

# Noref Policy Brief

## Never mind the gap: Turkish-Armenian relations past the crossroads

Einar Wigen

### Executive Summary

The Turkish-Armenian protocols signed in October 2009 seemed to represent a historic advance that could help resolve the two countries' dispute over the events of 1915 and change the regional dynamics for the better. But six months on, the implementation of the protocols has stalled, the much vaunted normalisation of Turkish-Armenian state-to-state relations appears all but dead, and the will to revive the process is at a low point.

Each side holds to a different interpretation both of the origins of the protocol process and the reasons why it collapsed; each blames the other for scuppering the deal by introducing preconditions over the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh question or the recognition of the border between the two countries. Moreover, international conditions are against progress, with the influence of the United States on Turkey having diminished since a congressional committee voted for a resolution calling the 1915 killings "genocide".

Nevertheless, it appears to be only a matter of time before international pressure to resolve the conflict will be renewed. It is essential that Turkey and Armenia seek to unwind the current process in a cordial manner, so that a new one may be started without too great a legacy of grievance about recent events. The international community could also play a constructive role in the interim by investing more effort into solving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, into preserving the contact points between Turkey and Armenia, and into improving information channels between the two countries.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In October 2009, Turkey and Armenia signed a historic agreement in Zürich that promised a relative normalisation of their diplomatic relations and an opening of their mutual land border. This stands as an almost unique event in a region marred by seemingly insurmountable conflicts and tension.

Both sides have a lot to gain by the protocols. Armenia would benefit by the increased economic activity which trade with Turkey would bring, and by being far less dependent on Russia. Turkey would remove an important obstacle to its accession to the European Union, and increase its influence in the Caucasus.

But over the winter of 2009-10, what seemed to be a great opportunity turned sour, and the protocols now seem to be all but a closed matter. Three things have gone wrong:

- The Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, underestimated the influence of the Azerbaijani president, İlham Aliyev, over Turkish opinion;
- The efforts of the Armenian diaspora in the United States finally bore fruit with a resolution from the House of Representatives' foreign affairs committee on 4 March 2010 which used the word "genocide" to describe the events of 1915; this cooled Turkish-American relations and further hampered the diplomatic efforts;
- On a more fundamental level, both sides agreed that "stopping the use of history as a political instrument" was a central part of coming to terms with their past, but it turned out that each side interpreted this as meaning that the other would accept *its* version of history.

This paper addresses these issues in three sections, which respectively discuss the key aspects of the

conflict; the process that led to the protocols and the geopolitical situation in which it arose; and the main causes of the protocols' demise.

## The issues at stake

All the three main state parties in this conflict – Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – agree at least on the nature of the issues at stake: the recognition of the mass murder of 1915 as an Armenian genocide, the opening of the border, and future of Nagorno-Karabakh. This section outlines the origin of these three issues, and how they play out in the region's international politics.

### 1915: the contest over history

The first problematic issue relating to the negotiations is the large-scale murder of Armenians by Ottoman Muslims in Anatolia in 1915. The dispute over what happened in 1915 has marred Turkish-Armenian relations for decades – involving both the Armenian diaspora in the West and the Republic of Armenia (since its independence in 1990) in disputes with the Republic of Turkey. This is a conflict over how history should be written, in which the two accounts greatly diverge and where the story of what happened (or did not happen) plays a vital part in each of the two nation-states' identities. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that, at least to diaspora Armenians, the memory of the 1915 events is to some extent what constitutes their "Armenianness". Likewise, the Turkish memory of the events – which recalls the Turks being besieged by the Great Powers on the outside who were allied to rebellious minorities on the inside – is a key narrative of how the Turkish Republic was founded.

To try to alter these narratives is to tell a new story of who the Turks and the Armenians are, and in effect to change their identities. This is why, when the two sides come to the table, and want the other to "stop using history for political purposes", they appear to think that the other side should simply accept their own version of what happened, and of who they are.

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to express his gratitude to Morten Skumsrud Andersen for comments on an earlier draft of this paper; and to thirty-six anonymous informants in Baku, Ankara, Istanbul and Yerevan, interviewed in January 2010.


The major difference between the two approaches is that Armenia tries to convince third parties not only to accept its version of the events, but also to make their narrative the only legal narrative to tell. This has been successful in France, where it is now illegal to tell the Turkish version of the events of 1915. Turkey, on the other side, fights vehemently to stop any such laws abroad, but does not try to make its own version into law in foreign countries.

The Turkish side estimates the Armenian death toll in 1915 to be between 300,000 and 700,000. The Armenian side considers the figure of 1.5 million to be an institutionalised part of their national identity. Armenia tries to get as many countries as possible, in particular Turkey, to recognise the events as “genocide”. Turkey strenuously denies that what happened in 1915 amounted to “genocide” (*soykırım*), and instead opts for the term “mass murder” (*katliam*). It claims that it bears no legal responsibility for what happened, arguing that a) this happened outside state control, b) that the Republic as such did not come into existence until 1922, and cannot be blamed for what happened prior to its existence, c) it was not intended as a genocide, and does therefore not fit the legal definition for genocide and d) “genocide” as a legal concept did not come into being until the 1940s.

Genocide is a legal concept, with both particular consequences and a specific legal definition. For an act to constitute genocide, it has to be committed with the “*intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group [author’s italics]*”<sup>2</sup>. The disagreement is not over the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians (although the numbers differ); it is over whether there is proof that the Ottoman leadership intended to destroy the Armenians as a group. In the Turkish version of the events, the acts were committed to secure the eastern front of the Ottoman Empire against the advancing Russian

forces. The Armenian guerrillas had made common cause with the Russians, and the Armenians were moved to Syria as a defensive measure. On the Armenian side there is a remarkable consensus on this issue; the measures were taken to exterminate the Armenians as a people, and had nothing to do with the military situation.

The task here is not to take full stock of the events of 1915, but simply relate how they are played out in contemporary politics. However, it may be worth noting that Armenians, in their everyday language, call what happened “the great catastrophe” (*meds yeghern*). This was the very phrase chosen by President Barack Obama in his speech on 24 April 2009. The Armenians were not pleased, as anything other than acknowledgment of “genocide” is regarded as a surrender to Turkish pressure.



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### ***“Western Armenia”: who speaks for the nation?***

The second problematic issue between Turkey and Armenia is the status of the present border. This problem resides in the fact that there are two documents signed and ratified, the Sèvres Treaty (1920) and the Kars Treaty (1921). Different legal entities have signed and ratified the two documents. While the Kars Treaty is the origin of the borders seen on most international maps today, the Sèvres Treaty gave Armenia a large section of what is today eastern Turkey. The Sèvres Treaty was forced upon the Ottoman Empire after its defeat in the first world war, and was incorporated in the constitution of the Democratic Republic of Armenia (1918-1920) – to which the Republic of Armenia, in securing its independence after the break-up of the Soviet Union, claimed to be a successor. However, the Turkish nationalist resistance fought its war of independence *against* this very treaty, which is regarded in Turkey as a symbol of foreign oppression and colonial domination.

2 For the whole text, see UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948, <http://www.un.org/millennium/law/iv-1.htm>, accessed 5 May 2010.

By contrast, the Kars Treaty was signed by (on one side) the Soviet Union and the Soviet Republic of Armenia and (on the other) the Turkish Republic, but it has never been explicitly recognised by the post-1990 Republic of Armenia. Today, Armenian nationalists – in particular the Dashnaksutunyun party – are afraid that opening the border that was established by this treaty would amount to implicit recognition of its legitimacy, and thereby acceptance of the removal of Armenians from eastern Anatolia in 1915. The governing party in Yerevan and Armenians in general seem to recognise the unlikelihood of Armenia ever having the border according to the Sèvres Treaty, but it is the “Dashnaks” who grab attention in Turkey. Whenever the Dashnaks publicly declare that an agreement with Turkey is dependent on the “return of Western Armenia”, it is this, rather than the official Armenian line, that is noted in Ankara and responded to by Turkish public opinion.

This process works in the other direction too, in that even the most bizarre elements of the Turkish nationalist opposition – which even though represented in parliament have little influence on official Turkish foreign policy – are given pride of place in Armenian public discussion. The two sides may indeed have irreconcilable aims, but there is also a large degree of misunderstanding of who is authorised to speak on behalf of the state on the opposite side of the border.

### ***Nagorno-Karabakh: a conflict unresolved***

The third problematic issue is the notorious Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh is formally part of Azerbaijan; it was an autonomous region of Azerbaijan during Soviet times, dominated by Armenians, but with a large minority of Azeris. In 1988-1993, an escalating series of disputes and massacres resulted in a war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which ended with Armenia in occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also of large tracts Azerbaijani territory (including

seven provinces which were not part of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous province). Armed hostilities may have ceased, but the war formally continues. This “frozen conflict” continues to mar regional politics.



Both countries have been largely ethnically cleansed of members of the other group, albeit Armenia to a larger extent than Azerbaijan. Refugees remain a big problem in the two countries, not least because they continue to be used as political instruments. Azerbaijan and Turkey are long-standing allies, and have strong ethnic and linguistic ties. This similarity was played up during the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, when Azerbaijan and Turkey used the slogan “one nation, two states” (*bir millet, iki devlet*) to describe their friendship. Turkey’s actual involvement stopped short of military intervention, but Ankara did supply Azerbaijan’s exclave of Nakhichevan during its blockade by Armenia.

The president of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, pleaded with Ankara not to proceed with the protocols unless the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is resolved. This intervention in domestic Turkish politics raises the question of what first undermined the protocols, an issue discussed below.

### **The geopolitics of the protocols**

Both Turkey and Armenia want to take credit for the process that led to the protocols, and therefore give different accounts of how they came about. Turkey prefers 2005 as the start of the negotiations, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sent a letter to Armenia’s president, Serge Sarkisian, suggesting that a joint commission be established to examine the 1915 events. The Armenian side prefers May 2008, when Sarkisian sent a letter to his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gül inviting him to attend the Turkey-Armenia football match in Yerevan to be held in September of that year.

The two sides thus disagree about the when, the who and the what about the origin of the negotiation process. In attempting to explain why it came about when it did, however, at least two themes recur. The first and most obvious is the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, which exposed the vulnerability of Armenia's trade routes (which run mainly through Georgia and which the war cut off for two weeks). But the problem with this explanation is that Sarkisian invited Gül in May 2008 and made this public in June. The second explanation is that Serge Sarkisian needed some way of deflecting criticism for the manner of his election in March 2008. As an informant in Yerevan put it: "one objective of Sarkisian was to replace domestic illegitimacy with international legitimacy".

### Lobbying in Washington

Both Armenia and Turkey have a certain influence in Washington; Turkey's with the executive branch of government, and Armenia's with the legislative branch. Turkey is a Nato ally and hosts a key American airbase – and as such, is extremely important in terms of its strategic and military contribution to United States strategy in the Middle East. On the other side stands the powerful Armenian diaspora in the US.

These two forces are exerted on different pressure points in Washington and have different effects. Turkey's influence is largely with the Pentagon, the State Department, and the defence industry. It is significant here that both President Obama and secretary of state Hillary Clinton called for the congressional committee to drop its "genocide" resolution.

There is also pressure from the American defence industry, which sees valuable contracts being imperilled as Turkey may turn to other suppliers for its military hardware. One defence industry executive estimates the value of US defence and aerospace

exports to Turkey at \$7bn, with tens of thousands of American jobs dependent on strong relations between the two countries. While Armenians rightly point out that Turkish lobbying efforts vis-à-vis the executive branch of government is a major force in Washington, it may not necessarily be the work of Turks themselves, as the defence industry tends to look out for its country's relations with buyers.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side of the Washington cross-pressure is the forceful Armenian diaspora. One informant in Yerevan makes the point that "there are 12 million Armenians in the world, and only 3 [million] of them live here". The diaspora's influence in Washington is mainly associated with its voting power and its ability to finance election campaigns for congressmen and senators. Its influence is therefore mainly in the legislative branch of the US government, as witnessed in the confrontation between the House foreign affairs committee and the two foremost US representatives of the executive branch dealing with foreign relations. These figures, Obama and Clinton, were involved in the Zürich negotiations that led to the protocols (although only Clinton was present in Switzerland). The executive branch of government is struggling to mend its relationship with Turkey, and Washington is effectively unable to exert any sway over Turkish ratification and implementation of the protocols.



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3 Kevin Bodargus, "Top Defense Contractors Warn That Genocide Measure Will Hurt Business", The Hill, 10 March 2010, <http://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/84875-companies-warn-genocide-measure-will-hurt-business>, accessed 10 March 2010.

## Nails in the coffin

The problems with ratification and implementation of the protocols arose soon after the protocols were made official. Three events effectively blocked their implementation.

First, Azerbaijan's president sent a delegation of female MPs to talk to their counterparts in the Turkish parliament in Ankara – including opposition MPs of a more nationalist and Kemalist orientation such as Canan Aritman of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Both Turkey's domestic opposition, who were already negative towards the rapprochement with Armenia, and İlham Aliyev were more successful in this initiative than could be expected. In the Turkish media, the issue became framed as one of the government selling out their allies and ethnic brethren in Azerbaijan for favours with Washington.

Turkey's prime minister Erdogan went to Baku and made a speech in the Azerbaijani parliament to the effect that he pledged not to proceed with ratification unless progress was made on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This made it impossible for the government to push the protocols through parliament. The Armenians were furious that the Turks had "inserted preconditions", and (as nearly all informants in Yerevan put it), this "proved that the agreement was not negotiated in good faith".

The second nail in the coffin came in January 2010 when the Armenian constitutional court made its pronouncement on the protocols – ruling that they had some inconsistencies with the constitution. The practical implications of this judgment are unclear; some informants in Yerevan interpreted it as meaning that the court's memorandum would serve as part of the agreement if it was ratified, but others thought that it would have no

practical result whatsoever. Be that as it may, the Turkish reception of the court's decision gave it high importance, with the media seeing it as the Armenians introducing the precondition to the protocols that the Kars Treaty was not to be recognised.

The third nail came in March 2010, with the House of Representatives' committee resolution calling the 1915 events "genocide". Turkey withdrew its ambassador from Washington in protest, and the Americans were too preoccupied with patching their own relationship with Turkey and saving their military base in İncirlik that it became difficult to invest any further efforts in ensuring the protocols were ratified. In any case the Americans had also lost the legitimacy necessary to do so, as the Turkish public now saw them as doing Armenia's bidding.



## Conclusion

In summing up this issue, it is tempting to echo the renowned Caucasus expert Thomas de Waal in suggesting that the international community, rather than bickering over what went wrong in this round of the Turkish-Armenian dispute, should look forward to the centenary of the 1915 events – namely 2015.<sup>4</sup> While de Waal himself focuses on what the American president in particular can do, the other parties involved could also learn lessons from this process. The need to put more efforts into solving, or at least making progress in, the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, would be an important such step. But if Turkey and Armenia now have many contact points – so-called "track two diplomacy" – there are virtually none between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this issue, see Thomas de Waal, Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 87, 2010, [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/armenia\\_turkey.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/armenia_turkey.pdf), accessed 5 May 2010.

Moreover, the emergence of a new generation that has grown up without any experience or memory of the other side except that propagated by the authorities will make resolution increasingly difficult. The existence of mutual contact points is likely to convince more people of the other side's humanity, even though arguments and quarrels can also be expected. Without this, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is likely to sabotage any renewed rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia.

If the contact points that exist between Turkey and Armenia are needed, so are better channels for disseminating news between the two parties. These may work on the middle and high levels of the relationship (though one informant in Ankara thought otherwise), especially in a context where the newspapers and other media in the two countries tend to pick up statements made by marginal hardliners on the other side and inflate them as if they represent official policy. Efforts like these – more contact points, and improved information channels – will not ensure the success of any new protocols, but they will remove a few of the obstacles that the protocols have faced this time.



### Further reading

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2. "Noah's Dove Returns: Armenia, Turkey and the Debate on Genocide", European Stability Initiative, Berlin, Istanbul and Yerevan, 2009, [http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_108.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_108.pdf), accessed 8 May 2010
3. "Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds Opening Borders", International Crisis Group Europe, Report No. 199, 2009, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/199\\_turkey\\_and\\_armenia\\_\\_\\_opening\\_minds\\_opening\\_borders\\_1.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/199_turkey_and_armenia___opening_minds_opening_borders_1.ashx), accessed 8 May 2010
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5. Thomas de Waal, *Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 87, 2010, [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/armenia\\_turkey.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/armenia_turkey.pdf), accessed 8 May 2010