

Turkey and Armenia: Facing the Challenge of Historic Opportunity

Bulent Aras

Professor of International Relations,
Istanbul Technical University

Ali Sarikaya

PhD Student,
King's College, London

In a historic gesture, Armenian President Serge Sarkisian invited Turkish President Abdullah Gül to watch the World Cup qualifying football match between the two countries' national teams. The invitation came amid hopes for a breakthrough in relations between Turkey and Armenia, and President Gül did in fact attend the match in Armenia on 6 September 2008 as a goodwill gesture. Diplomatic history suggests that sporting events may be used as a medium for achieving détente and developing relations between countries. The most famous case is known as "ping-pong diplomacy", when China invited the US table tennis team to Beijing for a series of exhibition matches in 1971, subsequently paving the way for a détente between the two countries during the Cold War era. The football match and Turkey's Caucasian initiative have placed Turkish-Armenian relations on the two countries' political agenda and reignited hopes for the normalisation of relations both within Turkey and Armenia and in international circles.

It came as no surprise to hear Turkish and Armenian policymakers announce the launch of final talks to establish diplomatic relations in October 2009. This constitutes the third move towards normalisation – after football diplomacy and the April 2009 road map – which has resulted from behind-the-scenes Swiss-mediated talks. The new framework is based on two protocols on the establishment of diplomatic ties and the development of bilateral relations. These protocols should be ratified by the parliaments of both states, a challenging task which requires intensive work at

domestic level in the two countries. No matter what problems the future holds for Turkish-Armenian relations, the two countries have never been so close to normalisation in the past sixteen years, with both sides declaring their shared aspiration to develop a positive, neighbourly approach towards one another. The political will to normalise relations in the face of serious domestic and international challenges could be explained by analysing each country's reason for taking this route.

Motives for Normalisation

Turkey has solid and well-grounded foreign policy motives for the normalisation of its relations with Armenia. Turkey's recent drive to minimise problems with its neighbours has been successful in all countries except Armenia. Turkey is engaged in mediation and facilitation activities in the Middle East and follows an active policy in the surrounding regions. The Russia-Georgia conflict, the stalemate in Azerbaijan-Armenian relations, the emergence of a Cold-War style West-Russia rivalry, and the formation of regional groupings around this binary opposition are immediate sources of concern. These could lead to further armed conflicts and constitute threats to the stability and security of the region. Furthermore, the problems of ethnic conflicts and separatism are not yet fully under control. These circumstances constitute the driving force for Turkish foreign policymakers to assume a constructive role for Turkey in inter- and intra-state conflicts in the Caucasus.

Turkish-Armenian relations are shaped by the wider framework of Turkey's Caucasian policy and the binding impact of the Armenian Diaspora. Ankara's relations with Yerevan have struggled with the issue of normalisation since its recognition of Armenia. Turkey seems more active in seeking a solution for the prob-

lems between the two countries: it recognised Armenia earlier than many states, and invited Armenia to join the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation as a founding member in 1993, despite the fact that Armenia has no shore on the Black Sea; Turkey supplied energy to Armenia when it faced serious shortages in the 1990s, and during the same period donated 100,000 tons of wheat, despite the poor image of Armenia held by many Turks; Yerevan-Istanbul flights are operational, despite the closure of the land borders; Turkey tolerates thousands of illegal Armenian workers in Turkey; and Turkish authorities have restored several Armenian cultural and artistic artefacts in Turkey.

Besides a tense regional situation, Armenia also feels the effects of an unstable domestic political environment, economic difficulties, and a rising level of unemployment. Armenian foreign trade is overwhelmingly dependent on Georgian ports, and the country's economy was significantly damaged by the recent Russian bombing of Georgia's Poti Port during the August crisis. Armenia therefore feels an urgent need to reconsider its regional relations and its economic and political alienation, creating the impetus to normalise relations with Turkey.

The Georgia-Russia crisis will likely have a devastating impact on the already deteriorating Armenian economy. It will also complicate Armenia's problems with other countries in the region. From an international perspective, the geopolitical necessity of normalising Turkish-Armenian relations is to loosen the Russian-Armenian-Iran axis, and even, if possible, to pull Armenia from this axis altogether. Improving Turkish-Armenian relations would be certain to decrease Russian influence in Armenia. Turkey's fresh approach of including both Azerbaijan and Armenia in regional peace efforts may end the Cold War style binary oppositions in the region. Furthermore, the Armenian administration recognises the need to put an end to the inimical patterns that create cycles of violence in the region.

Although Turkey and Armenia do not have diplomatic relations, behind-the-scene diplomacy continues between both sides. Groups within the two states both approve and oppose these secret talks. Turkey's response to Iran's mediation offer, i.e. that "we already talk to Armenia," revealed this hidden diplomacy. In the wake of the Georgia-Russia crisis, Ankara streamlined a multilateral diplomatic initiative, the Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform, and declared that it wanted Armenia to join the new project. Turkey's

attitude demonstrates Ankara's inclusionary approach toward Armenia in the regional context. To date, the Armenian administration has responded positively to the offer, and has indicated that it considers it a constructive effort.

One requirement for Ankara in preparing the ground for a Stability and Cooperation Platform is to normalise Turkey's relations with Armenia. Turkey would be open to criticism for keeping its borders with Armenia sealed, while at the same time initiating a regional peace initiative. Given the domestic polarisation on this matter, as well as possible Azeri reservations, Turkey is following a thorny path towards normalisation. With the outbreak of war in the region, the Platform initiative gave Turkish authorities a legitimate reason to pursue direct and public contact with Yerevan. Turkish-Armenian rapprochement is likely to have a positive impact on the Azeri-Armenian problem and should put an end to the Armenia's isolation. Until now, Yerevan had no option but to remain close to Russia. Turkey's isolation of Armenia hurt the Armenian economy, shutting it out of regional economic projects and thus contributing to the destabilisation of the Armenian domestic political environment. However, the likely impact of Turkey's isolation policy has reached its limits. The most this policy hoped to achieve was to generate a political will within Armenia for the normalisation of relations with Turkey. In addition, Turkey wished to push Yerevan to find a fair solution to its territorial problems with Azerbaijan. After long years of stonewalling and insisting on pre-engagement conditions from Turkey, the Armenian leadership has finally come around to a policy of normalising relations with its neighbour. Given the burgeoning of regional diplomatic attempts to resolve Azeri-Armenian problems, the time was ripe to replace Turkey's isolation policy with a more inclusive approach. As Turkish President Abdullah Gül pointed out to his Azerbaijani counterpart President İlham Aliyev, the new perspective of Turkish policy-makers is predicated on the expectation that Turkish engagement with Armenia will facilitate a solution to the Karabakh problem and other outstanding territorial issues.

Armenia suffers from the consequences of long regional isolation. It is a landlocked country and has to rely on Iranian and/or Georgian roads for land transportation for people and goods because of the sealed border with Turkey. This means a great deal of extra cost for foreign trade. Almost 80% of Ar-

menia's imported goods pass through Georgia, whose fragile security is, consequently, of great concern for Yerevan. As previously mentioned, Russia's bombing of Georgia's Poti port is a landmark development to confirm Armenia's concerns. Armenia suffers not only from high transportation costs, but also from the danger of a drop in foreign trade brought on by the situation in the Caucasus. In addition, Turkey is the most natural trading partner for consumer and industrial goods in the region. At present, Turkish goods reach Armenia via Georgia inevitably at an extra cost. Furthermore, Turkey is an emerging economy which could offer employment opportunities for Armenians. So, in economic terms, it is easy to see how Armenia would benefit from the opening of the borders.

Another imperative of normalisation from the Armenian perspective is Armenia's current absence from regional energy supply projects, a direct result of its isolation. There is a considerable amount of oil and gas in the Caspian region, and Turkey and Georgia benefit from this wealth thanks to the pipelines that pass through their territories. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is a major project that created a regional scheme to the immense benefit of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. While a trans-Armenian passage was the most feasible route, it was never even considered as an option because of Yerevan's ongoing problems with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Russian-Georgian crisis brought forth new projects for improving energy security and for diversifying energy supplies and supply routes to Europe, none of which included Armenia. As a result of its isolation, Armenia has paid a considerable price. The normalisation of relations with Turkey would pave the way for Armenia's involvement in future energy transit projects.

Resistance Against Normalisation

Armenia constantly voices allegations of genocide in every possible international forum and aims to corner Turkey with genocide blame in international circles. The Armenian Parliament referred to Turkey's eastern provinces as "western Armenia" in its declaration of independence, dated 23 August 1990, a declaration that also calls international society to recognise Armenia's genocide allegations. The Yerevan administration does not recognise the Gumru and Kars Agreements that established the Turkish-Armenian border in 1920 and 1921 respectively.

One major factor preventing the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia is Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan. Armenia occupies one fifth of Azerbaijani territory and ignores the UN Security Council decisions against the occupation. Ankara has close ties to Baku, and benefits from energy cooperation deals; Azerbaijan therefore closely follows developments in relations between Armenia and Turkey. Azerbaijan is Turkey's major partner in the region and will continue to be the most important country for Turkey to take into consideration. For its part, the Armenian state considers Turkey and Azerbaijan as serious threats to its national security and territorial integrity. The Armenian administration therefore pursues a balancing policy through the maintenance of close relations with Russia and Iran. Russia provides soldiers to secure Armenia's borders and has military bases in the country. It is a strategic partner and protector against potential Azerbaijani and Turkish aggression in the eyes of the Armenian administration, whose balancing policy has remained a major tenet of its foreign policy in the post-independence period.

A fear of encirclement lurks in the background of Armenia's domestic politics and foreign policy. The immediate effect of this fear is an inward-oriented domestic policy and an insecure foreign policy line. Armenia has problems with all its neighbours except Iran. Energy supply lines and new transportation networks have excluded Armenia while generating considerable amounts of foreign income for Azerbaijan as an energy-rich country, and for Georgia and Turkey as the hosts of pipelines extending to world markets. Armenia's difficulties with Georgia stem from the former's close ties to Russia; its clashes with Azerbaijan stem from the occupation and the Karabakh issue; and its relations with Turkey are uneasy due to territorial demands and genocide allegations.

A strong political bloc in Armenia favours normalisation, while the Tasnaksutyun Party opposes any rapprochement. The latter has close economic and political ties with the Armenian Diaspora and acts as a strong anti-Turkish group in Armenia. In Turkey, the major opposition parties, i.e. the Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Action Party, both criticised President Gül's visit to Armenia, which was backed, along with the protocols, by Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who considered them constructive steps toward normalising relations. The Azerbaijani government refrains from commenting

on Turkish-Armenian relations, although some weak voices express hope that Turkey's developing relations with Armenia may serve as a prelude for freeing Azeri territories under occupation. At the same time, there is strong criticism among the Azerbaijani opposition against any progress in Turkish-Armenian relations.

The Tashnaks spin incredible conspiracy theories, accusing Sarkisian of selling out Nagorno-Karabakh and severely harming the Diaspora's gains in the genocide claims. They say the process will protect Azerbaijan's interests and leave Armenians unsatisfied. Although a softer opposition says that protocols might produce positive results, it also warns that Turkey could use the situation to its own benefit. According to this view, even if relations are established and the borders are opened, Armenia's economy will become dependent on Turkey, and Turkey's political influence on Armenia will grow.

Normalisation and Turkish-American Relations

It was a disappointing moment for Turks to learn that the foreign affairs committee of the US House of Representatives has narrowly voted to approve a resolution describing the massacre of more than a million Armenians by the Ottoman Empire during the First World War as genocide. Turkey recalled its newly appointed ambassador to Washington, Namik Tan, for consultation minutes after the vote. It is no secret that there is an "Armenian question" in Turkish-American relations, which for a long time has resulted in a seasonal oscillation in bilateral relations around this time of year.

However, this year the usual political game occurred in a different context. Surprising as it may sound, the genocide ruling has also harmed the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia. In Switzerland in October 2009, two protocols were signed by foreign ministers of both countries to set a framework for the normalisation of their relations and the opening of the common border.

After the genocide ruling, the Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, underlined once again that Turkey is determined to continue efforts to normalise ties with Armenia. There is strong evidence that Turkish foreign policymakers would pursue the normalisation process with the utmost care and sensitivity.

The genocide bill simultaneously harms Turkish-Armenian normalisation and the intensified peace attempts to solve the Karabakh problem. It is for the benefit of the US, Turkey and Armenia to pursue constructive policies for the normalisation process. There is a historic chance of making real progress in Turkish-Armenian relations, which is likely to make the Caucasus a better place to live. Turkish society and politicians have put pressure on the Obama administration to think twice about blocking this landmark opportunity.

Policy Recommendations

The Russia-Georgia crisis has shown regional countries the importance of peace and stability. The regional status quo should change, and the new regional order should be based on a novel rhetoric and practice of economic interdependence, political cooperation, regional stability and prosperity. Turkish-Armenian rapprochement would be a necessary step toward this new regional order. The following points may help to expedite the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

1. The Armenian Diaspora and Armenia should be treated differently. There is more room to manoeuvre with Armenia, while the Diaspora is focused on genocide allegations. Also, Armenian interests differ from the Diaspora's priorities in that Armenia needs to normalise relations with Turkey to prosper economically. Careful diplomacy is needed in order to limit the Diaspora's influence on bilateral relations. It would be wise to postpone a resolution for the genocide issue to allow other immediate problems that impede a rapprochement to be addressed. There is an absolute need to put history and emotions aside for some time, especially at a time when *Realpolitik* forces the two countries to cooperate in the interest of regional peace and security.
2. Turkey's policy toward Armenia is to a large extent based on countering the genocide allegations and isolating Yerevan in the regional context. This defensive line should be replaced with a proactive one that confidently states what Turkey expects Armenia to do for normalisation. The first demand may be Armenia's recognition of Turkey's territorial integrity, which will prepare the ground for opening the border.

3. Russia and Iran are key countries with an interest in Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Their indirect support could serve to accelerate the normalisation process. Turkey's ability to follow an inclusive approach may prevent concerns arising in Tehran and Moscow regarding normalisation. Turkey and Armenia need to be on the same side to secure the ground for peace and stability in the Caucasus. Turkish policymakers should therefore pursue a multidimensional approach to persuade Iran and Russia that a rapprochement will not threaten Iranian and Russian interests, but instead will allow them to reap the benefits of regional peace and stability.
4. The normalisation of relations with Armenia would strengthen Turkey's regional profile in the Caucasus, and could open the way for new mediator and facilitator positions for Turkey in several Caucasian conflicts and problems. The Minsk initiative and UN-based attempts failed in their efforts to solve the Karabakh question, revealing a need to energise these diplomatic schemes and, more importantly, develop initiatives from within the region. Turkey's Caucasian initiative would be a likely starter.
5. Turkey should strengthen its inclusionary approach toward Armenia in the regional context. This change of attitude would force Armenia to drop its preconditions for normalising relations, while strengthening Turkey's policy of zero-problems with its neighbours.
6. Turkey's moves toward normalisation will generate support from the European Union, the US and the international community. This support should also be used to encourage Armenia to respect Turkish borders. The US and European administrations need to reevaluate the Diaspora's policies, which have the effect of disengaging Armenia from geopolitical reality in its region, through the use of American and European sources. Such a policy of isolationism only strengthens Russian influence in the region, a situation that the US and European administrations may not be hoping to see in the aftermath of the Georgian crisis.
7. Ankara needs to make sure that it pays attention to Azerbaijani concerns while developing relations with Armenia. The only way to wield any influence in Armenia is to maintain a dialogue channel open. It would be unfair to urge Turkey to close its doors to Armenia, while Azerbaijani leaders are pursuing diplomatic moves with the Armenian government.

Turkish policymakers should continue to underline the need for Armenia to put an end to its occupation of Azerbaijani territories in the interest of regional peace and stability.

8. There is an urgent need for a region-wide initiative for civil society dialogue. Inter-governmental measures may fail without strong support for peace and dialogue on a societal level. Turkish-Armenian civil society dialogue should be encouraged and supported. Visiting Yerevan as a tourist may be enough to see that the genocide issue is not central to the lives of Armenians. The divide between the two neighbours may be bridged through civil society activities.

Conclusion

The vision of Turkish foreign policy – shaped by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's intellectual architecture – relies on a win-win strategy in regional policy, based on principles of security for all, multicultural coexistence, economic interdependence and high-level political dialogue. The Turkish-Armenian normalisation process has also bolstered efforts to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, through, for example, the Minsk process and Russian mediation attempts. For the sake of such peace initiatives it is vital to keep the normalisation process alive. Any progress in Azeri-Armenian relations will have a positive impact on Turkish-Armenian relations and vice versa. The alternative is maintaining the status quo in the Caucasus, which is not sustainable for regional and international security.

In a region marred by many factors that generate instability, such as increased nuclear activity, international terrorism, violent regional rivalries, ethnic tensions, drug trafficking and illegal immigration, Turkey's policy towards the Caucasus seeks to contribute to peace and stability. The Russia-Georgia crisis has demonstrated to countries of the region the importance of order and peaceful relations. The regional status quo should change and the new regional order should have a new cogency based on economic interdependence, political cooperation, regional stability and prosperity. Turkish-Armenian rapprochement is a necessary step towards achieving this new regional order. Nothing can serve this goal better than the current scheme which would see the opening of a common border within a mutually agreed time period after the implementation of the protocol.