

THE TURKISH-ARMENIAN NORMALIZATION BID IN 2008-2010: AN ARMENIAN VIEW

Haroutiun KHACHATRIAN

*Analyst and Editor of the Noyan Tapan Information Center
(Erevan, Armenia)*

Introduction

Turkey and Armenia are neighbor countries, one having a territory of 783,000 square kilometers and a population of 72 million, and the other 29,000 square kilometers and 3.2 million, respectively. Moreover, the Turkish Republic is at least 87 years old, not to mention several centuries of the statehood as the Ottoman Empire, whereas Armenia has had no experience of independent statehood in the modern history except for two years in 1918-1920, and its history of independent statehood starts only in 1991. These two states, which are very different in every respect, have no normal relations. Turkey has closed its borders with Armenia (except for the air border, which has been open since 1994) and imposed a trade embargo on Armenia. As a result, Armenia cannot use the railroad and motorways connecting the two countries, moreover, its trade with Turkey is highly unbalanced, as the Armenian market remains fully open to Turkish goods whereas Turkey is virtually closed for Armenian imports. According to the data of the National Statistical Service of Armenia, in 2008 Turkish imports to Armenia were worth 268 million dollars whereas the Armenian exports to Turkey were 1.8 million; in 2009, when trade was diminished due to the global crisis, these figures were, respectively, 177.9 million and 1.2 million dollars. This situation is, of course, highly undesirable for Armenia and it has constantly made efforts to lift the blockade and eliminate the trade restrictions.

True, the early estimations about the catastrophic impact of this situation were shown to be overestimated, as the Armenian economy had accommodated to lower amount of cargo turnover and the export-import route rail-sea (ferry)-rail was relatively well working¹.

All three presidents of Armenia have said about their readiness to normalize the relations with Turkey without preconditions. Special emphasis is being made on the limitation caused by the fact that the land communications of Turkey are not accessible to Armenia. This is a potentially dangerous situation and this danger became reality during the August war of 2008, when the war fear endangered railroad traffic of Armenia through Georgia, the only rail access of Armenia to the outer world.² For all these reasons, Armenia is greatly interested in opening the borders with Turkey and lifting its trade embargo.

As for Turkey, its principal claims to Armenia in 1993-2008 was the demand that Armenia made concessions in favor of Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue before Turkey would open its border and normalize its relations with Armenia.

¹ See: H. Khachatrian, "Is Armenia Blockaded?" *War Reports* (London), No. 50, 1997, pp. 33-34.

² See: H. Khachatrian, "On Razor's Edge: An Armenian Perspective on the Georgian-Russian War," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 1: Perspectives on the Georgian-Russian War, available at [<http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=94387>].

A Short Chronology of Recent Events Concerning Relations of Turkey and Armenia

- 16 December, 1991 —Independent Armenia recognized by the Republic of Turkey,
- 25 June, 1992 —Armenia participates in the founding of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation,
- November 1992 —Turkey allows Armenia to import grain and flour through its territory,
- April 1993 —Turkey closes its border with Armenia and imposes an embargo on imports from Armenia as an act of solidarity with Azerbaijan, after the Armenian forces occupy the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan,
- 2002 —Turkish-Armenian negotiations start with Swiss mediation,
- 23 June, 2008 —President of Armenia Serzh Sargsian declares at a meeting with the Armenian community in Moscow his intention to invite his Turkish counterpart to Erevan,
- 12 August, 2008 —Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declares in Moscow the idea of creating a Peace and Stability Platform in the Caucasus,
- 6 September, 2008 —President of Turkey Abdullah Gül arrives in Erevan for the nominal purpose to watch World Cup football qualifying game between the national teams of Armenia and Turkey. Serzh Sargsian pays the reciprocal visit to Turkey on 14 October, 2009, when the second football game between the national teams of the two countries took place in Bursa.
- February 2009 —Two Protocols, Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations between the two republics are initiated. This fact was kept secret until August 31.
- 23 April, 2009 —The foreign departments of Turkey, Armenia and Switzerland (mediator) issue a statement about agreeing on some Roadmap on normalization between Armenia and Turkey.
- 31 August, 2009 —The two Protocols are made public,
- 10 October, 2009 —The two Protocols are signed in Zurich. The formal process of their ratification in the parliaments of both countries starts. Later in the same month the Protocols are sent to the Parliament of Turkey for ratification.
- 12 January, 2010 —The Constitutional Court of Armenia makes a decision that the two Protocols do not contradict to the country's Constitution. This formally clears the way for these documents to be ratified by the parliament.
- 22 April, 2010 —President of Armenia Serzh Sargsian informs that Armenia stops the process of ratification of the protocols as Turkey was evidently protracting the process. At the same time, he confirms the commitment of Armenia to go ahead with the normalization process.

Turkey Turns to Normalization with Armenia

A principal change of the Turkey's position around Armenia was caused by the August war of 2008 between Georgia and Russia. The shift in the geopolitical situation, which followed the war, stimulated Turkey to seek activation of its role in the Southern Caucasus. In particular, Turkey put forward its concept of a Peace and Stability Platform in the Caucasus, which would mean creating a structure, which would include all the countries of the region. This, in turn, led to the idea of establishing relations between Armenia and Turkey, as Armenia would not support any idea of Ankara unless it had normal relations with Turkey. The idea found an apparent support of Russia, no wonder that the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan declared his idea about the Platform during his visit to Moscow in August 2008. By the time of these events Turkey was in search of activation of its geopolitical role in the situation created after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.³

Ankara recognized that the previous policy had given no results during the 15 years and new approaches were needed. Evidently, Ankara would have more freedom in this respect, if it had normal relations with Armenia. This was in accord with the policy of Turkey known as: "zero problems with the neighbors" elaborated by Mr. Davutoglu, the main foreign policy ideologist of the ruling elite and the Foreign Minister since May 2009.

The above-mentioned events had created a beneficial international atmosphere for the normalization process. Whereas, the United States and the European Union were for a long time trying to make Turkey open the border with Armenia (meanwhile Russia, a country of high importance for Armenia, was at best, indifferent to that), after the August war of 2008, Russia too, clearly opted in favor of normalization between Armenia and Turkey, which made the process more easy. No wonder that Serzh Sargsian made the statement about his intention to invite Abdullah Gül to Armenia in a speech held in Moscow.

Hence, in fact, a unique situation was formed where all the "superpowers" (or "great powers," or "centers of power") shared the interest to support the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, despite their conflicts of interests, including in this region. During the signature ceremony in Zurich the world witnessed a unique picture, as the top diplomats of the U.S., Russia, France and the EU, namely, Hillary Clinton, Sergey Lavrov, Bernard Kouchner and Xavier Solana attended the ceremony to demonstrate solidarity on this issue.

Why is Ratification of the Protocols Needed?

It was obvious from the very beginning of the process that the normalization efforts started by the "football diplomacy" would not proceed without difficulty. This was evident during the months following the first visit of President Abdullah Gül to Erevan in September 2008, as the officials of the two countries made conflicting statements. But the occurrence of problems became especially evident after publication of the Protocols on 31 August, 2009. At least disagreements were evident from the

³ See: A. Iskandaryan, S. Minasyan, "Pragmatic Policies vs. Historical Constraints: Analyzing Armenia-Turkey Relations," *Caucasus Institute Research Papers*, No. 1, January 2010.

fact that the Protocols initiated several months earlier, were not made public for so long time. Moreover, evidently the process of Protocols signature might be delayed even more, but Serzh Sargsian hinted in his statements in the late summer of 2009 that his reciprocal “soccer” visit to Turkey might be annulled if no progress was observed in the normalization process. These statements catalyzed the publication of the Protocols on 31 August and their signature on 10 October.

However, the most obvious indication of the existence of problems was the surprising fact that these Protocols contain a provision that they would not be entered into force unless they are ratified by the parliaments of the two countries.

As a rule, establishing normal diplomatic relations between countries is the prerogative of the governments: they sign the respective documents and open representations in the capitals of the partner countries as they find it appropriate. Meanwhile, as indicated, the Protocols between Turkey and Armenia require ratification by the parliaments for being enacted. Why? It is evident, that this precondition was set by Turkey, the stronger side. Indeed, Armenia would be happy to normalize its relations with its mighty neighbor and to get its border opened after 16 years of blockade (and also to lift the trade embargo) as soon as possible. Moreover, the Armenian government would have no serious problems at home as the governing coalition led by the party of Serzh Sargsian, the Republican Party of Armenia, had safe majority in the parliament and would overcome any possible resistance in the country. Indeed, strong resistance to the process could be expected from the nationalist party Dashnaksutiun. This party, which was once the junior member of the ruling coalition, indeed left the coalition in April 2009 as the statement about “identifying a roadmap” for the Turkish-Armenian normalization was made (evidently, the Protocols were called “the roadmap”). However, the ruling coalition remained strong enough after Dashnaksutiun left it. Moreover, it was evident that the radical opposition to Serzh Sargsian, the Armenian National Congress led by Sargsian’s strongest rival at the 2008 presidential race, the first President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosian, in fact supported Sargsian’s bid to normalize the relations with Turkey (this became evident in September 2008, when ANC canceled its rally in Erevan for not hindering Gül’s visit). All of these factors showed that Sargsian would have no difficulties in the process of enacting the Protocols.

So, obviously, the precondition to ratify the protocols before enacting them was set by Turkey; apparently Ankara feared to encounter more serious resistance at home than the Armenian party did. And the Turkish side hoped to get some additional concessions from Erevan in exchange for normalizing the relations and opening the border.

What are the Additional Preconditions of Turkey?

These preconditions are well known and were voiced repeatedly during this normalization effort (from 10 October, 2009 to now) as well. There are three major additional goals not included into the Protocols Turkey would like to reach:

- First, it is its hope to force Armenia to make concessions to Azerbaijan around Nagorno-Karabakh. Starting 1993 Turkey had kept its land border with Armenia closed (and had banned imports from Armenia) seeking such concessions. As indicated above, this policy gave no results and Turkey initiated and later signed with Armenia the Protocols, in which there was no indication about Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, Ankara had hoped to get, after signing the Protocols, what it had failed to get during the previous 16 years of the blockade and embargo. At least, the public statements of Turkish leaders spoke about this. The great powers

support the position of Armenia that the Karabakh settlement mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group is a separate process having no relation with the Turkish-Armenian normalization. During the visit of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Moscow on 13 January, 2010 his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin voiced this position publicly.⁴

- Second, it is the hope of Turkey to stop the process of international recognition of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. To recap, now more than 20 countries have officially recognized the Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire as genocide and this process had started well before Armenia became an independent state due to the collapse of the U.S.S.R. (for example, Uruguay recognized it in 1965, the European Parliament adopted a similar resolution in 1987, etc.). As for Armenia, recognition of the genocide is required by its Constitution (in a form of reference to the Declaration of Independence of August 1990). It is also part of its National Security Strategy adopted in 2007 when Serzh Sargsian was still the Defense Minister.⁵ Since the Turkish-Armenian normalization process started, the Armenian leaders have repeatedly said that normalization with Turkey would not result in stopping its efforts to reach worldwide recognition of the genocide. Concerns about this issue were (and still are) especially high in the Armenian Diaspora. As the Armenian leadership pays great importance to the opinion of the Diaspora. Shortly before the signing ceremony in Zurich, President Serzh Sargsian initiated an unprecedented move. He flew 40,000 kilometers during five days and had meetings with representatives of Armenian communities in Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Beirut and Rostov-on-Don, to discuss the protocols and explain his positions to them, although they were all foreign citizens.

The protocols contain no notion about the genocide issue, but the sides will create, in the course of normalization, a joint “sub-commission on historical dimension.” What the job of that sub-commission will be had been extensively discussed in both countries and commented by the officials. In particular, the Turkish representatives claimed that this sub-commission would have the genocide issue as its primary subject of discussion. In contrast, the Armenian officials claimed that the issue of the genocide is not subject of discussing. They referred to the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations stipulating that the task of all the sub-commissions of the future Intergovernmental Commission should be determined two months after the Protocols entered into force. “To prepare the working modalities of the Intergovernmental Commission and its sub-commissions a working group ... shall be created two months after the day following the entry into force of this Protocol,” the text reads. On the basis of this provision, the Armenian party said that the job of the future sub-commission on the historical dimension has not been determined yet, and the Armenian party would not agree to make the sensitive issue of the genocide a subject of discussion.

- Finally, Turkey hopes that normalization will bring to an official recognition by Erevan of the existing Turkish-Armenian border, which is the former Turkish-Soviet border. According to the Zurich protocols, the sides confirm “the mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries as defined by the relevant treaties of international law.” Meanwhile, the existing border was determined by the Treaty of Kars signed on 13 October, 1921 with Gen. Mustafa Kemal who was not an official representative of the Turkish government then. In addition, this Treaty was never ratified by the Armenian parliament either before 22 March, 1922 (formation of the Transcaucasus Federation, after which Armenia was no longer an entity of the international law) or after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in December 1991. Moreover, there is a point of view that the only legitimate Turkish-Armenian border is the one deter-

⁴ See: “Putin: Uviazka karabakhskoi problemy i armiano-turetskikh otnoshenii—strategicheski neverna,” *Regnum*, 13 January, 2010, available at [www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1242195.html].

⁵ See: The Strategy can be found at [www.mil.am/eng/?page=49].

mined by the so-called Arbitral Award of the American President Woodrow Wilson in 1920, and this border lays west to the current one.⁶

In summary, on 10 October, 2009, a couple of hours before the signature ceremony started in Zurich, President Serzh Sargsian issued a special statement in which these three points are interpreted in a way that differs from that of Turkey.⁷

Controversy Hindering Normalization

Hence, the above-mentioned three problems have remained serious obstacles to the normalization process in which both Armenia and Turkey are interested. The existence of these problems is recognized by both parties, and they differ in the point if these problems will be addressed now or after the establishment of normal relations between the two countries. This conflict became evident just on 10 October, during the signature ceremony in the Zurich University. Eduard Nalbandyan, the Armenian Foreign Minister, refused to put his signature on the protocols as he learned that his Turkish colleague, Ahmet Davutoglu, was going to interpret the protocols according to the above-mentioned expectations of Turkey in a speech following the signature. Due to the efforts of the high-ranking guests (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was reportedly most active) the signature ceremony did take place, but it took place after a three-hour delay, as the sides agreed not to make any statements after it.

During the following months, as the ratification procedure has started in both countries, leaders of both countries have made numerous statements aimed at interpreting the above-mentioned three points in favor of their side. In doing so, each side accuses the other in efforts of setting preconditions in ratifying the protocols, but also ends in stating that its country will go ahead with normalization process if the opposite side does the same.

A new situation has formed since mid-January 2010. According to the Armenian legislation, each international document should be examined by the Constitutional Court (CC) before being sent to the National Assembly for ratification. On 12 January, the highest Court of Armenia made a ruling that the Zurich protocols do conform to the Constitution, thus clearing their way for ratification. In addition, the ruling contained a preamble in which the CC gave its comments about the above-mentioned three disputed issues. It declared that normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations does not mean

- (a) concessions in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue,
- (b) abandoning the genocide recognition efforts,
- (c) automatic recognition of the existing Turkish-Armenian border.

Thus, the Constitutional Court simply reiterated what was repeatedly said earlier by Armenian leaders, including the President (in particular in his 10 October address, see above), the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. However, six days later, on 18 January, Turkey decided to make a

⁶ A detailed survey of all these problems can be found at [www.WilsonForArmenia.org]. Of course, by visiting the tomb of Woodrow Wilson on 12 April, the same day when the Washington meeting took place, Serzh Sargsian gave additional food to such speculations.

⁷ See: Address of the President of Armenia to the People of the Republic of Armenia and to All Armenians, 10 October 2009, available at [<http://www.president.am/events/statements/eng/?year=2009&id=51>].

special statement expressing concerns that the CC decision jeopardizes the normalization process and puts preconditions to protocol ratification. The following shows that it was just a pretext for protracting the ratification. On 20 January, Prime Minister Erdoğan made the following statement (quoted by Reuters): “We have never taken the protocol to our Constitutional Court. We took it directly to our parliament without making changes. ... This is a proof of our sincerity. Armenia has tried to change the text.”

Armenia Suspends the Ratification Process

On 22 April, 2010, Serzh Sargsian issued a televised address whereby Armenia announced its decision to suspend the procedure of ratifying the Protocols, because Turkey had failed to ratify them “as agreed, without preconditions and in a reasonable timeframe.” The Armenian leader expressed the commitment of his country to ratify the Protocols after Turkey does it. “We shall consider moving forward when we are convinced that there is a proper environment in Turkey and there is leadership in Ankara ready to reengage in the normalization process,” Sargsian said.

The conclusion that the current Turkish leadership is not ready “to reengage in the normalization process” was made by Sargsian after the meeting with the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan held ten days before, on 12 April in Washington DC. During the 40-minute meeting the two leaders failed to reach a consensus.

“Maintaining regional peace is among the fundamental elements of Armenia and Turkey’s efforts for normalization of their relations, thus the resolution of a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan is naturally linked to this process, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has asserted,” the media quoted the Turkish leader as saying.⁸ Thus, Erdoğan made clear he was continuing his policy of linking the process of normalization with Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

At the same time, Armenia believes the position of the Turkish leadership is not unanimous and there are people among them to occupy a more moderate position. The words of Serzh Sargsian saying in his 22 April message: “I express gratitude to President Abdullah Gül of Turkey for political correctness displayed throughout this period and the positive relationship that developed between us,” spoke about that.

Unclear Perspective after the Formal “Suspending” by the Armenian Side

Turkey initiated the process of normalization with Armenia in an effort to enhance its role in the Southern Caucasus (the Georgian-Russian war being a big stimulus) and also to follow its declared policy of “zero problems with neighbors.” Hence, its government is interested in normalization with Armenia, and the external factors are favorable, as indicated above. However, the bid of the bilateral

⁸ “Erdoğan: Armenia Talks Linked to Karabakh Settlement,” *Today’s Zaman*, 15 April, 2010, available at [<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-207464-erdogan-armenia-talks-linked-to-karabakh-settlement.html>].

normalization initiated in 2008-2009 failed. This was because of the hurdles put by the Turkish party, or as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said during her visit to Erevan on 4 July, 2010: "...we urge Turkey to take the steps that it promised to take, and that both sides continue to try to find the opportunity to open the door to reconciliation and normalization. Armenia's decision last April was ... very impressive. And now, as they say in sports, the ball is in the other court."⁹

Currently experts estimate the probability of the protocol ratification by the Turkish parliament as very low. They indicate the following major reason: the Armenian issue is not among the priorities of the ruling elite of Turkey now. The main foreign policy priorities for Turkey are now activities in the Middle East, and the value of Armenia and the Southern Caucasus as a whole are now much lower. In addition, Turkey has a number of difficult home political problems, and general elections are likely to be held next summer. So, the ruling party is unlikely to undertake any steps of rapprochement with Armenia (such steps are not popular in Turkey) before these elections.

The factor of Azerbaijan is seen in this case as an influential factor. Azerbaijan's negative reaction to the Armenian-Turkish normalization was stronger than expected by the Turkish ruling elite. Baku not only raised the price for natural gas for Turkey from \$120 to \$260 per 1,000 cubic meters. Surprisingly, as it may seem, the 70-million Turkey cannot afford the luxury of having its own independent policy toward Armenia, unless it is allowed by the 8 million Azerbaijan. And Baku insists that Turkey continue its previous policy toward Armenia before progress is reached in Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

This failure is in fact a lost chance of decreasing tension in the region. In August of 2010, Armenia and Azerbaijan took steps to enhance links with contradicting defense systems. Azerbaijan signed a Treaty on "strategic partnership and mutual cooperation" with Turkey. Armenia has extended the 25-year term of location of the Russian military base in its territory and also has got additional pledges of military supplies from Russia. At the same time, in both countries there is an understanding that the existing situation needs to be changed. According to President Gül, a "silent diplomacy" is continuing between the two countries.

"I believe the status quo in the Caucasus is not in the interests of Turkey, Azerbaijan or Armenia. If we keep problems frozen, they may re-emerge at any time,"¹⁰ President Abdullah Gül was reported as saying in August 2010.

On the other hand, President Serzh Sargsian said on 19 August: "One cannot find two neighbor countries which are free from historical controversy, conflicts and disagreements... But a civilized answer to challenges is the full-scale cooperation, mutually beneficial trade and the common search of ways for mutual understanding. This is the logics which led us when we initiated the process of normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations." The words are noteworthy as they were said at a ceremony dedicated to the Armenian-Russian friendship in Gumri, at which the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev attended.

Thus, hopes are high that this "silent diplomacy" will bring some tangible results. However, the experts claim this will not happen before the summer of 2011.

⁹ *Joint Press Availability with Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan*, News of the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, available at [<http://armenia.usembassy.gov/news070410.html>].

¹⁰ "Gül Says 'Silent' but 'Decisive' Diplomacy under way in the Caucasus," *Today's Zaman*, 14 August, 2010, available at [<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-219005-102-gul-says-silent-but-decisive-diplomacy-under-way-in-caucasus.html>].