
Why Should Turkey Normalize Her Relations With Armenia?

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Journal of Turkish Weekly - 1/4/2009

Armenian and Turkish press has been recently talking about the rapprochement and possibility of the normalization of relations between the two countries. In spite of fifteen-year severed diplomatic ties, closed border and tense relations, the winds of change have begun blowing between Ankara and Yerevan with the visit paid by Turkish President Abdullah Gul to Armenia, upon the invitation of Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian, on the occasion of a soccer match. This historic visit was followed by a series of gatherings held on several occasions, such as the BSEC or Davos meetings, where the parties voiced their willingness with respect to the settlement of existing disputes between Turkey and Armenia. Considering the lack of dialogue between the two states since early 1990s, it is obvious that Turkey and Armenia have entered an unprecedented period in their history as two independent and sovereign states. It is currently a serious point of concern in Turkey and Armenia whether or not these steps will enable the parties to come out of the fifteen-year deadlock in their relations. However, instead of asking whether parties will be able to normalize their relations, a more important point that has to be discussed is why parties should normalize their relations.

The conflicts between Turkey and Armenia gradually emerged when newly-independent Armenia attempted to define Eastern Anatolia as "Western Armenia" and not to officially recognize the borders it has with Turkey. Following this, genocide allegations poisoned the relations between the two as they began to be voiced more loudly by the Armenian government and as the diaspora intensified its initiatives to have the 1915 events recognized as genocide in national parliaments all around the world. Nevertheless, the landmark event causing Turkey to close her doors completely to Armenia was the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh breaking out between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a territorial and administrative dispute from 1988 to 1992 and as a full-fledged war from 1992 to 1994. Moreover, even though the term of Levon Ter-Petrosian can be considered as more moderate with respect to the genocide allegations in particular, the hawkish discourse of Robert Kocharian, a Karabakh native and the region's former president, sharpened the tone utilized by Armenia from late 1990s onwards. Finally, resolution of the disputes, reopening of the borders and establishment of diplomatic ties with Armenia have been linked to the resolution of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, bringing about nothing but turning the situation into a "mutually hurting stalemate"[1] for both Turkey and Armenia.

The nature of the conflicts between Turkey and Armenia is a perfect example of hurting stalemate inasmuch as that both sides are damaged by the continuation of conflicts to a certain extent. From the Turkish side, stalemated conflicts with Armenia means facing the gradually increasing international pressure with respect to the recognition of genocide allegations, waiting the remarks of US Presidents with a bated breath every 24 April and perceiving the threat of being obliged to pay compensation and give some parts of Eastern Anatolia to Armenia, causing Turkey to suffer from SÃvres Syndrome even 90 years after the signing of the treaty, which feeds the "foreign enemies" discourse of ultra-nationalists in Turkey.

>From the Armenian side, on the other hand, insistence on the continuation of conflict points with Turkey costs the embargo imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan on this state, including exclusion from energy transit routes

passing through the region, limited diplomatic relations with neighbours and dependence on the money poured into the country by the diaspora because of lacking trade relations with neighbouring countries, inefficient investments and young population leaving the state, which turns Armenia into an old people's home.

It is unequivocally true to say that associating the conflicts between Turkey and Armenia with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and pushing the resolution of this conflict as a prerequisite for the normalization of relations between the two states only increase the severity of stalemate both parties suffer from. Given the fact that Azerbaijan has lost ground regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and support of the third parties has tilted towards Armenia since early 1990s, the support extended by Turkey to the Azerbaijani side is beyond price and intensely needed. However, for a number of reasons, Turkey should normalize her relations with Armenia not despite Azerbaijan, but for also Azerbaijan.

First and foremost, there is no doubt that, in contrast to Turkey's expectations, thinking the conflict points with Armenia in the same basket with Nagorno-Karabakh issue and confining this state to economic and political isolation in the region did not drive her into a corner but, instead, caused the hawks to come to power in 1998 and led the diaspora to sharpen its tone through intensifying genocide allegations and accelerating pro-Armenian campaign regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. It is true that Robert Kocharian pursued a totally different policy from Ter-Petrosian in that he tried to turn the isolation imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan on his state into an advantage through attracting the attention of diaspora to send more financial aid to Armenia and through depending on Russia and Iran further and, thereby, constituting a second axis in regional equation vis-à-vis the axis consisting of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Moreover, with a view that it is the diaspora underscoring the genocide allegations much more and taking an irreconcilable stance regarding the resolution of existing disputes, Turkey must make a clear-cut differentiation between the diaspora Armenians and Armenian residents. The main motive pushing the diaspora to put emphasis on genocide allegations so intensely is the need for an argument which will bring Armenians all over the world together and maintain their identity and integrity through serving as cement. What is more, compared with the initial years of newly independent Armenia, the influence of diaspora on the Armenian state and her foreign policy as a whole has become much more decisive from late 1990s onwards. From this point of view, it is undoubtedly true to argue that the shared policy pursued by Turkey and Azerbaijan to isolate Armenia in the region was one of the basic reasons for the hardening of the tone used by the diaspora and its increased impact on Armenia. As a result, given the fact that it seems impossible to establish an immediate dialogue with the diaspora due to its irreconcilable stance and decentralized character, normalization of relations with Armenia is in the interests of Turkey in that it can find a counterpart to defend her point of view and to come to a common point with respect to the disputed issues.

To put it another way, considering that, in our period, public diplomacy does not matter only at the margins any more, Turkey must give weight to shaping the lenses through which Armenian people see Turkey. Today, public opinion matters in the conduct of foreign policy more than ever. For that reason, even if an immediate establishment of diplomatic relations cannot be expected in the short and mid-run, opening borders with Armenia, increasing the number of direct flights to Yerevan and establishing more trade links between the two countries would make a substantial increase in the interaction channels between two societies and this would have a crucial impact on the point of views through which both nations see each

other. At the end, this would make further dialogue possible between them, making it more costly for Armenia to sustain her irreconcilable attitude and leading a way to the settlement of conflicts between Turkey and Armenia.

Furthermore, as of today, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue seems to meet the criteria for being called as an intractable conflict, i.e. long-lasting conflicts that are protracted in nature and failed to be accommodated despite the efforts exerted both by the adversaries themselves and by the third parties[2]. What is more, it is difficult to deny that Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is full of failed third party mediation attempts, which comprise the attempts of Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan and the Minsk Group under the auspices of OSCE (then-CSCE). Needless to say that, failure to settle the conflict mostly derives from the nature of the conflict itself -inability to integrate the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity in a way that both parties would accept, identity considerations attributed to the conflict by both adversaries and reluctance of the party having military advantage to give concessions-[3]. Nevertheless, the role of third parties plays an important part in turning Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into a protracted one. Here, the most significant point which has to be stressed is the conflict of interest between Russia and the West in asserting their impact in the region. Given the fact that a weak Azerbaijan would enable Russia to maintain her role in energy markets and a weak Armenia means a loyal supporter of Russian interests in the region, Russia, from its very beginning, has been quite reluctant to accept Western-sponsored roadmaps for peace, which was evident, for example, in Russian objection to the deployment of an OSCE-led international peace-keeping force in the region, instead of a Russian or CIS force.

When all these conditions under which the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has evolved are taken into consideration, it would be pure optimism for Turkey to wait for the settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to normalize her relations with Armenia. Therefore, the best thing that should be done on the way to the normalization of relations with Armenia is to increase the dialogue with this state through turning every occasion, including both official and non-official ones, into advantage. Accordingly, the historic visit paid by President Abdullah Gul to Armenia and other meetings held by some lower-ranking government officials on several occasions, like BSEC and Davos meetings, can all be thought as landmark steps towards re-establishing relations with Armenia.

In effect, it should not be forgotten that Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 played a part in paving the way for the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia. Indeed, considering severed diplomatic and commercial relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia sustains her commercial relations with the world via Georgia's Black Sea ports, which were paralyzed during the war. This short period of deprivation might have made obvious the catastrophic repercussions of being depended on only one state and might have urged Armenia not to mortgage her future on a controversial part of history, especially in a period when the poor Armenian economy began facing the impact of global financial crisis.

Moreover, the Russo-Georgian war was a wake-up call to the states in Caucasus inasmuch as that it unveiled the extent to which frozen ethnic conflicts in the region and Russian willingness to reassert her influence over the region can pose a threat to the peace, security and stability in Caucasus when there is no cooperation and coordination among the neighbouring states of the region. For that reason, it is clear that, since the war in August, Turkey and Armenia have not been in a position to turn down the dialogue appeals any more, not only for their own sake but also for the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.

Maybe a more important thing, following Russia's war in Georgia, is the increasing contacts between Azerbaijan and Armenia. To be more precise, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey came together in tripartite meetings held in New York in September and, then, in Helsinki in December and voiced their willingness for a solution. Moreover, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed Moscow Declaration in November 2008, following the talks hosted by Russia and under the auspices of Minsk Group, OSCE. Although the Declaration was downplayed because of not leading to any important result with respect to the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it should be labelled as crucial when it is considered in conjunction with other recent developments.

As conclusion, whether Turkey and Armenia will be able to turn these steps into an advantage towards normalizing their relations depends on the answer of the question to what extent parties are ready and eager to move the relations ahead. If these steps are not to be followed by additional demarches, then it means that they will be confined to the dustbin of history like other steps remaining inconclusive. However, if parties sustain their willingness to take the relations further ahead and if they feed this willingness with concrete initiatives, then, a warming in Turkish-Armenian relations will be righteously anticipated in the mid-run.

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[1] The concept of "mutually hurting stalemate" was firstly used by William Zartman to define a situation in which both sides of a conflict end up in such a costly deadlock that there is no use escalating the conflict to escape from it. I.W. Zartman, "Ripeness: the Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," In Conflict Resolution After the Cold War, ed. P.C. Stern and D. Druckman, (Washington, DC: National Academy Press), pp. 225-250.

[2] Louis Kriesberg, "Nature of Intractability," Beyond Intractability, eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, posted: October 2003.
http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/nature_intractability/

[3] David D. Laitin and Ronald Grogor Suny, "Armenia and Azerbaijan: Thinking a way out of Karabakh," Middle East Policy, vol.7, no.1, October 1999, p.158.

Wednesday, 1 April 2009

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