

Armenian Turkish Rapprochement: What Next?

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Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols on 10th October 2009 in Zurich which was the culmination of months of talks. Under the agreement, Turkey and Armenia will establish diplomatic relations and re-open their border. The protocols, which need to be approved by the Parliament of each country, also calls for a panel to investigate the "historical dimension" of the two countries relations – an unmentioned reference to the issue of the genocide of Armenians during World War I.

While the conflict over Nargorno Karabakh between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is not mentioned in the protocols, the presence of the Foreign Ministers of the mediating OSCE "Minsk Group" co-chairmen at the signing was significant not only in symbolic terms but politically for Turkey. Since the signing, on numerous occasions Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu have made it very clear that the success of the protocols will depend on "progress" on the Karabakh talks.

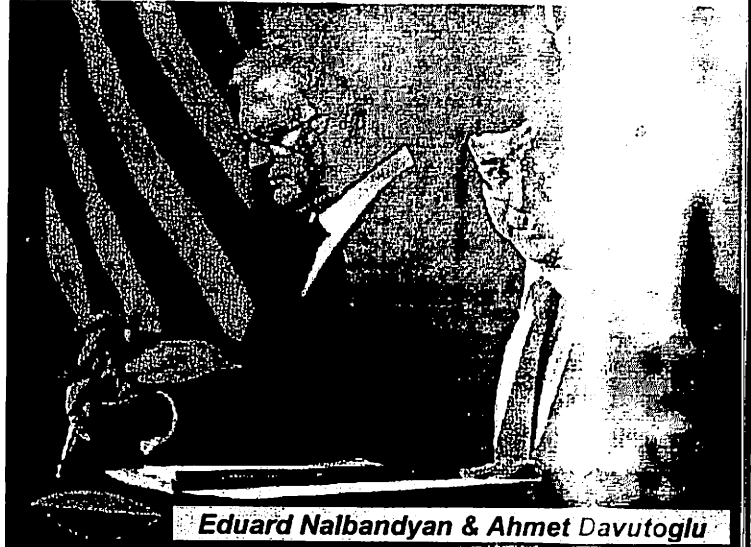
Mr. Davutoglu reiterated in an interview on Al Jazeera TV that when it comes to vote in the Turkish parliament, "the psychological and political atmosphere is important, otherwise," he continued, "we do not want to see the protocols rejected by parliament. It should be voted in the most suited political atmosphere".

In Turkey the protocols have been presented to the Parliament, while in Armenia the president has sent the document to the country's Constitutional Court for its customary opinion on such inter-state agreements.

By now it has become obvious that the Turkish-Armenian border will not be opened any time soon.

The signing of the protocols was a major victory of Turkish diplomacy. Ankara was able to receive what successive Turkish governments had demanded from Armenia since the country's independence in 1991. Even as the three main Turkish "pre-conditions" are not mentioned in the Protocols by name, they are clearly implied in the text (and later articulated by Turkish officials) that (a) Yerevan recognize the territorial divisions between Turkey and Armenia as determined by treaties signed between the Soviet Union and Kemal Ataturk's newly created Turkish Republic; (b) that Armenia should stop pursuing international recognition of the Armenian Genocide; and (c) Armenians should concede on the Karabakh conflict in favour of Azerbaijan.

In the larger context, the Turkish "opening to Armenia" (as the "opening to the Kurds") is part of Ankara's new foreign policy doctrine of having zero conflicts with Turkey's neighbours and AK party's redefined role as a significant regional player --



Eduard Nalbandyan & Ahmet Davutoglu

politically and economically. In recent years Turkey has come to view the strengthening of its national economic and political interests by taking the lead in crafting a new political and economic approach in the wider region. While remaining active in the Euro-Atlantic club, Ankara has equally been engaged in developing stronger Turkish-Russian and Turkish-(Eur)Asian relations, while gradually taking a larger mediating role in the Middle East. During a first ever visit to Iraqi Kurdistan by a Turkish official, Foreign Minister Davutoglu's statement reflected this new diplomatic mission: "It is time for Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis to rebuild the Middle East", he said, "therefore, it is time for everyone to take brave steps." (*Today's Zaman* 31.10.2009).

In terms of Armenia, the signing of the Protocols was a brave move on the part of President Serge Sargsyan and Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan, despite the overwhelming opposition at home and in the Diaspora on the fine print of the documents. Contrary to recent media coverage, there is a wide support among virtually all Armenians on establishing relations with Turkey, the major disagreements are over the price that Armenia has to or will pay to achieve that.

Indeed, the right "psychological and political atmosphere" that Foreign Minister Davutoglu expects to see before the borders are opened, has equal resonance on the Armenian side. To understand the complexity of the drafting, signing and implementation (whenever that to happen), several issues need to be taken into consideration:

The Republics of Turkey and Armenia had never had inter-state relations before. There were treaties signed between Turkey and the USSR, but none with Armenia as an independent country.

For the majority of Armenians, the relationship between Turkey and Armenians was broken 95 years ago, when a state-sponsored annihilation of the Armenian people took place in the Ottoman Empire.

Two World Wars have happened since then, two empires have ended, and new realities have been created since this Rupture between the two peoples.

It is against this difficult background that the establishment of diplomatic relations are being discussed for the first time ever. As such, Armenians, especially in the Diaspora, read the protocols with the Burden of Memory – the memory carried over by the surviving generations of the Genocide spread around the world.

Virtually all diasporan Armenians trace their roots to the pre-genocide Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire and have been affected by this human Catastrophe. Indeed, the Genocide is part of Armenian diaspora identity today not necessarily for political reasons or inherent anti-Turkism, as it is often presented in Turkey and the media, but primarily because it is part of the contemporary Armenians' family history.

The issue of the Genocide is a non-negotiable issue for the Armenians. This will remain a major issue in Turkish-Armenian relations as long as there is not any form or gesture of acknowledgement. It is not an issue that would diminish its significance for the Armenians because economic and trade issues are more relevant to Armenia. The longer Turkey delays acknowledgement, the longer the rapprochement and reconciliation will take.

Indeed, any attempt for reconciliation without this moral basis would fail to resolve the problems in Armenian-Turkish relations. Political or legal instruments alone do not resolve complex issues in human relationships, let alone among nations and neighbours, but common human values play important part in overcoming seemingly irreconcilable differences.

Another contentions issue in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement is the link between Turkish-Armenian and Azerbaijani-Armenian relations. The establishment of diplomatic relations without preconditions has been Armenian policy since 1991 -- and with successive administration. But conditions have been stated by Turkish officials even though they are not mentioned in the protocols.

Now that the protocols have been signed and both societies have been presented with a fait accompli, one could surmise two possible scenarios in the short term:

1) Having signed the protocols and established a link with the Karabakh issue, Ankara could delay the approval in parliament – thus keeping the border closed – until significant “movements” are seen in the settlement of the conflict. This releases the US and European pressures on Ankara to normalise relations with Yerevan and keeps Baku happy with the linkage. More significantly, this situation presents major challenges to Armenian Diaspora's efforts towards genocide recognition as political circles in the West would “avoid any steps complicating” the process of implantation of the protocols. In this scenario, the Armenian leadership in Yerevan will appear weak, being unable to deliver the most important aspect of the agreement, the opening of the border, which was their major selling point. However, after a long silence, recently President Sargsyan threatened to annul the agreements unless Ankara drops its preconditions on Karabakh.

2) Turkey will open the border with Armenian, a historical commission will be set up and other bilateral relations developed on low levels. But Ankara will make all these contingent on progress on the Karabakh settlement. In this case, Ankara would have stronger levers in slowing or speeding development of bilateral relations, depending on how Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are progressing. Indeed, closing an open border might be more harmful to Armenia than continuing to keep closed a closed border. At the moment, the real effects of an opened border are undetermined. Having lived with a closed border for 17 years, Armenia has certain “immunity” built over the years to the effects of the blockade. This, of course, does not mean that the borders should remain closed forever. The issue is what price Armenia is willing to pay politically and economically to have the Turkish-Armenian border opened for trade, commerce and economic activity. The more such economic roots and ties take shape, the harder it would be for Armenia to have its borders closed again – a likely possibility facing Armenia vis a vis both the Karabakh issue and genocide recognition.

Finally, the key is timing. The longer it takes to implement the protocols – opening of the Turkish-Armenian border being the most tangible outcome – the more difficult it would be to sustain the momentum of international support.

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