

Armenia–Turkey Rapprochement: The Most Significant Positive Event in the Region Since 1994 (If It Happens)

By Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Yerevan

Abstract

The signing of the Armenian–Turkish Agreement on October 10, 2009, in Zurich could prove to be a milestone in the relations between the two neighboring states and a major factor impacting positively on the stability of the entire Caucasus region. Yet the agreement needs to pass the difficult ratification test in the parliaments of Armenia and Turkey, and domestic opposition groups and the large Armenian Diaspora have to play along. If indeed this agreement is to bring more stability to the Caucasus, then Azerbaijan also needs to be convinced that the Armenia–Turkey rapprochement is in its national interest as well. Yet this is unlikely to happen because of the unresolved Karabakh conflict, an issue which clearly needs to be tackled with utmost urgency, by Armenia and Azerbaijan primarily, but also by the regional actors including Russia, and the international community.

Armenia–Turkey Relations: How It Started, or Rather Did Not Start

Turkey moved quickly to recognize Armenia's independence in 1992, in an effort to secure its border and to prevent any territorial disputes. But diplomatic relations were not established between the two countries. As the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh escalated, Azerbaijan asked Turkey to keep the border closed. Turkey supported its brotherly nation, especially when Armenia prevailed in the conflict.

Independent Armenia's first government declared its readiness to establish relations with Turkey without preconditions, seeing Turkey as a more appealing regional power than post-Soviet Russia. But that government was unable to avoid war in Karabakh. Facing a blockade, Armenia entered a strategic alliance with Russia and attempts to open the border with Turkey were abandoned. Turkey came to be perceived as an undeclared enemy alongside Azerbaijan. The closed border became the last intact part of the Iron Curtain.

The first President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrossyan was willing to compromise with Azerbaijan over Karabakh, nullifying the Armenian military victory. In taking this position, Ter-Petrossyan came into conflict with the century-old *Dashnaktsutyun* nationalist party, which sought to maintain Armenian victories. He banned that party and jailed some of its leaders. *Dashnaktsutyun*, however, had played an important role in Karabakh, and worked devotedly to win the war.

The second President of Armenia, Robert Kocharyan, came to power on a platform diametrically opposed to that of Ter-Petrossyan. Kocharyan freed the *Dashnaktsutyun* members from jail, made the party a member of

the coalition government, and declared recognition of the Genocide a major foreign policy objective (Turkey denies that the events of 1915, when about two million Armenians disappeared from Ottoman-era Turkey, were an act of Genocide). Kocharyan engaged the Armenian Diaspora in a worldwide campaign for Genocide recognition. The governing bodies of numerous countries recognized the Genocide in a variety of ways.

Despite the closed border, Turkey created a system of easy access for Armenian visitors: Armenian citizens can get a visa at Turkey's other borders. As a result, tens of thousands of poor Armenian citizens, mainly women, became illegal workers in Turkey. Many Armenians visited Turkey for vacations. Armenia and Turkey traded via Georgia, paying transit duties.

From “Football Diplomacy” to the Signing of the Zurich Agreement

The third President of Armenia, Serj Sargsyan, came to power under controversial circumstances. On March 1, 2008, after series of rallies, protesters who did not accept his electoral victory clashed with security forces. Ten people were killed. The government imposed emergency rule for a month. The US did not congratulate Sargsyan with victory. He became a president with weak legitimacy, in need of a quick success and recognition by the West.

In August 2008 the five-day Russian–Georgian war ended with Russia recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This changed the geopolitical situation in the region. Over the years Azerbaijan had routinely declared that without an advance in the negotiations over Karabakh, it would go to war. After

the Russian–Georgian war, Azerbaijan had to reconsider this rhetoric. To strengthen its image and further weaken Georgia, Russia enhanced its role as a peacemaker in the Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations and supports – or at least did not hinder – Armenian–Turkish rapprochement. It was before the August war when Sargsyan, while on a visit to Moscow, invited Turkey’s President Gul to Yerevan for the upcoming football game between Armenia and Turkey. Thus began the so-called “football diplomacy.”

A year of secret negotiations followed. In his remarks on April 24, 2009 (Armenian’s Day of Commemoration of the Genocide), US President Barack Obama, contrary to his pre-election promise, did not use the word “Genocide.” This is typical for a US President, but every year around April 24, Turks worry and Armenians are surprised. Obama used the second-best, but hardly legally binding, term: “the Great Calamity” in Armenian. Perhaps to prevent him using the “G-word”, Turkey, Armenia and Switzerland (the facilitator) published a joint statement on April 23, saying they had worked out a roadmap to full-fledged bilateral relations. This statement, issued immediately before April 24, was considered by many to be a major concession by Sargsyan. Then the process seemed to stall. It seemed Turks got what they wanted (Obama’s not using the “G-word” on April 24), then ceased to make any effort.

After midnight on August 31 (evening in Washington DC, the behind-the-curtain force driving the rapprochement process), the Declaration of Armenia, Turkey and Switzerland was published, followed by two Protocols. These documents were to be signed by both sides within six weeks, after which they would go to the respective parliaments for ratification.

The documents were signed in Zurich on October 10, 2009. The ceremony was not uneventful. The last-minute maneuvering exposed the difficulties that the sides still faced; Washington’s leading role in moving them forward; and Russia’s somewhat aloof position.

Armenian Criticism of the Agreement

Turkey has already presented the documents to the *Milli Mejlis* (parliament). Armenia has not yet presented them to its National Assembly. There is no clear deadline for when this should be done, or how long the ratification process might take.

Turkey has conveyed the message that without an advance in Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations (if “a piece of land”, at least of a symbolic size, is not returned to Azerbaijan) ratification may be stalled, limited or outright impossible. Here, Turkey forgets its own history

with Cyprus and that this type of conflict is no piece of cake. Any change in the balance of power, even a small territorial concession, may have dire consequences for the security of the entire region if it is not backed by strong security guarantees.

The Protocols generated a loud but somewhat hollow outcry from members of the Armenian public, official opposition parties, and the Diaspora. Sargsyan says that the documents reflect Armenian policies vis-à-vis Turkey from the very beginning of independence, i.e. readiness for diplomatic relations and open borders without preconditions. But many people read at least three major preconditions between the lines.

First, according to critics, the documents prevent Armenia from making territorial claims on Turkey. In their opinion, if the Genocide is internationally recognized there could be territorial reparations. This position is irrational. Weak and small Armenia will not be able to claim any territory from large and strong Turkey in the conceivable future.

The *second* criticism is that the documents accept Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. While some language in the documents could be interpreted as supporting that claim, there is no clear statement to that end.

The *third* is that the clause establishing a sub-committee on history allegedly violates one of the major tenets of the Armenian nation: that no Armenian should ever engage in a debate about whether or not the Genocide happened, or whether or not what happened was Genocide.

The Larger Context

Opening the border with Turkey, insofar as the US, Europe and Russia support it, is in the interest of many actors. It is even in the interest of Azerbaijan, since a Turkey with more leverage in the region will be able to influence the Karabakh negotiations process. Rapprochement is also in Georgia’s interest in the long term, because it will substantially increase stability in the region. The only actor whose interest is doubtful is one of two Russias: the Russia which wants to rule and influence its neighbors via military power. The “other Russia” (the civilized trading partner wielding only soft influence) will benefit from this process. Both Armenia and Turkey will benefit economically by attracting more foreign direct investment. International businesses will come to Armenia via Turkey. The under-developed areas of Turkey which lie to the west of the border, populated by Kurds, will find themselves at a newly opened crossroads.

The border opening will be the most positive event in the Caucasus since the signing of the Armenia–Azer-

baijan-Karabakh ceasefire in 1994. Most events here in recent years have been either outright tragic (six wars in the region since the collapse of the USSR!) or had disappointing consequences. The Khasavvyurt cease-fire between Russia and Chechnya did not result in peace; the second Chechen war ensued soon afterwards. Terrorism, kidnappings and military atrocities flourished and the North Caucasus was soaked in blood. Instability and Islamic Fundamentalism are growing there.

The Rose Revolution brought Mikheil Sahakashvili to power in Georgia, but despite his reformist agenda Georgia ended up at war with Russia. This ended hope for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. South Ossetia is hardly capable of serious self-governance and is about to be swallowed by Russia. Abkhazia has an able and democratically-elected president, but is facing new elections which, under Russian domination, could damage its fragile inner governance system.

Karabakh, a victor of the hot stage of conflict with Azerbaijan, remains isolated and sparsely populated. It was not recognized and was not annexed by Armenia. The result is that both Karabakh and Armenia remain underdeveloped. This brews authoritarianism, militarism and paranoia. Internationally, Karabakh is all but forgotten as a party to conflict because of inept Armenian negotiation strategies within the OSCE Minsk group.

The region is in dire need of good news. If the two states do ratify the Protocols, this positive historical event may turn the tide.

The Impact of Change on the Two Nations

The more the Armenians get to know Turkey, the faster they discover it is not the cartoonish enemy they have learned to distrust. Turkey has a rapidly developing economy. Its universities are well-funded and their graduates well-educated. While in the past its government was periodically overthrown by the military, Turkey has made efforts over the last 30 years to remove preconditions for such volatility. While EU accession remains uncertain, Turkey is moving closer to Europe in visible ways. Its current government and leading party represent moderate Islamists, but, perhaps incomprehensibly to biased non-Muslims, are more democratic than their predecessors, even as those governments downplayed some Islamic values in the name of Western ones.

The situation in Turkey is changing for the better. After the great civic leader and journalist, Hrant Dink, an ethnic Armenian citizen of Turkey, was killed in 2007, his assassination became a turning point which united progressive civic and political forces around the slogan

“never again”. Moreover, Nobel Prize-winning Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk recognizes the Genocide. He faces persecution in Turkey for it, but he has survived it and even become more famous.

While Genocide recognition is illegal in Turkey, the word or concept is being used more and more frequently in the pluralistic Turkish media. Turkey is rediscovering its past. This concerns not only its dark history with Armenians, but also its history with the Kurds and other hidden ethnicities, such as the Abkhaz and Kabardinians, who have resided there for more than 150 years.

Turkey is puzzling the US, its old NATO ally, by playing a more independent role in the region and entertaining ambitions to play such a role globally as an envoy of the Muslim world to the West and vice versa. If it is able to build trust with Armenia, this will be further proof that Turkey has made a choice in favor of the 21st century values of global humanity.

The global Armenian public's outcry against the Protocols is understandable, since members of the Diaspora are the direct descendents of those who suffered from the Genocide. In response, Sargsyan engaged in public dialogue to an unprecedented degree, visiting several global Diaspora centers. Large-scale discussions took place in Armenia proper. This created hope that the government will become more open and democratic if the process of rapprochement moves forward. The good news is that Sargsyan has a majority in the National Assembly, so ratification will not be difficult. The bad news is that this majority is not a result of fair elections.

If Turkey does not ratify the Protocols, prospects for democracy in Armenia and in the entire region will be damaged further. Those who feel that they can benefit from moving against Sargsyan may unite using strong nationalist and traditionalist rhetoric. This will end hopes – as happened in 1993 – that corruption will be reduced and oligarchic power structures weakened in Armenia by opening the border.

It is unrealistic to expect rapid progress in the Karabakh peace process. Turkey has to ratify the Protocols despite internal nationalist resistance and despite getting the cold shoulder from official Azerbaijan. If Turkey and Russia do not swerve at the last moment, at least one cornerstone in a new, sustainable security architecture will finally be in place in the South Caucasus.

Focusing on the Future

With Genocide recognition, as well as with the post-ratification implementation of Protocols, Armenia is playing a risky game. The Protocols may further Armenia's interests, or they may become a lever for pressuring the weak

government into more concessions. If the government were stronger, it could insist on better wording for some points in the Protocols, and protect its interests during implementation. But if there is good will from the government, civil society and progressive forces within the Diaspora, Armenia may come out of this historical trial more prosperous and secure than it was before.

There is a plethora of issues on the table which have not yet been addressed properly. How to envision, eventu-

ally, a positive-sum solution for the future of Karabakh? Is it conceivable at all, given the lack of democracy in Armenia, and still more significant lack of it in Azerbaijan? How will the region eventually emerge from the impasse between Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia? As we wait for ratification of the Protocols, these questions are the next set of issues on the agenda.

About the Author

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan is Country Director of the Eurasia Partnership foundation in Yerevan.

The Turkish–Armenian Protocols: Implications for Azerbaijan

By Anar Valiyev, Baku

Abstract

Turkish–Armenian rapprochement and the signing of the related protocols had a tremendous impact on Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. The failure of the Turkish side to link the Karabakh problem with normalization of relations between Ankara and Yerevan forced Azerbaijan to re-evaluate its policy toward Turkey and the West. With the opening of borders and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia, Azerbaijan loses an important tool of leverage in negotiating with Armenia to withdraw its troops from the occupied territories. Finally, Azerbaijan’s disappointment with the Turkish position could negatively affect the development of energy projects, and increase Russian influence in the region.

A New Agreement

On October 10, 2009 foreign minister of Turkey Akhmet Davutoglu and his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandyan signed Protocols on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the two countries. The ceremony was attended by the Swiss and Russian foreign ministers as well as U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.

The ceremony almost did not take place because of the sudden demarche of the Armenian side, which disagreed with the text of the final statement. The Turks insisted on raising the Karabakh issue, while the Armenians hoped to include a “genocide” clause. Under pressure from the other participants of the ceremony, both ministers agreed not to mention these issues in the final statement.

The protocols stipulate opening the Armenian–Turkish border within two months after ratification in the parliaments and establishing a working group to define procedures for a newly created intergovernmental commission and its sub-commissions.

Azerbaijani–Turkish Relations after the Protocols

The once cordial relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have been deteriorating since April, 2009, when negotiations between Turkey and Armenia entered into the decisive stage. Under Swiss mediation, both sides adopted a road map for normalization of relations. The fact that the negotiations took place and the parties’ decision to sign an accord without considering Azerbaijani interests shocked the Azerbaijani public and establishment. Despite Prime Minister Erdoğan’s speech in the Azerbaijani parliament in May, he could not silence the voices of criticism coming from Azerbaijan.

The major concern of the Azerbaijani side was the exclusion of the Karabakh issue from the road map and protocols. The signing of the protocols caused a storm of criticism in Azerbaijan. Immediately after the ceremony, the Azerbaijani foreign ministry issued a special statement regarding the protocols. The ministry reminded the Turkish side that the borders between Turkey and