by the society.¹⁰

⁷ “Party Programme”, *Justice and Development Party (AKP)*, at <http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gül, Abdullah: “Other Statements and Messages by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey*, at http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/BAKANLIK/BAKANLAR/AbdullahGul_Speecheskisaltimlisversiyon.pdf.

¹⁰ Armenian analyst Richard Giragosian has made this point in a number of speeches and articles.



The first high profile initiative from President Sarkisian trying to reach out to Turkey was the speech he made in Moscow on 23 June 2008, in which he said:

"Armenia's position is clear: In the 21st century borders between neighboring countries must not be closed. Regional cooperation could be the best means of supporting stability. The Turkish side offers to form a commission that would study historical facts. We don't oppose the creation of such a commission, but it should happen when the border between the states is open. Otherwise, it could become a matter of delaying the issue for years and a means of abuse. In the near future I am intent on taking new steps furthering the Armenian-Turkish relations. Most probably, I will invite the Turkish President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan so that we could together watch the football match between Armenia and Turkey."

This was followed by an official invitation to Turkish President Abdullah Gul from President Sarkisian to the football match scheduled for 6 September 2008. This set into action the high profile diplomatic exchanges which followed. However it was the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and the hurried Ankara proposal, announced on 13 August 2008 by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in Moscow for a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" (CSCP) that provided the justification for Abdullah Gul to accept this invitation. The visit was presented to the Turkish public primarily as an opportunity to discuss the CSCP.

But the responses from different Turkish political and social ranks to Abdullah Gul's acceptance of this invitation were not all positive. The leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) said that Gul's travel to Yerevan would damage Turkey's honor. The head of CHP (Republican People's Party) summed up his party's concerns with the following statement: "Did Armenia recognize Turkey's borders, did it abandon genocide claims, is it pulling out of the Karabagh lands it occupies? If these things did not happen, why is he going?" Nevertheless, the visit of Abdullah Gul to Yerevan went relatively smoothly. The Dashnak Party (ARF) organized protests along the avenues which the Gul's motorcade crossed. Security measures were intense. The visiting Turkish press reported many human stories. Psychologically it was an important turning point. The visit infused an added sense of normalcy and legitimacy in Turkey towards those working on reconciliation in the civil society or media sectors.

The next development contributing to Turkey's incentives to move along the rapprochement was the US elections in December 2008 which brought Barack Obama to the White House. During his campaign Obama had been unequivocal in his support for labeling the 1915 events as "genocide". Leading figures of Obama's administration have been on record recognizing the 1915 events as genocide, including the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden. And Obama announced during his campaign that "as President I will recognize the Armenian Genocide."¹¹

In the first few months of 2009, an intense diplomatic traffic between Turkish and Armenian Foreign Ministers took place. Azerbaijan, increasingly nervous, reminded Turkey of its strategic value by signing a memorandum for selling natural gas to Russia, raising concerns on the feasibility of the Western-favored Nabucco natural gas pipeline. There were

¹¹ "Noah's Dove Returns...", *op. cit.*



in the meantime statements and signals emanating from the US administration that Washington would caution against taking any steps that might disrupt the ongoing efforts of Turkey and Armenia to reconcile and normalize. This meant for the most observers that the word genocide would not be uttered if “the process” was ongoing. As anticipated, such linkages have given Turkey an incentive to demonstrate that the process is ongoing, but it was not a sufficient incentive to actually bring the process to fruition.

On 6-7 April Obama visited Turkey in his first bilateral trip abroad after his inauguration. In Turkey, Obama said that his views on the Armenian genocide "had not changed and were on the record." While Turkey was under pressure from the US to make concrete commitments to normalize relations with Armenia, the reverse pressure was coming from Azerbaijan. Expressions of strong concern from Baku for the blow to Azerbaijan's national interests followed. Already, Azerbaijani diplomats argued, there were indications that Armenia was hardening its position at the negotiation table. The point was that Yerevan had gained an upper hand with the prospect of normalization with Turkey. Moreover, the leaders in Baku resented the fact of not being properly briefed by Turkey. President Ilham Aliyev's refusal to attend the Alliance of Civilizations Summit in Istanbul on April 6-7 grabbed the spotlight in Turkey and was covered extensively by the press. Given the sense of solidarity latent in the majority of the Turkish public towards Azerbaijan, the revelation of a serious problem between the Turkish and Azerbaijani governments put pressure domestically on the AKP government.

The Turkish Prime Minister and other leading figures of the government underlined time after time in the next two weeks that Turkey would not normalize relations with Armenia until an agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh was reached between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This reflected a shift in the political rhetoric. Azerbaijan played its hand effectively, tapping into two marked aspects the foreign policy conduct of the AKP government: Its desire to turn Turkey into an energy hub and, as a consequence “indispensable” for the energy security of its partners particularly in the West, and its receptivity to public opinion. Azerbaijan's displeasure was strongly represented in the Turkish press and struck a chord among wide segments of the society. Yet, the foreign ministries of Turkey and Armenia managed to issue the following joint statement on 22 April 2009:

“Turkey and Armenia, together with Switzerland as mediator, have been working intensively with a view to normalizing their bilateral relations and developing them in a spirit of good-neighborliness, and mutual respect, and thus to promoting peace, security and stability in the whole region. The two parties have achieved tangible progress and mutual understanding in this process and they have agreed on a comprehensive framework for the normalization of their bilateral relations in a mutually satisfactory manner. In this context, a road-map has been identified. This agreed basis provides a positive prospect for the on-going process”.

No details were provided, leaving much room for speculation. The statement had clearly been timed to give justification to President Barack Obama to abstain from labeling the 1915 events as “genocide” in his April 24 Armenian Remembrance Day message. Washington had passed the message that progress in Turkey-Armenia reconciliation could prevent the “US recognition of genocide” at least for one more year. Indeed, on April 24, Obama referred to 1915 events as the *Meds Yeghern*, or Great Catastrophe in Armenian. Yet, both Turks and Armenians wrecked havoc by the wording choice of Obama. The leadership in Armenia was



accused by many Armenians around the world for having created a context (i.e. the appearance of an ongoing rapprochement) which supposedly justified Obama's abstinence from pronouncing the G-word. Frustration among Armenians hiked when in May 2009 Prime Minister Erdogan visited Baku and delivered a powerful speech in the Azerbaijani Parliament assuring his audience that the Turkish-Armenian normalization was linked to the resolution of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Karabagh. President Sarkisian was under immense pressure not to continue the Turkey-Armenia rapprochement. He therefore announced that he would not come to the re-match between Turkish and Armenian national football teams scheduled for October 2009 in Turkey unless there was a concrete progress in the rapprochement with Turkey.

On 31 August 2009, two protocols that had been initialed by the two countries' Foreign Ministers were released: "Protocol on establishment of diplomatic relations" and "Protocol on development of mutual relations". The two documents were signed on the same day, and in the words of the Armenian constitutional court "they regulate interrelated and complementary matters" and "are linked through cross-references and prescribe mutual obligations." The release of the protocols to the public was timed to narrowly "save the day," allowing 6 weeks of public debate before a signing ceremony which would take place in Zurich on 10 October 2009, just in time to display positive momentum which could justify Sarkisian's attendance to the soccer game which was scheduled for 14 October 2009.

4. The Protocol Formula

While one of the protocols confirms "the mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries as defined by the relevant treaties of international law" and relates the "decision to open the common border" as well as to establish diplomatic relations, the other foresees the establishment of an intergovernmental bilateral commission with seven sub-commissions (for political consultations, transport, communications, energy infrastructure and networks, legal matters, science and education, trade, tourism and economic cooperation, environmental issues, and the historical dimension). Though the content of the two protocols offered a general framework towards establishing and developing diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey, it left the thorniest issues vague and open to interpretation. Eventually such ambiguities did not prove to be constructive, as they led to exaggerated fears and unreasonable expectations on both sides.

From an Armenian perspective, the most problematic aspect of the protocols was the "sub-commission on the historical dimension to implement a dialogue 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, in which Armenian, Turkish as well as Swiss and other international experts shall take part." Given the sensitivity of the debate on history, this convoluted wording induced a fierce debate. How were the historians going to be selected? Were they meant to represent the official perspective of their countries? Would they try to decide if the "1915 events" could be qualified as "genocide"? The answers to these types of questions were crucial, particularly for many Armenians who feared that the history sub-commission was a tool Turkey would use to declare to the world that even Armenians were engaged in a study that aimed to determine the facts of 1915. This, they feared, would constitute a setback for genocide recognition campaigns. Indeed, certain statements that the Turkish government representatives made in defense of the protocols against the Turkish opposition exacerbated this Armenian concern.



A more healthy debate about the pros and cons of a history commission was needed. Expectations from the Turkish side that dialogue about history would prevent campaigns among the Armenian Diaspora for genocide recognition reflected a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the Armenian communities around the world. And the outright rejection – without suggesting formulas that might be more effective- by many Armenian groups was unfortunate. Ultimately, though “official assignment” for joint history research might indeed be tricky, it is evident that both nations can only benefit from more serious research on their controversial history, and from a deeper understanding of the role of different actors as well as the diversity of the tragedies which occurred in different regions of the ailing empire.

Another “catch” in the protocols was the issue of the border. Because the 1921 Kars treaty which defined the mutual border was not explicitly mentioned in the protocols, critics in Turkey claimed that the protocols did not ensure that Armenia recognize the border. On the other hand, hardliner Armenians interpreted the wording as a recognition of the border and accused the Armenian authorities of compromising the Armenian “historic homeland.”

The third element of the protocols that led to divergent interpretations was the absence of any mention of Karabagh. This ambiguity allowed the Armenian leaders to claim that progress in the resolution of the Karabagh conflict was not a “precondition,” while the Turkish side argued that the two processes were “synchronized.” It was stipulated in the protocols that they would come into force not when they were signed but on the “first day of the first month following the exchange of instruments of ratification.” The Turkish side thus assumed it could sign the protocols but not ratify them in parliament until satisfied with the movement towards the resolution of the Karabagh conflict.

While President Sarkisian claimed the two processes were not linked, Azerbaijan was assured by Ankara that they were. This doubletalk was not sustainable, given the blatant contradictions which observers quickly spotted. When confronted, Turkish leaders spelled out the fact that Turkey would not ratify the protocols until “the occupation of Azerbaijan” ended. It is still not clear what this exactly means. Would for example Armenia’s withdrawal from all or some of the districts surrounding Karabagh be enough? Or, for example, would an agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the principles of an eventual agreement suffice? Lack of clarity set the stage for misunderstandings in the highly sensitive environment of the Turkey-Armenia-Azerbaijan triangle.

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued that the protocols and the scheme for their implementation was based on a few miscalculations and ungrounded assumptions. The effort to avoid clarity on the most controversial issues inflated the situation of mistrust and did not facilitate the process. The widespread perception among both Armenians and Turks that the protocols could deliver Turkey the upper hand in “genocide diplomacy” was misfounded, The truth is that Yerevan authorities can not prevent this campaign even if they wanted to – and would drastically lose ground domestically if they tried. Another questionable assumption was that the solution of the Karabagh conflict was imminent and that the prospect of an open border with Turkey would empower Sarkisian and motivate Armenians to follow through with necessary compromises at the negotiation table with Azerbaijan. Turkey’s brinkmanship backfired. The resistance to Karabagh-related compromise among Armenians was in fact exacerbated by the perception that this compromise might be part of a trade-off with Turkey. And finally, the extent of negative reactions from Azerbaijan appears to have been underestimated.



In defense of the protocols, they did lay out some ground-rules upon which a future relationship can rest and the debate they stimulated made the respective positions of various segments of the societies in both countries known. The discussion about the protocols was a learning process that permitted both countries to develop more realistic understanding of their respective maneuver space.

5. The Negative Spiral

Between the time when the protocols were released on 31 August 2009 and the signing of the protocols on 10 October 2009, a fierce debate ensued in Turkey, in Armenia, and among Turkish and Armenian Diaspora around the world. The leaders of the two countries used this period for informative exchanges in their respective societies. The Armenian side arguably took this mission more seriously than their counterparts in Turkey. In the Armenian parliament, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) which has 20 seats, and the Heritage Party, with its 7 seats took negative stances against the protocols, while the biggest opposition bloc with no seats in the parliament, the Armenian National Congress, was also critical. Former Minister of foreign affairs, Oskanian, advocated against the protocols as well. The ruling coalition, made up of the Republican Party with 65 seats, Prosperous Armenia with 24 seats and the Rule of Law with 9 seats were supportive of the protocols and in total had enough seats to pass it in the Parliament.

The ARF statement on 1 September 2009 stated that the protocols “call into question the fact of the Armenian Genocide and nullify the timeless rights of the Armenian people.” The statement continued to point out that Turkey conditions the Armenian-Turkish process with the Karabagh issue. Under heavy rain, the ARF organized a protest rally in the center of Yerevan on 2 September 2009 with posters that read “No concessions to Turkey” and “Armenian spirit will never surrender.” Armenian National Congress leader former President Ter-Petrosian underlined the potential harms of a joint history commission saying that this enabled Turkey to “stop the danger of the US recognition”.¹² Members of the Armenian National Congress argued that carrying the issue of history to any state discourse or initiative would inevitably set any normalization up for failure. Heritage Party stated that the recognition of current borders “deprives Armenia of the right to speak about the historical facts of Turkey’s seizure of its homeland,” and Former Foreign Minister Oskanian stated that “when we say that we recognize today’s Turkey’s borders, we note that we have no territorial claim towards Turkey.”

The Armenian President held discussions not only with political parties and NGO’s in Armenia to discuss the protocols but also met with leading groups in the Diaspora. In early October 2009, he went on a weeklong tour to major Armenian communities in the Diaspora to discuss and promote the process ongoing with Turkey. Paris was his first stop, followed by New York, Los Angeles, Beirut, and Rostov-on-Don in Russia. The president was met with massive protests, but also received the support of some important Diaspora organizations. One of the most controversial aspects of the process was the plan to pursue joint work on history. Closing the door to claims towards parts of eastern Turkey was seen to be an unacceptable concession in particular for ARF affiliated groups. Sarkisian went out on a limb with his defense of the protocols, arguing that the history work would “help the Turkish people to be

¹² Ter Petrossian, Levon, “speech in front of Matenadaran”, (18 September 2009).



more unbiased in going through the pages of their own history.”¹³ Eventually, the Armenian General Benovolent Union (AGBU), the biggest and oldest Armenian Diaspora organization, and the Washington based Armenian Association of America (AAA) expressed support for the protocols while the ARF affiliated Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) strongly opposed.

A comparison is useful in this regard. In Turkey, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu met with a limited number of NGOs and the government made less of an effort to publicize the logic of the decisions it had signed off. Opposition parties in Parliament criticized the protocols, mirroring the Armenian opposition’s criticism, claiming that Turkey gained neither a promise that genocide recognition campaigns would end nor a commitment from Armenia to end its occupation of Azerbaijani lands. Moreover, the non-mention of the Kars treaty defining the common border was interpreted by the Turkish opposition as an unreasonable concession. Meanwhile, Turkish enthusiasts applauded and expected an unreasonably rapid resolution of all the thorny issues between the two countries.

The protocols’ signing ceremony on October 10th was witnessed by the Swiss, US, Russian and French foreign ministers and was ridden with tensions due to the mini-statements that were to be delivered by both sides. It was obvious that what each side meant by its signature was not synchronized. Nevertheless, Sarkisian did attend the football game in Bursa, where he and the Turkish President Gul displayed warm relations. After that, the protocols were sent to the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Turkish Parliament to be kept there until such a time that a step towards the solution of the Karabakh problem could justify its ratification.

On 12 January 2010, the Armenian Constitutional Court declared the conformity of the protocols to the constitution and it attached a text that stated that the protocols could not be interpreted in a way that would contradict the declaration of independence. Though the language of the prepared text of the Armenian Constitutional Court was likely to be geared to the Armenian public opinion, it raised even more questions in Turkey. This decision was interpreted as the confirmation that Armenia would stick to references of “Western Armenia” and pursue the genocide recognition campaigns. The response of the Turkish Foreign Ministry came in six days, noting that, “it has been observed that this decision contains preconditions and restrictive provisions which impair the letter and spirit of the Protocols. The said decision undermines the very reason for negotiating these Protocols as well as their fundamental objective.”

Turkey in a sense seized the constitutional court decision of Armenia as an “exit strategy” and many columnists in the mainstream press jumped on the bandwagon with what appeared to be an orchestrated reaction. In February 2010, the parliament of Armenia passed an amendment to the law on international treaties, making it possible to suspend or terminate agreements signed before they enter into force. Thus Yerevan was prepared to annul the signing of the protocols in case Turkey delayed their ratification. The next development that stirred the debate about the protocols and their possible derailment was the vote schedule in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House on the HR 252, for “genocide recognition.”¹⁴

¹³ Smbatian, Hasmik and Stamboltsian,, Gevorg: “Sarkisian Cotinues Diaspora Tour” (05 October 2009), at <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1843752.html>.

¹⁴ For a full text of the resolution: “Affirmation of the United States Record on the Armenian Genocide Record”, *US House of Representatives, H. Res. 252* (17 March 2009), at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hr111-252>



6. Washington Tightening the Knot

When writing this paper, the 2010 replay to the annual flurry of the nearing Remembrance Day on April 24th was in full force. On March 4th, the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee voted ‘yes’ with 23-22 votes to HR 252.¹⁵ This development reignited the debates in Turkey about the possible consequences of US genocide recognition, the chance of salvaging the stalled “normalization process” between Turkey and Armenia, as well as the hypothetical calculations of the opportunity cost of Turkey downgrading strategic relations with Azerbaijan, Israel, or the US. Much effort was spent by the Turkish diplomatic machine to prevent the recognition of genocide in America – either by Congress or in the annual statement of the President on April 24th. Before the vote, 2 Turkish parliamentary delegations, totaling 9 MPs visited Washington. The Turkish Ambassador to Washington was recalled immediately after the vote. Both officials and the press responded harshly. On 5 March 2010 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded as follows: “This is a comedy. For God’s sake, can history be looked at like this? Is it a politician’s job to look at history? Can those who gave a ‘yes’ vote in that assembly find Armenia’s place on the map? ...The decisions that are made there do not bind us. With its history, its culture, its civilization, Turkey is a very big state. This country is not a tribal state. I am saying openly, the decision of the foreign affairs committee will not hurt Turkey at all. But it will hurt countries’ bilateral relations and interests to a large degree. We will not be the ones who lose. Those who think small will. Those who act with revenge and hostility will lose.”

Many leading names in the Turkish press took a doomsday approach, sounding fears that such a resolution in the US can lead to territorial compensation to Armenians and will empower other countries to pass such resolutions, qualifying the vote as a blow to Turkish pride, calling on the AKP to realign its foreign policy to the expense of the US, predicting that Armenian and Turkish nationalists will be empowered and the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process will be derailed, and stirring up anti-Americanism in the Turkish society.¹⁶

As much as a US Congress resolution recognizing genocide would be unfortunate, the fears of legal consequences are overrated.¹⁷ Ironically, the consequences of a prospective US genocide resolution are likely to be determined mostly by the reaction of the Turkish government to such a development.

The posturing and “leveraging game” played out each year by Turkey, Azerbaijan, the US and Armenia as April 24 nears is based on faulty logic. At the end none of the ‘punishments’ in store are in the interests of the countries which threaten to deliver them. Azerbaijan and its balanced foreign policy will not be better off if its relations with Turkey or the US are severed. Neither the US nor Turkey will be better off if US Congress passes a genocide resolution which leads the Turkish government to realign its foreign policy or derail the reconciliation process with Armenia. Furthermore, the US will not benefit from the domestic and regional consequences if Turkey were to proceed with the protocols to appease Washington.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ An analysis of Turkish press reactions is available at: *European Stability Initiative (ESI)*, at <http://www.esiweb.org/rumeliobserver/>, dated 12 March 2010.

¹⁷ “Turkey’s friends and the international debate on the Armenian Genocide”, *European Stability Initiative (ESI)*, *ESI newsletter* (12 March 2010), at http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=67&newsletter_ID=45.



A more information-based discussion of the consequences of these resolutions would go a long way in taking the emotional edge out of the Turkish public reaction and create certain “immunity.” For this and other destructive elements in the debate in Turkey, a consistent political leadership is important.

7. Conclusion, and Looking Forward

Allowing Turkish citizens to voice their opinions about history freely, maximizing the rights and freedoms of the Armenian minority in Turkey, intensification of links between Turks and Armenians in many areas of scholarship, culture and media is a win-win path forward. Such steps are not only important for Turkey’s democratization but also for building confidence among Armenians around the world and preparing both nations for any future diplomatic normalization track. On the other hand, geopolitical moves such as opening the border with Armenia is a separate issue, subject to a wide range of strategic considerations. Moving forward on this front would present challenges for the Turkish government domestically, and could risk shaking some of the basic pillars Turkey’s regional strategic vision rests upon. In short, with the realization that the protocol-based normalization process will neither end genocide campaigns nor necessarily boost the Karabagh solution forward, Ankara’s cost/benefit analysis of following through with the initiative at this time appears to have tipped to the negative. On the other hand, as long as the process is in limbo, it costs the Armenian leadership political capital. A debate has therefore been ongoing in Armenia on whether to withdraw from the process to prevent Turkey from reaping PR benefits.

With Turkish parliamentary elections scheduled for 2011, Armenian parliamentary elections in 2012 and presidential elections in 2013, and then the 2015 climax of the 100th year anniversary of 1915 looming, expecting another ambitious normalization process in the near future could be unrealistic. In the absence of progress on the Karabagh front, which has the potential of setting into action a virtual cycle in the region, Turkey and Armenia may need to resign themselves to taking baby steps. Efforts on finding common ground in the diplomatic arena may need to continue behind closed doors, protected from the stresses of managing public opinion. Meanwhile, at the level of civil society, education, media and culture, activities abound and continue to create a “normalcy” at the people-to-people level. The mutual understanding developing through civil dialogue and exchanges is fundamental in that it will contribute to building a much more solid foundation upon which, eventually, full normalization can rest.