

# Towards a Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement?

AYBARS GÖRGÜLÜ\*

## ABSTRACT

Given its close political, economic, social and cultural ties to the region, stability, prosperity and a cooperative atmosphere in the South Caucasus are of great significance to Turkey. From this perspective, the normalization of Turkey's relations with Armenia is one of the priorities of the AKP government. So a new era is about to begin in Turkish-Armenian relations, which up until now have been burdened by historical legacies, inertia and a lack of trust. The process of rapprochement launched with the restoration of the Akhtamar Church in 2002 is likely to soon result in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries; however, the process is complicated, and it is still uncertain when the official ties will be definitively established. That is why a detailed look at the 18 years of deadlock between Turkey and Armenia would be helpful in order to better understand the changing dynamics of the problem.

**T**urkish-Armenian relations have been deadlocked since Armenia gained its independence in 1991. The closed border and the lack of diplomatic ties cloud the future of bilateral relations as well as official and non-official efforts aimed at contributing to the process of normalization. However, Turkish-Armenian relations have been gaining momentum since 2002. The restoration of the Akhtamar Church, the demonstrations in Turkey after the assassination of Hrant Dink, Turkey's EU membership process and finally Turkish President Abdullah Gül's visit to Yerevan in September 2008 are all cornerstones of this new era. This recent rapprochement process between Turkey and Armenia is also attracting significant attention from the international community. The primary reason behind this is the fact that the two sides have never come this close to a solution of their intricate problems during 18 years of bilateral relations.

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\* Sabancı University; and Assistant program officer at the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV),  
aybars@tesev.org.tr

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Since its foundation, Turkey has had problematic relations with its neighboring countries. In that sense Armenia is no exception; however, the lack of official ties and the closed land border between two countries make the nature of the bilateral relations quite unique. The aim of this article is to introduce this special relationship between Turkey and Arme-

nia by touching upon the headlines of the problematic relations. After a brief introduction of the main problems and challenges in the relationship, the paper will underline the importance of normalization in terms of enhancing stability and cooperation in the South Caucasus region with a special focus on the latest regional developments and international actors' positions regarding Turkish-Armenian relations.

### **The Historical Background**

It is pointless to blame only one side for the lack of diplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia and for the closed border that physically separates the two societies. In addition to being burdened by historical legacies, inertia and a lack of trust, Turkish and Armenian state authorities were also challenged by the breakout of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The exacerbation of this conflict strained the negotiation process between the two sides while they were discussing the modalities of establishing diplomatic relations and ultimately led to the entire closure of the Turkish-Armenian border.

Nevertheless, the process went well for both sides at the beginning. Turkey recognized the independence of Azerbaijan on Nov. 9, 1991, and one month later, on Dec. 16, the international arena witnessed the recognition of all other ex-Soviet countries by Turkey without discrimination. Following the recognition of the new Caucasian states, Turkey established official ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the first contacts with Armenia took place in quite a positive atmosphere. Accordingly, after the recognition of Armenia in the first months of 1992, Turkey designated an ambassador for the diplomatic representation office in Yerevan that was going to be opened in the near future. High-level diplomatic delegations from both sides visited Ankara and Yerevan, respectively, to discuss possible areas of cooperation as well as opportunities for trade. In addition to these preliminary meetings, Turkey invited Armenia to become a founding member of the Orga-

nization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). The then-Armenian president, Levon Ter-Petrossian, represented Armenia at the meeting of heads of state of the BSEC countries in Istanbul in 1992, and this also was taken as a sign of Armenia's willingness to improve relations with Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

However, despite numerous meetings and official visits, Turkey and Armenia were not able to establish diplomatic relations. The negotiation process of the bilateral protocol for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries encountered several problems and eventually became deadlocked. Turkey argued that Armenia did not officially recognize the existing common border between the two countries as established by the 1921 treaties of Kars and Gümrü. Hence, as a prerequisite for establishing diplomatic relations, Turkey asked for an official statement stressing that the independent State of Armenia recognizes these treaties and respects the territorial integrity of Turkey. Armenian authorities never issued such a statement and argued that there was no need for a declaration of this type since neither of the two countries had ever denounced the treaty.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this problem, the aggravation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia led to the suspension of official talks between the two sides as well as the closure of the common border.

### **A Vicious Circle?**

Since the closure of the border in 1993 and the rupture of official ties, various nongovernmental actors have tried to fill the gap generated by the absence of dialogue between the two sides. In this context, under the pioneering efforts of civil society organizations and business representatives from both countries, the disadvantages of the closed border have been displayed on several occasions. In addition, there have been significant efforts to establish academic and cultural exchange programs to develop mutual perceptions in both Turkey and Armenia. At the same time, official attempts to normalize relations have continued in some form; however, not much has been achieved.

The 1990s was a period of stalemate for both Turkey and Armenia. Turkey aimed to coerce and to some extent punish Armenia by not opening the border. However, this policy not only failed to bring the expected results, it also deepened mutual misunderstandings shaped by the tragedies of the past. The isolation of Armenia has in addition encouraged the Armenian diaspora campaigns promoting international recognition of the 1915 events as genocide. The success of these efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s generated a defensive rhetoric in Turkey and legitimized the deadlock with Armenia in the eyes of public opinion. Even

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though the genocide issue was put on the Armenian government's agenda after Kocharian was elected president in 2001, it is actually the Armenian diaspora that has exerted great efforts pushing for the adoption of the genocide allegations in the parliaments of third-party countries

to give this issue an international character. Turkey's official position against the recognition of genocide allegations by these legislatures was that such decisions are not binding on Turkey under international law. This argument was valid but overlooks the fact that the "genocide" became a reality (or a fact) in the countries that recognized the 1915 events as such. So despite the fact that these decisions bore no legal implications, they turned public opinion in these countries against Turkey.

It should be noted that Turkey's official position regarding the genocide issue has also changed in the last couple of years. Today, the catastrophe of the 1915 events and the damage it has inflicted on both societies are implicitly recognized by Turkey. Turkey's current strategy is to push Armenia for agreement to the establishment of a joint committee of historians. Turkey's current argument is based on Article 2 of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and holds that genocide is a crime committed by individuals and can only be determined by the courts upon historical evidence, irrespective of the convention's retroactive irrevocability. So Turkey expects reciprocation from the Armenian side for the formation of a joint committee of historians to collect relevant data and determine if possible the nature of incidences. Even though Armenian authorities are not completely opposed to this proposition, nothing concrete has been achieved up to the present time for the establishment of such a commission.

### **Turkey in the South Caucasus**

The new momentum in Turkish-Armenian relations should be analyzed within the framework of the proactive foreign policy making of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. After coming to power in November 2002, the AKP government continued and accelerated the EU reform process. However, this acceleration in the negotiation process also mobilized member states that were skeptical of Turkish membership. The increasing number of negative voices going hand for agreement to the establishment -in-hand with the declining enthusiasm of the AKP for the EU project resulted in a slowdown of negotiations. In the meantime, the AKP government has realized that fulfilling

the political and economic criteria for EU accession will not be enough to make Turkey a full member and thus the government has started to invest in Turkey's regional competencies. In other words, the regional leadership card has become a bargaining chip against the EU. The South Caucasus was naturally one of these regions where Turkey began to invest more, both economically and politically. However, the blocked Turkish-Armenian relations came on the agenda as a serious challenge to the AKP government's efforts to develop Turkey's position as a regional power.



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It is apparent that given its close political, economic, social and cultural ties with the region, stability, prosperity and a cooperative atmosphere in the South Caucasus are of great significance for Turkey. Within this perspective Turkey wishes to pursue a cooperative policy toward the region in order to consolidate its influence, maximize its interests and contribute to peace and stability in its wider neighborhood. However, the major global transformation that took place at the end of the Cold War directly affected both Turkey and the South Caucasus region. Celebrations of the fall of the Soviet Union were short lived since the newly discovered borderlands transformed the old Turkish-Soviet border into an area of instability. Disorder in this transit region for oil and natural gas exports from the Caspian Sea to Europe concerned Turkey, which has been seeking to become an energy hub. That is why ensuring the sustainable stability of the Caucasus region became one of the major strategic concerns for the Turkish state. Nevertheless, over the past 18 years Turkey's policies towards the region have been unable to ensure this stability.<sup>3</sup>

It can be argued that it is beyond Turkey's ability to bring stability to the Caucasus, which is a border for the Euro-Atlantic area and at the same time a crossroads where the interests of many states overlap in a complex pattern. The region connects Western markets to Central Asian energy routes and sources and offers energy suppliers other than the Russian and Iranian monopolies to Europe.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the geopolitical struggle developing especially in the South Caucasus over its energy resources and energy transport routes has placed the region at the center of the global power struggle.<sup>5</sup>

So where can we place Turkish-Armenian relations in this puzzle? First of all, the lack of diplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia jeopardizes Turkey's efforts to become a regional leader and also its attempts at mediation for the region's protracted conflicts. The Nagorno-Karabakh dispute is a good example in that sense. Turkey's involvement in this conflict as a party rather than a mediator and its unconditional support for Azerbaijan motivated by factors both strategic – *oil-rich Azerbaijan's importance for Turkey* – and domestic – *Azerbaijan's status as a "kin-state" to Turkey* – has limited Turkey's potential role as a mediator. Still, Turkey is eager to act as a negotiator between the two sides, since the resolution of this conflict is vital to Turkish interests in terms of both the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations and the establishment of peace and stability in the Caucasus.

The second aspect related to Turkish-Armenian relations concerns the fragile atmosphere of stability in the South Caucasus. The principal problem in the South Caucasus is that the region has been disrupted with three armed conflicts that encumber peace and stability. Even though these disputes are labeled as "frozen," the five-day war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 over the breakaway province of South Ossetia has once more demonstrated that the conflicts of the region can easily escalate into harsh military battles. Even though this war changed the regional balance and served to accelerate the development of Turkish-Armenian relations by creating new opportunities for normalization, it has also demonstrated the risks posed by reliance on transport and communication via Georgia. When all communication and energy transportation projects through Georgia were suspended during the war, Armenia's availability to become an alternate route for oil and gas pipelines running to the West from the Caspian Sea became more visible. This surely created a new motive for Turkey to open the border with Armenia in order to have an alternate route for pipelines.

In light of these developments it would not be inappropriate to expect normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations in the near future. Besides it is no se-

cret that the latest round of negotiations between Turkey and Armenia has been under way for more than a year. In addition to Gül's visit to Yerevan in September 2008, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan has had several meetings with his counterpart, Eduard Nalbandian, to discuss the modalities of establishing diplomatic ties as well as an initiative proposed by Turkey to establish a regional alliance with the participation of the three Caucasus states together with Turkey and Russia. Even though the Caucasus Platform initiative should be viewed as a process in which the political initiative itself is much more important than its potential outcome, Ankara has once more demonstrated that Turkey prefers to play an active part in the solution of the problems hampering regional stability and an atmosphere of peace rather than quietly watching developments.

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### **A Regional Perspective**

Here, a closer look at regional developments and the positions of international actors would be helpful in order to understand how much the latest changes in the regional balance of power have affected the ongoing process of normalization in Turkish-Armenian relations. The primary actor in the South Caucasus region is certainly Russia, even though it took a while for this country to re-establish its dominion in the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia affects the future of Turkish-Armenian relations via its dominance over the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, which has actually been the major problem in Turkish-Armenian relations since the closure of the border. Since Turkey has officially linked the normalization of bilateral relations with Armenia to a possible peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the peaceful resolution of this dispute is critical for Turkey. As the largest state in former Soviet Union territory, Russia has always been a major party to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The absence of diplomatic ties with Turkey and the war with Azerbaijan have naturally pushed Armenia to the Russian sphere of influence. In addition to the cultural and religious affinities between the two countries, Russia has become the protector of Armenia politically, economically and militarily. In 1997, an agreement of friendship and mutual cooperation was signed between Russia and Armenia allowing Russian forces to be stationed in the country. According to the accord, in the case of a military clash, both sides would help each other and respond jointly against the aggressor party. As such, the deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh has given

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Russia a chance to exert great influence over Armenia and the South Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> Until the five-day war between Georgia, Russia had worked behind the scenes to ensure the continuation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and supported the *Karabakh clan* in Armenia, which profits politically and economically from the conflict. However Russia's strategy to

freeze the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute apparently changed after the conflict with Georgia. Many believed there was a reason why Sargsyan invited Gül to Yerevan during a Moscow visit, and it is argued that this gesture signified a change in Russia's policy with regard to normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. For the first time, Russia stopped interfering with Turkish-Armenian dialogue and even tried to promote it.

Regarding the positions of the US and the EU, it can be argued that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US started pursuing an active foreign policy in the former Soviet territory to fill the power vacuum in the region. It supported the region economically and technically to eventually become the area's hegemon. The EU had similar desires as well, but the absence of coherent and long-term foreign policy making at the EU level hampered the success of the union's South Caucasus projects, and the EU's approach towards the region focusing solely on economic and technical aspects undermined the union's efficiency in the region as a political and military actor. At the same time, their positions regarding Turkish-Armenian relations have always been positive. Both sides favored the immediate resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. However they also effectively used the problematic Turkish-Armenian relationship as a bargaining chip in their relations with Turkey and Armenia.

In this context, the genocide resolutions in the US Congress have become a permanent source of conflict in Turkish-US relations. Whether 2009 will be an exception that sees the newly elected US president, Barack Obama, using the g-word on April 24 in his traditional commemorative message is still unknown. However Obama made firm pledges during his election campaign that he would support Armenian diaspora's campaign to have the genocide allegations recognized if he were to be elected. But it should not be forgotten that the executive branch in the US traditionally opposes genocide resolutions due to the fact that such a decision would severely damage Turkish-Armenian relations. Such a move would also

undermine the recent rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia by emasculating the AKP government's efforts to normalize relations. In addition, the visit of Obama to Ankara right after the

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NATO summit in Strasbourg clearly indicates that Turkey will be an indispensable actor for the new US government and that Turkey's regional competencies are highly appreciated by Washington. As a result many believe that Obama will not want to lose the support of a critical ally like Turkey in the dawn of withdrawing soldiers from Iraq and will not use the word "genocide" in his commemorative message in April. In addition, if one tries to decode the speech made by Obama at the Turkish Parliament on April 6, 2009, it seems probable that Obama will not label the 1915 events as genocide in his April 24 speech as he promised during his election campaign in 2008.<sup>7</sup> In Ankara, Obama stated that he did not want to interfere with the delicate negotiations between Turks and Armenians and reminded both sides of the urgency of the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations.<sup>8</sup> Even though there were rumors claiming that the Turkish-Armenian border would be opened following Obama's visit to Turkey, President Gül announced that the information reported in the media on Turkey's opening of the border on April 16 was not accurate.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted here that the meaning of Obama's visit for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations is exaggerated. The US administration has always supported the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties since the deadlock in the early 1990s; however, they also saw no harm in using the genocide issue as a bargaining chip in Turkish-US relations. As Ahmet Davutoğlu, chief foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has suggested, the critical aspect of Obama's visit is that the genocide issue "should not hijack the strategic vision of Turkish-US relations or Turkish-Armenian relations."<sup>10</sup> So it would be too optimistic to expect a sudden opening of the border after Obama's visit, but his April 24 speech is critical both for the future of Turkish-US and Turkish-Armenian relations.

As for relations with the EU, the genocide allegations and the closed Turkish-Armenian border play a role in directing the course of Turkey-EU relations. The European Commission's annual progress reports, which evaluate the course of the negotiations and the reforms carried out by Turkey, always put emphasis on establishing good neighborly relations and the importance of opening the border without delay. In addition, some heads of state, such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy, state on all occasions that it is not possible for Turkey to enter the EU without recognizing the genocide and opening the closed border with Armenia.<sup>11</sup>

The establishment of official relations and the opening of the border will launch a confidence-building process on both sides by reducing and eliminating mutual misunderstandings

Another important aspect is the inclusion of Armenia in the European Neighbourhood Policy. This situation indicates that the EU puts great emphasis on good neighborhood relations in the South Caucasus. As is mentioned in a TEPSA report: “The EU considers conflict resolution and good neighbourly relations as one of its prime foreign policy objectives.

It calls for all accession candidates to resolve outstanding difficulties with their neighbours before acceding to the EU.”<sup>12</sup> So it can be argued that Turkey will eventually open its closed border with Armenia in order to become a full member of the EU. However, the facts that the major EU countries have recognized the genocide claims in their national parliaments and that the Armenian diaspora is well organized in Europe decrease the EU’s possible involvement in the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations and the union’s ability to force Turkey on a rapid solution.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, under all the circumstances analyzed in this article, it would be appropriate to argue that a basis is provided for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. According to diplomatic sources, the establishment of diplomatic ties will happen soon. The critical aspect here is that no matter when it takes place, this development will surely change the regional balance of power in favor of Turkey. However, Turkey should definitely finalize this process without harming its good relations with Azerbaijan since the deterioration of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations can sabotage the positive atmosphere that will blossom in the wake of the opening of the border and the establishment of official ties between Turkey and Armenia. Here the change in Russia’s position regarding Turkish-Armenian relations is critical, since it would be too optimistic to expect normalization without the consent of Russia.

It is obvious that the opening of the border will be beneficial for both Turkey and Armenia. Armenia needs the normalization in order to cooperate with Turkey in various spheres including the Black Sea region and the establishment of an atmosphere of peace and security in the South Caucasus and also in order to deal with the global challenges and threats this country faces. On the other hand, Turkey needs to develop good relations with Armenia since the sealed border and the absence of diplomatic ties leave Turkey vulnerable to external pressures

from the US and the EU. The lack of official ties with a neighboring country also cripples Turkey's proactive foreign policy goals aiming to increase its regional competencies. In addition, the establishment of official relations and the opening of the border will launch a confidence-building process on both sides by reducing and eliminating mutual misunderstandings. That is why the real normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations will become a reality after opening the border, and only then will the two sides be able to start working at normalizing the mutual perceptions in both countries.

## Endnotes

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