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Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap

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SUMMARY

- The historic normalization between Armenia and Turkey has stalled and it is critical to prevent relations from deteriorating further.
- If Armenia and Turkey eventually succeed in opening their closed border, it will transform the South Caucasus region. But the concerns of Azerbaijan, Turkey's ally and the losing side in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, need to be taken into account. The international community needs to pay more attention to the conflict and work harder to break the regional deadlock it has generated.
- The annual debate over the use of the word *genocide* to describe the fate of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 has turned into an ugly bargaining process. It is time to take a longer view. President Obama should look ahead to the centenary of the tragedy in 2015 and encourage Turks to take part in commemorating the occasion.

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He is author of the authoritative book on the Karabakh conflict, Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War *(NYU Press, 2003), which has been translated into Armenian, Azeri, and Russian. His new book,* The Caucasus: An Introduction *(Oxford University Press), was released in September 2010.*

THE ARMENIA–TURKEY PROTOCOLS

In October 2009, Armenia and Turkey began a historic rapprochement, signing two protocols on normalizing their relations that showed them a way to escape their tragic past. In April 2010, the process stalled, as the Turkish government proved reluctant to submit the protocols for ratification by its parliament.

The Armenia–Turkey normalization process was the most positive initiative in the South Caucasus for many years, and if carried through it still has the potential to transform the region. There is a chance that it can be revived after Turkey's general election, which is due in the early summer of 2011. It is important for all interested parties to work to keep this prospect alive. That requires robust support for non-political Track II Armenian–Turkish initiatives that widen the constituency of Armenians and Turks interested in rapprochement. It also requires expending greater effort on the resolution of the unresolved Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorny Karabakh, which was the main reason why the process ground to a halt.

If the process is to get back on track, all involved parties, including the United States, should set their sights on longer-term goals several years hence and "make haste slowly" toward them. The centenary of the Armenian tragedy in 2015 is a good reference point by which to set the goal of full Armenian–Turkish normalization.

A TRAGIC HISTORY

The Republic of Armenia has been an independent state since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but the border with neighboring Turkey has been closed for most of that time, and suspicions between Armenians and Turks are still strong.

Armenian–Turkish relations live under the shadow of the mass deportation and killing of the Armenian population of Eastern Anatolia by the Ottoman Young Turk regime in the years following 1915. The allied powers at the time called the killings "crimes against humanity and civilization," and many historians agree that more than one million Armenians died. For the Armenian diaspora, most of whom are grandchildren of surviving Anatolian Armenians, this tragedy defines their identity. Since the 1960s they have lobbied internationally for the killings to be termed a genocide. The government of modern Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, consistently denies that there was a genocidal policy toward the Armenians and points out that hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Muslims died during the same period.

Turkey recognized the newly independent Republic of Armenia in 1991, but did not establish diplomatic relations. Bilateral ties quickly became captive to Armenia's escalating war with Ankara's new ally Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh. In April 1993, Armenian forces extended their military campaign outside Karabakh itself, capturing the Azerbaijani province of Kelbajar. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in protest; seventeen years later, the border remains closed.

In Turkey, attitudes toward the country's neighbors and minorities have changed in the eight years since the election into government of the mildly Islamist AKP party in 2002. The taboo about discussing the Armenian issue has been lifted—although some of the bravest voices on this issue have sometimes paid a high price. Armenian tourists now visit Turkey in large numbers, and there are weekly flights between Yerevan and Istanbul. Fethiye Çetin's memoir, *My Grandmother,* published in 2004, confronted Turks with the long-suppressed fact that hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens had Armenian grandparents who were forcibly assimilated after 1915. Celebrated author Orhan Pamuk challenged his countrymen to break their silence on the fate of the Ottoman Armenians. The Istanbul editor Hrant Dink—an ethnic Armenian and Turkish citizen—played a key role in initiating Armenian–Turkish dialogue. Dink's assassination in 2007 by a seventeen-year-old nationalist fanatic

triggered grief and outrage. At his funeral tens of thousands of mourners walked the streets of Istanbul, some chanting, "We are all Armenians."

Around the same time, at the request of both sides, the Swiss foreign ministry began to chair confidential talks between Armenian and Turkish diplomats. In September 2008, the process moved to a new level when Turkish President Abdullah Gül accepted the invitation of his Armenian counterpart, Serzh Sarkisian, to an Armenia–Turkey soccer match in Yerevan.

For Turkey's governing AK Party, holding out an olive branch to Armenia fit within the new "zero problems with neighbors" policy devised by its chief foreign policy strategist, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who is now Turkey's foreign minister. Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian also saw an opening. His legitimacy had been damaged by the violence that accompanied his election in February–March 2008, and his courageous decision to invite Gül to Yerevan opened a new credit line of international support. The Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers eventually signed two protocols on normalizing their relations at a ceremony in Zurich on October 10, 2009, supported by, among others, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Both sides gave themselves extra room to maneuver by requiring their parliaments to ratify the Zurich protocols. The documents stipulated that diplomatic relations must be established and the Armenia–Turkey border opened within two months of ratification.

OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS

The Zurich Protocols opened up hopeful vistas for both countries. For Armenia they promised an end to regional isolation and long-term economic transformation. Even with the border closed, Turkey is Armenia's fifth largest trading partner via Georgia, with an annual trade turnover of more than $200 million. The country manager of the World Bank in Armenia, Aristomene Varoudakis, cites figures predicting that when the border with Turkey re-opens, imported goods will be cheaper and their volume will increase by 13 percent over five years; transportation costs will be cut by 20 percent. Armenia will benefit from sharing an open border with a country that since 1996 has had a customs union with the European Union for trade in non-agricultural products.

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For the Turkish government, a successful rapprochement with Armenia holds out the prospect of engaging in the South Caucasus as a disinterested power. Successful normalization with Armenia would also be a major step toward addressing the gravest historical issue confronting Turks worldwide. Practically speaking, it would mean an end to the perpetual humiliation of foreign parliaments passing genocide resolutions condemning Turkey. For four decades, Ankara has expended time and resources resisting these measures, yet the parliaments of nineteen countries have passed resolutions on the 1915 massacres, with most designating the killings as genocide. On March 4, 2010, the International Affairs Committee of the U.S. Congress voted to term the killings "genocide," causing Turkey to recall its ambassador from Washington.

However, neither the Turkish nor Armenian government received a groundswell of domestic support for the Protocols, leaving both sides politically vulnerable on the issue. In Armenia, public opposition was not fierce, but there was little popular enthusiasm. Some Armenians expressed short-sighted concerns about the shops of Yerevan being flooded with cheap Turkish goods. Sarkisian faced much stronger criticism when he visited Lebanon, France, and the United States to sell the Protocols. Some critics within the diaspora accused him of selling out Armenia's heritage by promising to recognize the current border with Turkey, agreed upon with Moscow in 1921. Others denounced the pledge

to establish a subcommission "on the historical dimension to implement a dialogue with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations," arguing that it gave Turkey the opportunity to dispute an established genocide.

Sarkisian could have pushed ratification of the Protocols through parliament without difficulty, but this criticism made him cautious, and he insisted that both countries should ratify the Protocols in tandem, a strategy that handed the initiative to the Turkish side. Sarkisian also sought the cover of sending the Protocols for an expert judgment by Armenia's Constitutional Court, which added a new complication to the process. Although the court ruled in January 2010 that the documents were in accordance with Armenia's constitution, the Turkish side interpreted the accompanying commentary as linking the pursuit of genocide recognition to the Protocols.

The centenary of the Armenian tragedy in 2015 is a good reference point by which to set the goal of Armenian–Turkish normalization.

The Turkish government backtracked on ratifying the Protocols, following an intense Azerbaijani campaign against normalization. There are a number of interpretations for this reluctance to proceed. The Turkish leadership may have mistakenly believed that there would be sufficient progress in the Karabakh peace talks in the months after the Zurich ceremony to allow them to proceed with ratification. There were also evident differences between President Gül, who was personally invested in the rapprochement with Armenia, and the more powerful Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who made public statements of solidarity with Azerbaijan.

The approach of Armenian Genocide Day on April 24, 2010, raised tensions, and a meeting in Washington on April 12 between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Sarkisian failed to resolve differences. On April 22, Sarkisian suspended Armenian involvement in the process. He chose not to withdraw from it altogether and in his statement personally thanked President Gül for his work, but signaled that the Armenian side would no longer seek ratification of the Protocols, leaving the process in a deep freeze.

THE KARABAKH FACTOR

The Turkish government drew back from ratifying the Protocols as a result of domestic and Azerbaijani demands that progress was first needed on the unresolved Nagorny Karabakh conflict, even though Karabakh is not mentioned in the two documents.

The conflict over Nagorny Karabakh is the deepest problem facing the South Caucasus. The dispute erupted in 1988 when the Armenian majority population in Karabakh, an autonomous region inside Soviet Azerbaijan, tried to secede from rule by Baku and join Soviet Armenia. A low-level conflict gradually escalated into a full inter-state war with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fighting ended in 1994, when Armenian forces won a military victory that saw them secure control not just of Nagorny Karabakh itself but, partially or wholly, of seven Azerbaijani regions around the enclave, which they called a "security zone." Since then the Armenians have built up a small, unrecognized statelet in Karabakh behind a 110-mile-long cease-fire line, with two opposing armies deployed on either side. Protracted negotiations on the conflict invariably get stuck on the issue of the final status of Nagorny Karabakh itself. For the past five years the talks, mediated by the three co-chairs of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), France, Russia, and the United States, have centered on a draft Document of Basic Principles ("The Madrid Principles"), which has sought, so far without success, to resolve this issue through creative formulations on the future of the disputed territory.

Azerbaijan (population almost 9 million) is a junior partner to Turkey (population 70 million), and relations between the mildly Islamist

AKP and the strongly secular ruling elite in Baku are cool, but Azerbaijan has ways of influencing Turkish domestic politics and is also a major supplier of the country's gas. Turkish officials also displayed naivete about the Karabakh issue. They underestimated how fundamental the Karabakh question is to Armenians, believing that Yerevan could be prevailed upon to cede several of the occupied regions around Karabakh in exchange for the reopening of the Armenia–Turkey border. Yet there is almost no chance that Sarkisian, a Karabakh Armenian, would give up conquered territory for the sake of the Turkish border.

Azerbaijan sees the Armenia–Turkey issue through its own fearful spectacles: It worries that opening the Armenia–Turkey border would reduce its leverage on Armenia and make Armenia more intransigent in the negotiations over Karabakh. Many Armenians probably share this view and were the border with Turkey to open, in the short term Armenians might seek to consolidate the status quo in and around Karabakh. Yet the longer-term dynamic is almost certain to work the other way: with its border to the West open, Armenia would begin to lose its siege mentality and eventually become more open to giving up occupied land in order to emerge from international isolation. Turkey would enter the South Caucasus as a neutral player with much more leverage over the Karabakh issue.

If the Armenia–Turkey border were to open, Azerbaijan's "defeat" would therefore become symbolic only, and it would almost certainly stand to gain in the long term. Unfortunately, not enough effort was undertaken to make this argument to Azerbaijan, and President Ilham Aliev was not invited to the Washington nuclear summit in April alongside his Armenian and Turkish counterparts, giving the Azerbaijanis the impression that a deal was being done behind their backs.

The stalling of Armenian–Turkish normalization also damaged the Karabakh peace process. For most of 2010, talks have been deadlocked. Several soldiers have died in a series of shooting incidents on the Line of Contact outside Karabakh. In August, Armenia agreed to an extension for the Russian military base in Armenia and stronger military cooperation with Russia in what looked to be a response to an increased Azerbaijani military build-up.

Such is the atmosphere of mistrust between Baku and Yerevan that neither side agrees to constructive measures that could build trust and lead to the kind of "progress" that the Turkish

NAGORNY KARABAKH: THE HEART OF THE MATTER?

CREDIT: *Christopher Robinson*

government says it wants to see so as to ratify the Protocols. The Armenian side makes it clear that it will not give up any territory it controls, prior to a firm commitment on the status of Nagorny Karabakh. The Azerbaijanis voice even more fundamental objections to constructive steps that are seen to be "doing business with the enemy."

For Armenia the Protocols promised an end to regional isolation and long-term economic transformation.

The Armenian government is also very fearful of any indication that Turkey is claiming a formal role for itself in the Karabakh peace process. Turkey should be sensitive to this. If Ankara is too vocal on the Karabakh issue, it runs the risk of only further alienating the Armenians and making them more intransigent. The Turks would be more helpful if they stated publicly that they have no pretensions to being a mediator, that they support the current Minsk Process, and that their definition of "progress" on Karabakh is a flexible one. Ankara officials could also usefully point out to their Azerbaijani counterparts the positive benefits of a Track II process, which has underpinned Armenian–Turkish political rapprochement, but which is signally lacking between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

One place that could emerge as a potential "win-win" area for all three countries is the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, which is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenian territory. In Soviet times, Nakhichevan was a major junction on the Moscow–Tehran railway. It relied on neighboring Armenia for gas, electricity, and railroad connections. As the Karabakh conflict escalated, Armenia cut off all supplies to Nakhichevan, leaving the exclave in a desperate condition. All sides would win if Armenia were to agree to open up communications and rebuild shared infrastructure with Nakhichevan in tandem with the opening of the Armenia–Turkey border. Azerbaijani citizens would benefit in a tangible way; Armenia would have secured the opening of its western border without ceding captured territory; and Turkey could hail the initiative as a sign of progress.

THE ROAD TO 2015

To be assured of eventual success, the stalled Armenia–Turkey rapprochement is in need of both short-term measures and a longer-term strategy.

There have been several positive initiatives this year. An Armenian–Turkish youth orchestra has been formed. Armenian Genocide Day on April 24 was commemorated by hundreds of Turks on Taksim Square, Istanbul's busiest public space, with the full cooperation of the authorities. In the current climate of political deadlock, it is important for both sides to coordinate such initiatives so that they are understood and well-received by the public and covered by the media. A dispute over the holding of the first religious service for 95 years at the medieval Armenian church of Akhtamar on Lake Van in eastern Anatolia on September 19 indicates just how difficult this can be. The Turkish government took a progressive step in allowing a service to be held in what is, under Turkish law, a museum, and to acknowledge the Armenian history of Akhtamar, which had been denied for many years. The Armenian patriarch in Istanbul agreed to conduct the service. But the Turkish government did not, as expected, agree to restore a cross to the dome of the church and invitees from Armenia said they would not attend. Eduard Sharmazanov, spokesman for Armenia's governing Republican Party, called the service "an imitation show." Eventually, a cross was placed outside the church but too late to prevent a boycott. A breakdown in communication spoiled what would otherwise have been a landmark event.

This response contrasts strongly with the warm reception of both ordinary Greeks and Greek politicians to a similar initiative, the holding of the first religious service since 1923 in the old Greek Orthodox monastery of Soumela on August 15, presided over by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. The contrast between the two services highlights how much

further along Greek–Turkish normalization is compared with Armenian–Turkish rapprochement and how the closure of the border still rankles with Armenians.

There are a number of other potential initiatives that can be undertaken in spite of a closed border. An important constituency that should not be ignored is Istanbul's small population of over 50,000 Armenians with Turkish citizenship who still feel marginalized and are hardly noticed in either counrty, but who are an important bridge between the two cultures. Another group, Armenian citizens traveling to Turkey and often working illegally there, also need more protection and would benefit from the provision of consular services by a third country.

If Armenia, which has a surplus of electricity, were to transmit power to areas of eastern Turkey across the closed border, many would benefit: the Armenian economy, the Russian company that owns the Armenian grid, and ordinary people in power-starved regions of eastern Turkey.

Other possible steps include:

- A limited opening of a zone next to the Armenia–Turkey border that contains the medieval Armenian city of Ani, now just inside Turkish territory. This would allow Armenian tourists to visit the ancient site.
- A Turkish government initiative to invite diaspora Armenians to visit the ancient Armenian heritage sites of Anatolia.
- A Turkish initiative to fully open and digitize the Ottoman archives containing the official Ottoman records of the events of 1915 to 1921.
- The dismantling of the memorial in Istanbul to Talat Pasha, the Young Turk leader who organized the deportation of the Armenians in 1915.
- The opening of a Turkish Airlines route between Istanbul and Yerevan.

The United States can play a leading role in helping bridge the Armenian–Turkish divide. However, it is hobbled by what could be called the "April 24 question," the issue of how to describe the 1915 tragedy while honoring both the large Armenian–American community and a strategic relationship with Turkey. Unfortunately the problem of how to describe a great historical tragedy has devolved into grubby political bargaining over the use or non-use of the word "genocide." On April 24, 2009, and again in 2010, President Barack Obama adopted a dignified formula, foregoing the word in favor of the most common Armenian phrase to describe the tragedy: the *meds yeghern,* or "great catastrophe." Turkish liberal intellectuals have begun to use the same phrase—and might have been Obama's inspiration. Many of them have taken up the cause of the late Hrant Dink, arguing that Turkey must come to its own reckoning with what happened to its missing Armenians, without pressure from foreign parliaments.

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Coming rapidly over the horizon is what could be called the "2015 issue," the question of how the world will commemorate the coming centenary of the Armenian holocaust in five years' time. Undoubtedly, there will be focus on the calamity as never before, which presents both potential dangers and opportunities. The United States would do well to remind the Turkish side of the importance of this date and make the argument that if there is full normalization of relations on all levels by 2015 it will benefit all sides. If, in his comments on this issue, President Obama makes reference to the centennial and encourages Turkey to be ready to take part in the commemoration rather than isolate itself from it, he could aspire to be a catalyst for Armenian–Turkish reconciliation, rather than another actor in the long-running quarrel between the two peoples. ■

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FURTHER READING

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