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# Soccer Diplomacy And The Road Not Taken

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An alternative perspective for building peace between Turkey and Armenians

Truth and Mercy have met together;

Peace and Justice have kissed.

Psalm 85

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

"The Road Not Taken"

By Robert Frost

In this article[1], I examine the recent heightened diplomatic activity between Armenia and Turkey and the reasons behind the lack of progress in the negotiations despite the confidence with which they started. After providing the context and highlighting the inherent problems with the current state of affairs, I recommend accounting for power asymmetries and addressing the root causes of the problem during the dialogue between the two states.

The context

On Aug. 7, 2008, Georgian forces attacked South Ossetia's capital Tskhinvali triggering military intervention by Russia. By the time a ceasefire was reached on Aug. 12, Russia had made it clear that it would resort to all necessary measures to maintain the status quo in the region. Georgia's southern neighbor, Armenia, felt the effects of the confrontation. During the conflict, traffic was disrupted on an important highway connecting the two countries, stopping vital supplies from reaching Armenia.

There might have been another, less dignified, reason behind the urgency in which Turkey-Armenia dialogue was pushed forward by the Armenian authorities. Serge Sarkisian had been elected president only a few months before, and the elections were not only tainted with irregularities and fraud, but on March 1, the Armenian government's crackdown on the opposition had caused 10 deaths, including two security officers, and dozens of injuries. The international community was very critical of the presidential election[3] and its aftermath, and many experts argued that Sarkisian was hoping he would gain legitimacy abroad by giving impetus to dialogue with Turkey. After all, both Europe and the U.S. had been pushing for better relations between Turkey and Armenia for years.[4]

An important development had preceded the Russia-Georgia conflict-and launched what was later called "Soccer Diplomacy." Armenian president Serge Sarkisian had invited his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gul, to visit Armenia and watch with him the Armenia-Turkey World Cup qualifier soccer match.

After the Russia-Georgia conflict, both the Armenian and Turkish sides gave new impetus to behind-the-scenes meetings at the level of foreign ministry officials, which culminated in Gul accepting the invitation a few days before the match. On Sept. 6, Gul's plane landed in Yerevan, making him the first Turkish president to visit the Armenian Republic.

I believe one word describes amply the reasons Turkey enthusiastically welcomed the initiative: genocide.

For several decades now, Turkey has been struggling against resolutions in parliaments around the world recognizing the Armenian Genocide. Twenty countries, including Russia, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Canada, and Argentina, have already recognized the Armenian massacres and deportations as a genocide, citing the overwhelming consensus of historians and genocide scholars on this subject. On the other hand, official Ankara continues to vehemently deny that there was any genocidal intent towards the Armenians in the last years of the Ottoman Empire and it spends millions of dollars in its denial campaign, in which it lobbies politicians, entices support from journalists, funds academic denial efforts, suppresses education efforts on the Armenian Genocide, and presents denial assertions to the general public in North and South America, Europe, and the Middle East (Israel especially).

The main battlefield for genocide recognition in recent years has been the United States, where a majority of Members of Congress support passing a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide, but at least twice in recent history, voting on such resolutions has been postponed/put on hold at the last minute.

With a Democratic majority in Congress, and with the prospects of an Obama/Biden victory high, there seemed to be a growing realization in Turkey that it would only be a matter of time before the U.S. officially recognized the Armenian Genocide.[5]

Under such conditions, a discussion about rethinking Turkey-Armenia relations started within the Turkish political and military establishment and was reflected also in the media. The hardliners argued that Ankara should not establish formal relations with Yerevan until the latter stops pursuing international recognition of the genocide and withdraws its forces from Nagorno-Karabagh.

The moderates, on the other hand, argued that the best strategy for Turkey would be to disrupt the harmony between the Armenian state, which has made genocide recognition one of its foreign relations goals, and the Armenian Diaspora-mostly comprised of the descendants of the victims and survivors of the Armenian Genocide-which has been pursuing genocide recognition worldwide for decades through lobbying and other forms of activism. By starting negotiations with the Armenian Republic and receiving concessions from it on the genocide recognition front, Turkey would create a schism between the diaspora and Armenia and undermine the passage of the Armenian Genocide Resolution in the U.S and other countries, they argued.

It is in this context that negotiations between Turkey and Armenia gained new momentum.

During the negotiations, one of the main issues Turkey was adamantly pursuing was the formation of a commission of historians to study the events of 1915-16 and decide whether or not they constituted genocide. In return, it offered the opening of the border and the

establishment of diplomatic relations.

#### The conceptual context of Soccer Diplomacy

Here, it is important to highlight the fact that in general, Turkish diplomats and commentators do not view Armenians as a single monolithic block, but as three supposedly homogeneous blocks. The Armenians living in Turkey[6] (mainly in Istanbul) comprise the first group. These are, mostly, the descendents of the thousands of Armenians living in Istanbul during the genocide who were spared deportations and killings, because they lived in a metropolitan city, right under the nose of Western embassies, consulates, and missionaries. These Armenians today cannot even commemorate the genocide. In Turkey, these Armenians are regarded as "our Armenians" or the "good Armenians," as long as they do not speak out about the genocide and the continued discrimination they face. A prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, was assassinated in 2007 because he was an outspoken critic of the Turkish establishment and called for the recognition of the suffering of the Armenians. The citizens of Armenia, the second group, are, according to the dominant rhetoric in Turkey, the "neighbors" who are under difficult economic conditions and do not mind forgetting the past and moving on, if the Armenian Diaspora leaves them alone. The Diaspora Armenians, the third group, are the "bad Armenians." They are Turkey's sworn enemies. They level accusations of genocide against Turks and try to undermine Turkey. These three stereotypes essentially describe the perception of most Turks. There is absolute ignorance and disregard to the plight of the genocide survivors and their descendents who were scattered around the world and rebuilt their communities after living in camps and in abject poverty, facing the threat of disease and death years after the genocide. In discussions in Turkey, the Diaspora Armenians-the descendents of genocide victims and survivors-need to be isolated and ignored. This is yet another example of official Turkey's reluctance to face the past and address the roots of the problem.

#### Soccer diplomacy: a misnomer

The exchange of ping-pong players in the early 70s between China and the U.S. that paved the way for President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972 became known "Ping Pong Diplomacy." When the Armenian president in 2008 extended an invitation to his counterpart to visit Yerevan and attend the soccer match, the media started referring to the Turkey-Armenia dialogue as "Soccer Diplomacy." While such a term could be fitting to rapprochement between two powerful countries like the U.S. and China, a similar description for Turkey and Armenia is misleading, because it assumes that Turkey and Armenia are "competing" on a level playing field. In the latter case, not only is there a glaring power asymmetry, but that power asymmetry is largely a result of genocide perpetrated by one of the sides against the other.[7]

Here is how Prof. Peter Balakian explains the power asymmetry during and in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide:

First, the asymmetry of power is a key element in the act of genocide. In 1915 the perpetrator used its military, its state bureaucracy, and an unequal social structure to enact a plan of extermination against a people who were a defenseless, Christian minority. The Turkish government's subsequent denial became a further manifestation of such radical asymmetry in which a large, strategically important nation-state uses all of its political and military means-including blackmail, coercion, and cajoling-to get third parties to cooperate with it in delegitimizing the history of

the Armenian Genocide. The goal is to absolve Turkey of responsibility for the events of 1915 and to undermine its moral definition. The main power that the Armenians of the diaspora have is the truth of the ever-growing discourse about the history of 1915.[8]

Philosopher Henry Theriault has been at the forefront of the discussion on this power asymmetry.[9] He says: [T]he result of genocide is not a neutral disengagement of the perpetrator and victim groups, but the imposition of an extreme dominance of perpetrator group over victim group. If prior to the Armenian Genocide, Turks and other Muslims as a group were formally and practically dominant over Armenians as a group, the genocide maximized this, to give Turks and other Muslims absolute dominance to the level of life and death over Armenians. Often we mistake the end of a genocide for the end of the harm done to the victims. It is the end of the direct killing, perhaps, but the result of that killing and all other dimensions of a genocide is to raise the power and position of the perpetrator group high above that of victims, in material terms-political, economic, etc. Resolution of the Armenian Genocide requires reversing this domination.

It is this very requirement to eliminate this domination, and bring some amount of symmetry to the power relations, and address the core issues of the problem that is lacking in the current dialogue between Turkish and Armenian officials, facilitated and encouraged by the West. Not only does Turkey continue to vehemently deny the Armenian Genocide, it is also exerting pressure on Armenia to agree to the idea of a commission to examine what happened to the Armenians, disregarding the scholarly consensus on the matter. Acknowledgment of past horrors-let alone the readiness to engage in the long process of restitution-is not even on the table.

Moreover, Turkey wants to stall the recognition of the genocide by countries worldwide by pushing for the formation of a historical commission, and hence be able to argue that the Armenian Genocide is far from being a historical fact, and that historians are still discussing what happened to the Ottoman Armenians from 1915-18.

Where to go from here

The Turkish-Armenian conflict cannot be transformed through traditional diplomacy. Instead, I recommend an alternative approach championed by John Paul Lederach[11] who highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict and engaging all segments of the affected populations in the process. These premises have been ignored in the so-called "Soccer Diplomacy."

Lederach argues that "the place called reconciliation" is the meeting point of Truth (which, he says, involves Acknowledgement, Transparency, Revelation, Clarity); Mercy (which involves Acceptance, Forgiveness, Support, Compassion, Healing); Justice (which involves Equality, Right Relationships, Restitution); and Peace (which involves Harmony, Unity, Well-being, Security, Respect). The current Turkey-Armenia dialogue stands in complete disregard of all these principles: The Truth is set aside. There is no readiness from the Turkish side to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide and be transparent in the evaluation of past and continued actions. There is no room for Mercy, because the Turkish side continues to assert there is nothing to forgive, because there was no genocide. Nowhere in the dialogue do Justice, Equality, and Restitution have a place-on the contrary, the dialogue is based on the very tenets of the power asymmetry and ignoring justice.[12] And, as a consequence, Peace is nowhere in sight.

Theriault talks about the shortcomings of the theory of magically "resolving" the Turkish-Armenian problem: [T]here is...the assumption that there can be a single, decisive transition from "unresolved" to "resolved" through an act or set of acts. This assumption shared by antagonists from Turkish deniers to committed Armenian activists is curiously Christian, echoing the notion of instantaneous absolution for sins through supplicant entreaty and clerical pronouncement. Resolution is not an event or outcome; it is a process, a very long-term process. Armenian-Turkish relations are not a simple all-or-nothing proposition, either "in tension" or "worked out perfectly." They are better or worse along a continuum of fine gradations, with no bold line between "good" and "bad" relations. Likewise, they are not fixed, but can fluctuate through time in trajectories of improvement and deterioration.[13] Theriault also argues that "[i]n the case where there is no acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide, it is trivially obvious that no resolution can occur." However, recognition alone is not enough. It has meaning only when it reflects the "material and social-structural changes" or causes them. Furthermore, according to Theriault, "positive relations between Turks and Armenians are not made permanent simply by being enacted at a given point in time. They must be reproduced and supported at every moment, or the relations will degenerate."

The fact that after a very dynamic start in August, "Soccer Diplomacy" has, as of the writing of this paper, slowed down and is facing impediments is a testament to the fact that "traditional" diplomacy cannot go far in resolving protracted conflicts, because it ignores the root causes and the power dynamics. A new model is necessary.

A 'welcome' initiative

While "Soccer Diplomacy" was already in progress, an important initiative was launched by intellectuals in Turkey, who signed a petition apologizing to Armenians for the "Great Catastrophe that the Armenians were subjected to." [14] The apology, together with the list of initial signatories, was posted online on Dec. 15, 2008, and already within a few days, thousands of other citizens of Turkey had signed it. Despite the fact that it fell short of properly referring to 1915-16 as "genocide," and did not even mention who exactly "subjected" the Armenians to the "Catastrophe," this initiative by Turkish intellectuals created a cautiously positive response among Armenians both in Armenia and the diaspora, where it was generally welcomed as a good first step. [15] Gul's visit, on the other hand, had received mixed reactions, and was not welcomed as warmly by many Armenians exactly because it did not involve any attempt, however meager, to acknowledge the root causes of the problem.

Official Ankara's position regarding the apology campaign initiated by 200 intellectuals was clear from the very beginning: The apology campaign for the Armenian Genocide is bad for Turkey and will also harm Turkey-Armenia dialogue, which has been making strides recently.

Statements to this effect were made by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, and Turkish army generals.

When the apology campaign was launched, Erdogan said it amounted to "stirring up trouble, disturbing our peace and undoing the steps which have been taken." He added, "If there is a crime, then those who committed it can offer an apology. My nation, my country has no

such issue."

Babacan, in turn, said, "This is a sensitive issue for Turkey. There is a negotiation process going on [with Armenia]... This kind of debate is of no use to anyone especially at a time talks continue and it may harm the negotiation process."

"We definitely think that what is done is not right. Apologizing is wrong and can yield harmful consequences," said General Metin Gurak, the spokesperson for the General Staff, during a press conference.

Gul first spoke in defense of the initiative when it was first launched, saying that it was proof that democracy was thriving in Turkey. Yet, this simple statement was harshly criticized by the opposition in Turkey, and accusations flew from left and right. One parliament member "accused" Gul of having an Armenian mother. The president was quick to deny the allegation and start legal action against the person who threw it. He didn't bother to say, "My mother is not Armenian, but what if she were?" By taking the accusation as an insult, he essentially reinforced the racist prejudice in Turkey against Armenians.

Apparently, Gul could not hold his good-cop routine for more than two weeks. In early January, during an interview on the Turkish television channel ATV, Gul said the apology campaign would have a negative effect on the diplomatic efforts between the two countries.

According to Gul, "When we examine the latest debates in terms of their results, I do not think they make a positive contribution." He also said his previous statements were presented in a distorted way.

So within a few weeks of the launching of the apology campaign, there was consensus among the ruling party, the opposition, and the army in Turkey that the apology campaign will have negative consequences on Turkey-Armenia dialogue. This might be an indication that Ankara has no intention to address some of the core issues anytime soon. Moreover, it is opposed to any civil society initiative to address-even in part-these issues.

Instead, Ankara wants to put heavy make-up on its face, hoping to hide its century-old scars. The calls by Turkish intellectuals for official Ankara to wash its face and get plastic surgery are yet to be heard.

#### Conclusion

True transformation of Turkish-Armenian relations cannot take place without involving all sectors and levels of the affected population. "Soccer Diplomacy" was not Turkish-Armenian dialogue-as it was portrayed in the Western media. It was Turkey-Armenia dialogue and ignored the diaspora, which has been a major source of support for Armenia since its independence. Also, a great amount of creativity is necessary to address the power asymmetries that are so inherent to this conflict-especially since these asymmetries are the product of the genocide perpetrated by one side, followed by denial and continued hostile attitudes towards the victims and their descendents.

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