
Turkey-Armenia Relations in 2015: Thaw or Freeze?

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This is a summary of a roundtable held at Chatham House on 26 June 2014. Tunç Aybak, Thomas de Waal and Hrach Tchilingirian discussed the politicization of the Armenian genocide and possible developments in relations between Turkey and Armenia.

What happened to the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War is first and foremost a human issue and this often gets lost in the discourse. In his statement on 23 April, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed the moral dimension as opposed to making a political statement.

Most traces of the Armenian population in Anatolia have been destroyed. For example, there were around 2,000 Armenian schools in Anatolia in the early 20th century, but not one remained after the war.

The genocide has remained an issue in the victims' families, and this is behind the diaspora's vehement stance on this. Most diaspora Armenians want to see a recognition that the massacres happened; they expect some form of compensation rather than reclaiming of land.

There are three main aspects in Turkey-Armenia relations around the genocide issue:

- moral – the recognition and restitution pursued by many intellectuals (activists and a number of NGOs in Turkey and Armenia)
- political – state-level relations and Azerbaijan's involvement (vis-à-vis the Nagorny Karabakh conflict)
- legal – the legal debate about intent to kill, lost properties, assets etc.

The problems of the Armenian community in Turkey, mostly concentrated in Istanbul, need to be addressed by the government; indeed, this would be a good place to start work on improving relations with Armenia.

In Turkey, public debate about the genocide only started after the political assassinations of Turkish officials by certain militant Armenian diaspora organizations in the 1970s. These attacks prompted the government to provide training for Turkish diplomats on how to respond to questions on the 'Armenian issue'. The attacks broke the wall of silence, but not the wall of denial.

The murder of Hrant Dink (editor of the Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos*) in 2007 was another turning point; it sparked a reaction in civil society and academia. There is still a lot of legal discourse going on, but the fact remains that an enormous number of Armenians were killed in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War; the legal aspects are for lawyers to judge. The Turkish initiative to open the majority of Ottoman archives is commendable, but it leaves out the public memory of the genocide.

Erdoğan's statement offering condolences to the grandchildren of the Armenians killed during the First World War is a positive step, but he is not considered a reliable interlocutor. In times of political crisis he usually acts as a polarizer; he should move towards empathetic diplomacy. The year 2023 will mark the centenary of the Turkish republic and recognition of the Armenian genocide would be a good way to show that it has come of age.

The discourse has moved on, but the politics has not caught up yet. There are two main political issues around the genocide: the diaspora, and the closed borders and the link to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. There are also three different Armenias to be considered: the Republic of Armenia, the diaspora and the Armenian community in Turkey.

Important changes have taken place in the Turkish society since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. The government stopped the Kemalist discourse and let civil society get on with its activities. The re-emergence of oral history and memoirs from the period around the First World War is also an important factor. Some Armenians were assimilated into the Turkish community; they disappeared from the historical record, but memory of the events has survived in eastern Anatolia and its re-emergence in the public discourse has changed the political atmosphere.

The G-word (genocide) has taken over the discourse in an unhealthy way. The accord signed between foreign ministers Ahmet Davutoğlu and Eduard Nalbandyan in October 2009 was an attempt to reset the clock. Turkey has offered to establish a joint historical commission in which researchers from both countries would study the events of 1915. Ankara saw this as a way to let Turkish society come to terms with the issue. However, the suggestion was not taken well by the Armenian diaspora due to disagreement over basic principles; Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan's enthusiasm for the protocols diminished partly due to protests during his diaspora tour. Still, the ratification would have gone forward but for the Nagorny Karabakh issue.

In 1991, Turkey recognized Armenia but did not open diplomatic relations – a decision Ankara may be regretting now. The border was closed after the 1993 Kelbajar massacre. Since then, Azerbaijan has used Turkey to voice its grievances. Azerbaijan has grown much stronger over the past 10 years. Baku does not understand that an improvement in Turkey-Armenia relations could be useful for the whole region and it has regularly exercised its veto. In 2009, there was an assumption that Baku had been kept informed about the developments, but this was not the case. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu did foresee that Azerbaijan would be a problem, but he signed the 2009 accord in the hope that Azerbaijan could be brought on board at a later date. The failure of the protocols has made things worse and there has been less official contact since 2010 than there had been in the whole of the 1990s.

In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, relations with Russia are more zero-sum than before, but there are still multiple Russian actors involved in the policy process, including business. For example, the Russian company operating the Armenian railways is keen on rapprochement with Turkey as it would open up opportunities for developing railway links between the two countries.

There are no quick fixes, but there has been progress on the genocide issue and the approaching centenary has been stimulating the Turkish side in particular. Transparent and accountable public diplomacy is needed. The AKP is trying to frame the genocide question in a way they are comfortable with, i.e. as part of Ottoman history.

There has not been much discussion about the possible aftermath of Turkey's recognition of the genocide. There would likely be a restitution process, probably a rather messy one. But most Armenians are not looking to reclaim their grandparents' property in Anatolia; recognition of the genocide is first and foremost a moral issue for them. Recognition of the genocide by Turkey would be a good confidence-building measure, as would a restoration of citizenship to all Turkish Armenians.

The EU's contribution to the improvement in Turkey's policies towards minorities (especially the Kurdish minority) has been widely noted. However, several civil society activists, including the late Hrant Dink, have expressed criticism of the EU for making rapprochement between them one of the conditions of accession; they maintained that the rapprochement process needs to be driven internally, not externally. The Armenian genocide is gradually becoming an issue in Turkey and this process has become part of the democratic process in the country.

The years 1912–22 saw ethnic cleansing in the whole of the Caucasus. Many communities – Turks, Kurds, Azerbaijanis etc. – suffered during the First World War. The issue under discussion here is state-sponsored and politically motivated crimes. The genocide was one of several systematic processes of persecution of the Armenian minority during the Committee of Union and Progress dictatorship.

The process of reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia cannot be separated from the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, but a lot can be done even without opening the border, e.g. opening diplomatic relations and setting up regular flights between Ankara, Istanbul and Yerevan. At the moment, political relations are subordinate to Turkey's energy relations with Azerbaijan, but the two should be separated. The genie is out of the bottle and civil society is likely to remain the key driver of the reconciliation process.