
Eyes On Almaty Talks For Karabakh, Turkish-Armenian Dialogue

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Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu may meet with his Armenian counterpart, Edward Nalbandian, on the sidelines of an international gathering that begins today in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

The informal meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is also expected to be a setting for key talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia concerning their territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh.

News reports have said Nalbandian and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov will discuss a possible Armenian withdrawal from the Lachin and Kelbajar provinces, which are the only link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, during the gathering. Any breakthrough on the protracted dispute of Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian populated territory occupied by Armenia in the early 1990s, could also lead to progress in the stalled efforts to normalize relations between Turkey and Armenia.

Turkey and Armenia sealed historic twin reconciliation protocols in Zurich last October, but the process was stalled amid Azerbaijani opposition to any Turkish-Armenian rapprochement as long as the stalemate in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute persisted. Turkey related its reconciliation with Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue immediately after it signed the protocols, further complicating the painstaking process.

Turkish officials said Davutoglu will hold meetings with foreign counterparts on the sidelines of the two-day OSCE gathering but did not say whether a meeting with Nalbandian was one of them. Davutoglu is also expected to meet with Mammadyarov.

"Mr. Minister [Davutoglu] will have bilateral talks while in Almaty.

However, those meetings are not yet scheduled," Turkish diplomatic sources told Today's Zaman yesterday, when asked whether Davutoglu would have talks with Nalbandian and Mammadyarov. Armenian news portal Panorama reported on Thursday that Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesman Tigran Balayan said, "At this moment, no meeting between the Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers has been scheduled in Almaty."

On the sidelines of the Almaty gathering, the OSCE Minsk Group, which has been trying to find a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan for 15 years now, will also hold a meeting. Nalbandian and Mammadyarov are both expected to participate in the Minsk Group's meeting, officials stated. The Azernews news portal quoted Mammadyarov last week as saying Azerbaijan and Armenia have already agreed to an Armenian withdrawal from five provinces adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh and that this issue will no longer be discussed. According to the Azerbaijani foreign minister, once a peace accord is signed between the nations, Armenia will immediately withdraw from the occupied regions, while Kelbajar and Lachin must be returned within five years.

"We have already agreed to the terms that Armenia returns Lachin and Kelbajar to Azerbaijan in five years," Mammadyarov told a news conference in Baku yesterday, adding that this principle is also included in the Madrid Principles. Mammadyarov noted that Azerbaijan thought it agreed with Armenia on this issue, yet the Armenian side kept bringing this issue up in

the foreign ministers' St. Petersburg meeting. According to Mammadyarov, Armenia's approach in raising concluded matters further prolongs the solution of the conflict.
