
The Turkey-Armenia-Azerbaijan Triangle: The Unexpected Outcomes of the Zurich Protocols

Zaur SHIRIYEV* & Celia DAVIES**

Abstract

This paper analyses the domestic and regional impact of the Turkish-Armenian normalisation process from the Azerbaijani perspective, with a focus on the changing dynamic of Ankara-Baku relations. This line of enquiry is informed by international contexts, notably the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and the respective roles of the US and Russia. The first section reviews the changed regional dynamic following two regional crises: the August War and the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. The second section analyses domestic reaction in Azerbaijan among political parties, the media, and the public. The third section will consider the normalisation process, from its inception through to its suspension. The authors find that the crisis in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations has resulted in an intensification of the strategic partnership, concluding that the abortive normalisation process in many ways stabilised the pre-2008 status quo in terms of the geopolitical dynamics of the region.

* Zaur Shiryev is a foreign policy analyst based in Azerbaijan, a columnist for *Today's Zaman*, and serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Caucasus International*.

** Celia Davies is an Associate Editor at *Caucasus International* and an LLM candidate in International Law at the University of Edinburgh.

Key Words

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Introduction

Between 2008 and 2009, Azerbaijan's foreign policy was thrown into a state of crisis. The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 followed by the attempted Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process (initiated in September 2008) unsettled geopolitical perspectives across the Caucasus and the wider region, throwing traditionally perceived axes of threats and alliances into question. Before the dust had settled on the first conflict, another was already brewing, destabilising many of Azerbaijan's basic foreign policy assumptions. Baku was confronted with the difficult and traumatic task of redrawing its psychological map of the region, and, consequently, its foreign policy agenda.

The Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process generated serious concerns in Azerbaijan, at both the public and governmental levels. The particular worry was how the improvement in Turkish-Armenian relations would affect the resolution of the Azerbaijani-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The immediate cause of the closure of the Turkish-Armenian border was Armenia's 1993 occupation of Kelbajar, one of the seven adjunct districts to Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region. Baku's resistance to the normalisation process was and is based on the argument that the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border should, given their connection, move forward in parallel. The normalisation process saw an agreement to establish mutual diplomatic recognition, culminating in the Zurich Protocols in October 2009, signed in the presence of the Russian, French and Swiss foreign ministers and the US Secretary of State. However, neither party has ratified the protocols, and the process has essentially been frozen pending progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Six months after the signing, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's declaration that Turkish parliamentary ratification was contingent on the conflict resolution progress prompted condemnation from the Armenian side, and an official

suspension of their ratification process. President Sargsyan's statement did, however, express Yerevan's "desire to maintain the existing momentum for normalizing relations".¹ The partial rapprochement led to vociferous debate in Azerbaijani society, paralysing political groups in their visions of Turkey.

Two Crises: Redrawing the Political Landscape

In geopolitical terms, the immediate casualty of Russia's intervention in Georgia was regional energy security. In Azerbaijan's eyes, the events of August 2008 revealed some uncomfortable realities: first, that Georgia could no longer be considered an entirely reliable transit route for Azerbaijan's oil and gas, and second, that Russia would be willing to use its military and political arsenal for the destruction of Azerbaijani and Caspian hydrocarbon exports.² Furthermore, the war significantly changed Azerbaijan's perceptions of the EU, NATO and the US in terms of their political clout and regional strategies. Many among the Azerbaijani political elite were convinced that the EU was ill-prepared to deal with a major crisis in its eastern neighbourhood, that the price of NATO membership was too great, and that the US would struggle to balance Moscow's influence in the Caucasus.

In the end, Georgia's physical energy infrastructure was essentially unharmed, though total conflict-related damage was estimated at US \$38 million.³ The real damage was to international perceptions of the region's energy security, the cost of which remains hard to gauge.

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The war compelled Baku to abandon its assumption that Russia would refrain from acts of aggression against its neighbours. Russia's willingness to deploy military force- even after the signing of the EU-brokered Six Point Peace Plan⁴- revealed new regional realities, whereby Moscow's grip on the region is arguably stronger than ever. Russia's recognition of the independence of the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was worrying for Azerbaijan in the context of another territorial conflict: Nagorno-Karabakh. Though Moscow hastened to say that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be considered as a separate issue, Baku perceived an implicit threat. The signing of the Moscow Declaration "On Regulating the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict" by the presidents of Armenia,

Azerbaijan, and Russia following talks in Moscow in November 2008 sent a clear signal regarding Russian influence and its continued position as chief peace-broker, bolstering President Medvedev's claim in late August 2008 that Russia had "privileged interests" in its bordering countries.

The August War also led Baku to reconsider its faith in the nature of US regional engagement. Prior to August 2008, Baku had seen Washington as a potential deterrent to Russian regional supremacy, and despite the political support Tbilisi enjoyed from President Bush at the height of the conflict,⁵ Baku struggled to revise its impression with the Russian reset policy initially pursued by the Obama administration. Azerbaijan was frustrated by what it saw as a shift in US regional engagement, whereby the Georgian-Azerbaijani tandem was replaced by a focus on the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. That Washington was pressing Ankara to normalise relations with Yerevan without making any causal link to the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict- the reason that Turkey had originally closed its borders in 1993- angered Azerbaijan and seriously threatened relations with the Erdoğan government.

Baku perceived Washington's rapprochement initiative as the flashy

centrepiece in complex negotiations between the Obama administration, Armenian advocacy groups in the US, the Armenian government, and Turkey. The US administration, unable to deliver on promises of genocide recognition, instead sought to alleviate Armenia's economic predicament by opening the Turkey-Armenia border. A significant improvement in relations between Ankara and Yerevan, argued many US strategists, would not only help to stabilise the volatile South Caucasus but would also reduce Armenia's political and economic dependence on Russia and Iran, which would clearly serve American interests.

For Ankara, the Russo-Georgian conflict provided a catalyst for regional rapprochement. After a ceasefire stopped the violent five-day war, Prime Minister Erdoğan released his proposal for a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" (CSCP), aimed at fostering peaceful relations across a region that had become increasingly vital to Turkey's energy interests, in line with his Foreign Ministry's "zero problems with neighbours policy".⁶ Ankara sought to work in close cooperation with Moscow on the details of the initiative,⁷ and Russia, happy to see a regional initiative untainted by Western hands, pledged its support.⁸ The three South Caucasus countries, however, were less enthusiastic, with Georgia in particular

expressing wariness. Though there was no explicit rejection of the initiative by Tbilisi, Georgian analysts feared that a significant component of the CSCP, the proposed Turkish-Armenian deal, would pose a threat to Georgia's economic and security interests.⁹

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Primarily, the normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations would weaken Georgia's position as a major transit country in the region and Tbilisi could lose its dominant position in energy projects. Secondly, if Armenia were to become less dependent on Georgia, it could become more active in supporting the demands of Armenian nationalist groups active in the Georgian province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, threatening domestic and regional stability. Furthermore, the whole process was perceived by Tbilisi officials as part of a common Russian-Turkish agenda to reduce the influence of Western powers in the region, which would in turn make it easier for Russia to turn Georgia into a satellite state.

The fallout from the August War transformed the geopolitical realities of the South Caucasus, and in this regard Ankara found itself juggling the potentially conflicting demands of multiple relationships: with Russia, with the West, and with each of the three South Caucasian states. The Turkish government's strategic objective has been to turn the country into a major energy hub, and the obvious vulnerability of the transit lines running through Georgia prompted Ankara to rethink its overall Caucasus strategy.¹⁰ Ankara's leading foreign policy makers- flying the flag of the "zero problems" policy- recognised that in the wake of the August War, land-locked Armenia was even more isolated, due to the severance of ties with Russia via Georgia. As mentioned above, this situation created immediate impetus for the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process. On the other hand, Ankara faced a strategic dilemma: how could Turkey normalise relations with Armenia without ruining the strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, which remained crucial to its energy ambitions?

The Attempted Rapprochement and the Azerbaijani Response

The Turkish-Armenian border was closed by Turkey in 1993 following

Armenia's occupation of the Azerbaijani district of Kelbajar. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 822¹¹ on 30 April 1993, condemning the occupation of Kelbajar, demanding respect for the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and supporting the immediate, full and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying forces from the occupied areas of Azerbaijan. In 2001, a Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission was established with a view of normalising bilateral relations and, in the longer term, achieving historical reconciliation. The commission functioned until 2004. Throughout this time, the air space remained open, civil society initiatives were ongoing, and most importantly, trade via Georgia continued. However, the border remained closed, and official relations were frozen.

Despite this increasing contact, Baku did not voice any detailed position on Ankara's role in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement until April 2009.

From the Azerbaijani perspective, the rapprochement process emerged over three stages:

- i. September 2008 - April 2009: “Football diplomacy”;
- ii. April 2009 - October 2009: The build up to the Zurich Protocols;
- iii. October 2009 - April 2010: The failed ratification and suspension of the process.

As Turkey’s ambitions to become a regional leader and economic power grew, the blockade became to be perceived as increasingly troublesome, a perception which created the conditions for reconciliation and normalisation. Private meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials began prior to 2008, and contact intensified when President Gül sent an unusually supportive message to congratulate President Sargsyan on his election in February 2008. Then in what has since been termed “football diplomacy”, in September 2008, President Gül accepted an invitation from his Armenian counterpart to visit Yerevan for a FIFA World Cup qualifying match between the two national teams, Armenia and Turkey. Gül was the first Turkish head of state to visit Yerevan. Despite this increasing contact, Baku did not voice any detailed position on Ankara’s role in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement until April 2009. The likely catalyst for Baku’s harsh reaction was President Obama’s visit to Turkey in that same

month, and his statements regarding the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border to promote development, which upped the ante and significantly increased concerns in Azerbaijan. Thus, as Turkish-Armenian talks played out behind closed doors, Turkish-Azerbaijani relations reached a near crisis point. The problem was the source of Baku’s information: Russian intelligence. It was widely reported in the Azerbaijani media¹² that Azerbaijani officials had received detailed information on the secret negotiations between Ankara and Yerevan—specifically that progress on Nagorno-Karabakh was *not* a pre-condition for rapprochement—during a visit by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov to Baku. Bortnikov came to Baku at the end of March 2009 on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Azerbaijani National Security Ministry. During this visit he apparently met with President Aliyev to inform him about the Turkish-Armenian talks. Thus in the first weeks of April, the Azerbaijani government remained unconvinced by declarations by Turkish officials regarding the existence of a proviso on Nagorno-Karabakh, and it was not until the visit of Prime Minister Erdoğan in May 2009 that the situation began to change.

The concern in Baku was that the normalisation process was not being tied

to the immediate cause of the breakdown in relations back in 1993. The crisis officially began when Azerbaijani President Aliyev cancelled his trip to Istanbul for the Alliance of Civilisations Summit, held on 6 April 2009. For Baku, it was worryingly late in the day that they finally received official assurance from Ankara that normalisation would not take place in isolation of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. That finally happened in May 2009, and was also followed up by a prime ministerial visit to Baku, with a delegation that also included a number of high profile ministers: in addition to Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, the energy, foreign trade, transportation, and culture and tourism ministers journeyed to the city.¹³ During the visit, Prime Minister Erdoğan held a joint press conference with President Aliyev, during which he made the unambiguous declaration that “[t]here is a relation of cause and effect here. The occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh is the cause, and the closure of the border is the effect. Without the occupation ending, the gates will not be opened.”¹⁴

Reaction of the Azerbaijani Government

Azerbaijan saw Obama’s visit to Turkey and his statements on rapprochement as evidence that Turkey was realising a US-

sponsored initiative. Tensions continued to increase, with, as mentioned above, President Aliyev announcing that he was boycotting the April 2009 Istanbul Summit of the Alliance of Civilisations in reaction to the possible Turkish-Armenian reconciliation being discussed in the absence of a breakthrough on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Shortly after the summit, Aliyev publicly condemned the rapprochement initiative, calling it “a mistake”.¹⁵ He expressly criticised Washington’s role in encouraging Turkey to open the border with Armenia, despite the continued occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven adjunct districts. Importantly, the normalisation process was not an exclusively US-driven initiative; private negotiations had already started in Zurich between the two parties long before Obama’s election, and actors within the EU also played important roles.¹⁶ Again, Obama’s 2008 election campaign had included a declaration to the powerful Armenian diaspora in the US that the April 1915 events should be recognised as genocide. As expected, Turkey balked at this, but tempered its refusal with what was arguably a much more significant gesture, an agreement to cooperate with a US-led peace and normalisation process.

In this context, President Gül’s statement that “Turkey thinks of

Azerbaijan in her every act”¹⁷- following his meeting with Obama on 6 April- failed to reassure the Azerbaijani government, which remained firm in its demand that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be a necessary pre-condition to the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border. That this was not the case caused outrage and disappointment in Azerbaijan at both the public and official levels. Many Azerbaijanis felt that Ankara was distancing itself from Azerbaijan through these actions, and the announcement that Ankara and Yerevan had held secret talks and openly committed to a roadmap for normalisation fuelled this sense of betrayal. On 22 April 2009, the foreign ministries of Turkey, Armenia and Switzerland issued a joint statement saying that “[t]he two parties have achieved tangible progress and mutual understanding in this process and they have agreed on a comprehensive framework for the normalisation of their bilateral relations in a mutually satisfactory manner. In this context, a road-map has been identified”.¹⁸The official statement on the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement was widely perceived in Azerbaijan as a betrayal of the key principle on which the partnership between Ankara and Baku was based, which was that no accords between Armenia and Turkey should be

agreed to until after the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In the initial stages of this diplomatic crisis, the Azerbaijani government pursued a three-pronged strategy that avoided direct engagement with the Turkish government.

Following this development, Baku stressed its official position on a possible rapprochement. After noting that he was not in a position to tell Ankara how to handle its relations with Yerevan, President Aliyev, during a press conference in Brussels with European Commission President José Manuel Barroso on 28 April 2009, shared Baku’s main concerns:

We are getting a lot of official and non-official information about what’s happening between Turkey and Armenia. This is a deal between two sovereign countries, and we have no strategy to stop or impede it, but we, the Azerbaijani people, want to know answer to one very simple question: is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict a pre-condition for the rapprochement process or not?¹⁹

In the initial stages of this diplomatic crisis, the Azerbaijani government pursued a three-pronged strategy that avoided direct engagement with the Turkish government. Firstly, it mobilised

public opinion through media reports on the negative implications of an unconditional Turkish-Armenian rapprochement on Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. Secondly, it fostered “independent” links between Azerbaijan MPs and the leadership of the Turkish opposition, namely the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Both parties believed that unconditional rapprochement with Armenia would damage Ankara’s alliance with Baku. Thirdly, at official meetings and conference across the EU, Azerbaijani officials suggested that Azerbaijan might consider shifting the direction of its energy cooperation toward Russia.

Prior to President Aliyev’s statements in April 2009, the government refrained from directly expressing its position. The first strategy was the mobilisation of the largely state-controlled media in order to persuade the Azerbaijani public that the unconditional normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations would damage its national interests. Despite the Turkish government declaring that they had not overlooked the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, statements to the opposite effect made by Armenia’s Foreign Minister, Eduard Nalbandyan, caused confusion and distrust. From the beginning of the negotiations and throughout the ensuing diplomatic crisis, Armenian authorities

made it clear that as far as they were aware, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was not on the agenda of the normalisation talks. Government representatives stated that “the negotiations between parties will continue under the scope of the Minsk Group”, and “the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was not presented as a pre-condition within in Turkey-Armenia negotiations”, raising fears among Azerbaijani officials.²⁰

Each of the parties made clear its concerns about the normalisation process taking place in the absence of conditions pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In mid-April 2009, a delegation of Azerbaijani ruling and opposition party MPs flew to Ankara to discuss recent developments and share their concerns with Turkish politicians, mainly from the opposition party. Turkey’s intensifying bilateral relations with Armenia had been discussed in the Milli Majlis, the Azerbaijani parliament, as early as December 2008, and the position had always been clear. In rare agreement, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party and the opposition declared that this intensification would jeopardise Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.²¹ While

the Azerbaijani delegation was in Ankara, Azerbaijan MP Ganira Pashayeva, who is pro-government but officially non-partisan, issued a press release on behalf of the delegation, stating that the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border prior to the liberation of the occupied territories would constitute a major disappointment to the Azeri people, and that it was their “hope and absolute belief that since the only party that stands to benefit from this solution is Armenia, the Turkish people will not let this happen”.²²

The period between October 2009 and May 2010 was a time of active shuttle diplomacy for Azerbaijan. The country used Turkish public opinion as well as its energy card to try to persuade Turkey to reconsider its rapprochement strategy. Baku reached out to Turkey’s government, political parties, civil society, and the public, asking them to consider Azerbaijan’s interests. The more nationalistic members of Turkey’s ruling party and the main opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), opposed the Armenian deal on the grounds that such a deal would be akin to selling out their Turkic brethren in Azerbaijan, and that further, absolutely no compromise should be made on the genocide debate.

With regard to Baku’s trump card, on 14 October 2009, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) signed an agreement to sell 500 million cubic meters of gas a year to Russia’s Gazprom starting in 2010, at a price of US \$ 350 per thousand cubic meters. Azerbaijan made it clear: either Turkey ensured that Baku’s demands were met in its negotiations with Armenia, or else Azerbaijan would continue to court Russia and send its Caspian energy supplies elsewhere. The threat and indeed concrete action suggested significant political and economic sanctions in punishment for Turkey’s policy shift.

Domestic Political Reactions in Azerbaijan

The situation offered a rare alignment of opposition and government positions, at least once the reality of the situation had hit home. It was not until Obama’s visit to Turkey (6-7 April 2009) that the opposition spoke out against the Turkish position. Prior to that, there had been a feeling that the ruling party was overreacting, and that anti-Turkish sentiment was being stirred up by pro-Russian groups. Opposition groups stood by the belief that Turkey would not act against Azerbaijan’s national interests. The opposition media portrayed Turkey as naive rather than

politically calculating, with Armenia, Baku's traditional enemy, as the source of blame. However, after the signing of the Zurich Protocols in October 2009, Turkey's active participation in the rapprochement process could no longer be denied.

The chain of causality has been an important factor, with a focus on the notion that without addressing the original problem that led Turkey to close its borders in 1993, no further action should be taken in this direction.

Thus on 8 April the Azerbaijan opposition parties, including Musavat, the Azerbaijan National Independence Party and the National Democratic Party, issued statements against the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, declaring that Turkey's actions would do "an incurable harm" to relations with Azerbaijan.²³ Each of the parties made clear its concerns about the normalisation process taking place in the absence of conditions pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Politically, this was perceived as a concession by Turkey to Armenia. The sense of betrayal stemmed in part from the perception that Yerevan had not offered anything to

Ankara in return for the rapprochement, and continued to condemn Turkey's role in the 1915 events. From this angle, there was perhaps a failure among Azerbaijani politicians to understand the extent of Turkey's ambition as a major regional political and economic power. As fears grew, unconfirmed rumours about trade relations between Armenia and Turkey began to fly, including allegations that trade between Turkey and Armenia had hit US \$185 million, and that Turkey was host to 70,000 Armenian citizens who were working illegally.²⁴ The domestic opposition had harboured animosity towards the Turkish government since the October 2008 presidential elections in Azerbaijan- condemned by the OSCE as not reflective of the principles necessary for a meaningful and pluralistic democratic election²⁵- when Turkey did not respond to their pleas for support.

The ruling party implicitly supported the opposition's growing sense of anger and confusion about the rapprochement process, though stopping short of explicit agreement. Political analyst Zerdusht Alizade has assessed this as a clever bit of strategic manipulation on the part of the government. He argued that by encouraging increasingly harsh condemnation of Turkey by the media and in the public sphere, the government succeeded in portraying Azerbaijan as strongly opposed to the normalisation

while retaining fully plausible deniability. Indeed, it publicly disassociated itself from “the level of aggression and reactions in Azerbaijan media against Turkey’s recent involvements; nonetheless, we cannot directly intervene and shape the public opinion.”²⁶ Given that the local media is majority state-owned, it is difficult to accept this statement at face value. To Alizade, the government deliberately sought to fuel tension and influence public opinion, for which purpose the opposition played a crucial role. The mutual intelligibility of the Turkish and Azeri languages meant that media coverage was easily accessible to Turks.

Public Opinion

The public debate in many ways reflected the abovementioned tendency to pursue a historicised and highly reductive interpretation whereby villainous Armenia and politically naive Turkey had conspired to make Azerbaijan the victim of their machinations. As the situation developed, with the signing of the Zurich Protocols marking the peak in the Turkish-Azerbaijani crisis, public debate increasingly turned to historical interpretations rather than new and possibly uncomfortable political realities. For instance, a central debate was based on the question of whether Turkey

would abandon Azerbaijan for the *second* time, the first being the Soviet invasion in 1920.²⁷ Among academics, opinion varies regarding the degree of Turkey’s responsibility for Azerbaijan’s inclusion in the USSR.²⁸ The analogy is weak, and the trend of historical interpretation of the 2008-9 crisis reflected an inability or perhaps merely an unwillingness among Azerbaijanis to acknowledge a new regional dynamic. It is also worth mentioning that accusations of Turkish betrayal were limited to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, rather than the nation as a whole, suggesting the depth of feeling that is involved in the oft-cited Turkic brotherhood. Turkish intellectuals reacted to these accusations by suggesting that the Turkish-Armenian normalisation was being manipulated to support pre-existing anti-Turkish sentiment among some circles in Azerbaijani society.²⁹ Others saw Azerbaijan’s reaction as a clear indication that it had “decided to flirt with Russia in order to make progress in its relations with Armenia,” i.e. to use Russian influence to unfreeze the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.³⁰

Within public discourse, the chain of causality has been an important factor, with a focus on the notion that without addressing the original problem that led Turkey to close its borders in 1993, no further action should be taken in this

direction. Nonetheless, the majority upheld the notion that Turkey had not, in fact, “betrayed” Azerbaijan, arguing that there was no indication of a *long-term* change or shift in Turkey’s historical pro-Azerbaijan stance, and that the public should not rush to judge Turkey’s short-term foreign policy manoeuvres. This line of thinking was based on the notion that first of all, Turkey’s attempts to increase its stature as a regional leader had hitherto respected Azerbaijan’s interests,³¹ and secondly, that there had been multiple occasions where Baku’s own foreign policy had diverged from Turkish national interests. One question that has been raised repeatedly is why Azerbaijan has not formally recognised the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) as a terrorist organisation.³² Others have pointed to the Northern Cyprus issue; though the Azerbaijani leadership promised in 2004 to provide economic and diplomatic assistance to Turks living under tough conditions in Cyprus, it refused to recognise the independence of Northern Cyprus, sensitive to the possibility that Cyprus would retaliate by recognising the *de facto* authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh.³³ The Turkish liberal media has tended to be quicker to blame Azerbaijan, concluding that while Baku expected support from Ankara on foreign policy issues, it was not stepping in when Turkish interests were at stake.

From another angle, there are those—particularly among historians and public intellectuals—who argued that this move by Turkey would ultimately support the conflict resolution process with regard to Nagorno-Karabakh. Political scientist Leyla Aliyeva suggested that the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement was driven by two primarily pragmatic concerns:

- i. In the long term, the continued political and economic isolation of Armenia will increase the likelihood of aggression;
- ii. History shows that politically isolated states have never sought out reconciliation with their neighbours. By opening the border with Armenia, Turkey will gain an opportunity to put pressure on Armenia in regard to the deadlocked Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process.³⁴

Aliyeva added that regardless of these external developments, the Azerbaijani government must take a more active role in the development of the events and evaluate its own position.³⁵ It is worth reiterating at this juncture that among Azerbaijani political circles the majority did not oppose the normalisation of Turkish-Armenians relations *per se*; the issue was rather that they felt it had to be linked to the withdrawal of Armenian military forces from the occupied Azerbaijani lands.³⁶

Local Media Coverage

Similar to the opposition's approach, the initial tendency toward scepticism of a genuine act of betrayal by Turkey on the part of the politically moderate media in Azerbaijan was borne out by headlines such as "Has Azerbaijan lost her closest ally to Armenia? Is that realistic?"³⁷ published as late as 8 April. The headline reflected general public discourse, where Armenia is the villain, not Turkey, though ultimately the conclusion was the same as that of the government: making concessions to a party that blocks any possibility for conflict resolution would constitute a total fiasco of historical proportions.

The prevailing emphasis in local news coverage was this narrative of betrayal, whether or not any such betrayal was declared. This was reflective of the generally emotional response to political events, as seen in an 8 April article from *Olaylar*, a moderate opposition news agency, titled "Turkish government's betrayal of the people of Azerbaijan". Here, the near-hysterical rhetoric portrays a frenzy of ethnic hatred:

Armenians, who are claiming the occurrence of a genocide [perpetrated by Turkey in 1915] are in a bloodthirsty state. They do not differentiate between Azerbaijani Turks and Turkish Turks. To realize their claims, they fight with us simply because we are Turks. Thus

Turkey's opening of her border with Armenia is nothing but a betrayal of Azerbaijan.³⁸

In the more staunchly nationalist publications, such as the pro-government daily *Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan)*, Turkey garnered a good deal less sympathy. Under a similar title to the one cited above- "Would Turkey betray?"- an article from this paper examined the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in the context of Turkey-Armenia negotiations.³⁹ The author reflected:

The belief that the Nagorno-Karabakh problem will be resolved more smoothly due to the opened borders is over-optimistic and moreover a complete fallacy. The only action that would bring peace to the region is opening the border in tandem with the gradual withdrawal of the Armenian presence from the Nagorno-Karabakh. However, as the Armenian president's remarks on the issue indicate, this was not even on table during the final agreement, and thus [the Armenian president] continues to blocks all possibilities for peaceful resolution.

The author also found "upsetting" the discussions of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem in the Turkish media, where, he says, the tendency was to describe the Karabakh conflict as an unfortunate obstruction to the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, with the latter being Turkey's priority. From the Azerbaijani point of view, generally speaking, the Karabakh issue should trump all else when it comes to regional relations with Armenia.

The Zurich Protocols: Crossing Baku's Red Lines

The rapprochement process culminated, and in one obvious sense perished, in the Zurich Protocols. On 10 October 2009, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu and his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandyan signed two documents, the “Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations” and the “Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations”. US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, and Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey oversaw the signing of these protocols, and hailed the end of a gruelling diplomatic struggle and the beginning of a new era for the region. To date, however, neither party has proceeded with the domestic ratification process. Like the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the normalisation process remains frozen.

The day before the signing of the protocols, President Ilham Aliyev spoke from Chisinau where he was attending the CIS Summit:

I am absolutely convinced that the resolution of the Karabakh conflict and the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border must proceed in a parallel fashion... Between these two processes there is no official link, but an unofficial

one exists. This tie must be preserved and the two questions must be resolved in a parallel fashion and at the same time.⁴⁰

After the signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release declaring that Turkey's decision “directly contradicts the national interests of Azerbaijan and overshadows the spirit of brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey built on deep historical roots”.⁴¹ Despite Ankara's moves to realign itself with Baku's red lines, the Turkish decision to sign the protocols in the first place and Azerbaijan's reaction to that left bitterness on both sides. The attendance in Zurich of high officials from countries that represent the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs was interpreted by Baku as an indication of their support for Armenian interests, despite the fact that the major international sponsors of the bilateral agreement, the US, the EU, and Russia, all appear to favour the separation of the rapprochement from the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. These factors intensified both government and public disagreements in Azerbaijan on Turkish-Armenian normalisation. Baku's negative reaction at first glance would seem both predictable and justified. Indeed, how could one view the improvement of relations between Azerbaijan's closest ally and its opponent as anything but a weakening of Azerbaijan's position in

the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute? The concern in Baku was that by lifting the sanctions against Armenia, Turkey would be implicitly tolerating what it deemed unacceptable in 1993, and this move would run counter to the interests of Azerbaijan, a country that perceives Turkey as its chief ally.

The main criticism was focused on the text of protocols, which did not include any reference to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Arguably, Turkey's perceived obligation to link the normalisation process to the Karabakh issue should have been indicated before the start of negotiations, given that the closure of the borders between Armenia and Turkey was itself the result of the occupation of Azerbaijani territory by Armenian forces. But the nature of the long-frozen diplomatic relations, which continued to cause problems right up until the actual signing of the protocols, made this extremely precarious. Moreover, it is not entirely clear whether the "condition" of Nagorno-Karabakh was brought up after the reaction of the Turkish and Azerbaijani populations, as claimed by the Armenian media and as stated by Armenia during the signing of the protocols, or whether it had been broached at an earlier stage at the government level. Opinions expressed by the Turkish media and in official statements argued that during the signing of protocols, Turkey wanted to use the

Nagorno-Karabakh issue to encourage Armenia on the one hand, and to urge Minsk Group's co-chair countries to increase pressures on Armenia on the other. But after the signing of the protocols, which increased domestic tensions in Turkey, Ankara could only link the ratification to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in loose terms: "If the process [of Armenian and Azerbaijani negotiations] speeds up, the ratification of the protocols with Armenia will also accelerate," said Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan the day after signing the protocols.⁴²

For the most part, the Azerbaijani government's position was shared by domestic political leaders, analysts, and the public. Vaga Guluzade, ex-national security and foreign policy adviser of former President Heydar Aliyev, said publicly that "I consider this to be a betrayal of Azerbaijan's interests and a deception of the Turkish and Azerbaijani public. This contradicts the promises made personally by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to MPs and the public in Baku."⁴³

The Turning Point

Just days after the signing of the Zurich Protocols, the emotional dimension of Turkey-Azerbaijan bilateral relations became very apparent. In a second round of "football diplomacy", the Turkish and

Armenian presidents were present at a World Cup qualifying match between their teams in Bursa.⁴⁴ When officials in Bursa did not allow the Azerbaijani flag to be brought into the stadium- in line with a decision by FIFA officials- and when a Turkish police officer showed disrespect for the flag, a diplomatic crisis ensued. The Azerbaijani media erupted, and in retaliation for the “flag scandal” in Bursa the Azerbaijani authorities lowered the Turkish flags that fly in Baku’s Martyrs’ Alley, the burial place of Turkish soldiers who fought for the liberation of Baku in 1918.

It is clear to Russia and to many others that peace with Turkey alone is not enough to integrate Yerevan into the West or to reduce Russian influence there.

The flag crisis marked a turning point in the Turkish-Azerbaijani-Armenian dynamic. Prior to the insult at Martyrs’ Alley, Turkish public opinion was for the most part pro-Azerbaijani. Beyond the public, Turkish opposition parties had harshly condemned Erdoğan and the AKP government, accusing them of selling out their allies for the rapprochement process. This public and political support pushed both Erdoğan and Gül to reiterate that Nagorno-Karabakh was a pre-condition for

rapprochement with Armenia. Support in Turkey for Azerbaijan was driven by pragmatic concerns as much as the proclaimed brotherhood; there was a real fear that the ruling party was tearing the country away from its most valuable strategic partner. While the incident damaged Azerbaijan’s image in Turkey- with Turkish nationalists warning Baku “not to mess with the Turkish flag”⁴⁵- its ultimate effect was to shock both countries into their own rapprochement. The brief taste of animosity had been sufficiently unpleasant to scare them back into friendship.

Conclusions: Realities Revealed, Lessons Learned

Following this unexpected sea change in diplomatic relations, the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, which Turkey had initially sought to disentangle from the negotiations of the two protocols, was revitalised. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan called for the combination of the two peace processes when he met with US President Barack Obama on 7 December 2009, and again at a meeting with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on 13 January 2010.

Armenia did not immediately halt the ratification process; the protocols were approved by the Constitutional Court on 12 January 2010. In Armenia

every international agreement must first be examined by the Constitutional Court before being passed on to the parliament. The court approved the documents, though marked parts of the preamble based on three main concerns. Firstly, Armenia would continue in its efforts to gain worldwide recognition of the 1915 events as genocide. The ruling reminded President Sargsyan that “the Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia” as regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Declaration of Independence. Secondly, it rejected any connection between the new agreement with Turkey and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Thirdly, and most significantly, it stated that the implementation of the protocols did not imply Armenia’s official recognition of the existing Turkish-Armenian border as established by the 1921 Treaty of Kars. In doing so, the Constitutional Court rejected one of the main premises of the protocols, “the mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries as defined by relevant treaties of international law”.

On 22 April 2010, President Sargsyan issued a decree whereby the ratification procedure of the Armenia-Turkey protocols on normalisation of relations between the two countries was formally

suspended. Accordingly, on 26 April, the bill on the ratification of these protocols was withdrawn from the agenda of the National Assembly. Thus less than a year after the signing of the protocols, the region’s pre-2008 geopolitical dynamic had been restored. The process revealed the political and diplomatic realities of the region, providing guidance for future relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Turkish political elites had believed that the Ankara-Yerevan rapprochement would help reduce Russian influence in Armenia, with some parties suggesting that pro-Russian groups in Baku opposed the normalisation on those grounds. In the end, Russia actually supported the process, arguably for the purpose of creating tensions between Turkey and Azerbaijan, and damaging their energy cooperation.

Better relations between Ankara and Yerevan, most US strategists contended, would help not only to stabilise the volatile South Caucasus but also reduce Armenia’s political and economic dependence on Russia and Iran, which clearly serves American interests. However, as long as there are Russian military bases inside Armenia and along its borders, and Armenian airspace is under the protection of Russian forces, Armenia can easily resist any sort of pressure from Azerbaijan or Turkey, and can safely push back any threat of

military force to liberate the occupied territories. It is clear to Russia and to many others that peace with Turkey alone is not enough to integrate Yerevan into the West or to reduce Russian influence there. This was amply demonstrated by the agreement Armenia signed to prolong the lease for Russian military bases shortly after the normalisation process was suspended.⁴⁶

One consequence of the whole crisis has been the deterioration in US-Azerbaijani relations. Baku criticised the policy the US pursued in pushing Turkey to open the border with Armenia, despite the non-resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. From Baku's point of view, Washington's failure to appoint a US ambassador to Azerbaijan during this period was a further insult. It was only after the rapprochement was suspended that visits by high-level US officials started to increase, and at the end of 2010, the US finally appointed a new ambassador to Azerbaijan, though ultimately Obama was unable to secure his reappointment following pressure from the Armenian lobby.

Energy relations played a crucial role in the process. During the crisis in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, Ankara had feared that by signing energy contracts with Russia's Gazprom, and not explicitly supporting the Nabucco project, Baku was distancing itself from Turkey's

stated ambitions to become a regional energy hub.⁴⁷ But with the suspension of the rapprochement, strategic relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have intensified, particularly in the energy sector. In September 2010, the two countries signed a bilateral Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support, and since then, relations have continued to bounce back with vigour. The signing of the intergovernmental agreement on the Trans Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP) on 26 June 2012 signalled a high degree of mutual trust, as well as the persuasive power of the energy card.

The full impact of what now seems an intense but fleeting crisis remains to be seen, and meanwhile, Turkey has been able to pursue its ambitions as an international peace-broker over another border, in Syria. The violence emanating from Syria, compounded by the influx of refugees and the diplomatic and military demands entailed in its Middle Eastern role have occupied Ankara almost without a break. However, 2015, the centenary of the 1915 events in Armenia, is likely to bring about renewed pressure on Ankara to consider diplomatic relations with Armenia. The challenge for Turkish policy makers will be to negotiate a range of competing and conflicting political, diplomatic, and economic demands within a neighbourhood and region that is certainly less stable than it was in 2008.

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Turkish-Armenian Normalisation and the Karabakh Conflict

Cory WELT*

Abstract

Over three years after the signing of protocols on opening diplomatic relations and land borders, the prospects for Turkish-Armenian normalisation in the absence of progress on the Karabakh conflict are slim. But there is also little sign of a breakthrough in the Karabakh conflict-resolution process. Given these impasses, this article proposes an alternative way forward: an unconditional opening of Turkish-Armenian diplomatic relations followed by a retooling of the Basic Principles. This retooling would accept a linkage between the border opening and the withdrawal of Armenian forces from territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh. It would also reduce ambiguities in the Basic Principles that have stalled the peace process to date. The article first analyses the failure of the Turkish-Armenian protocols, then justifies a change in policy, and finally, proposes a retooled set of interim principles and focuses on intermediate steps that would help normalise Armenian-Azerbaijani relations while deferring the final settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh's political status for a later time.

Key Words

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh, Minsk Group, Turkey-Armenia normalisation, conflict resolution.

Turkish- Armenian Normalisation and the Karabakh Conflict¹

Over three years after Turkey and Armenia signed two landmark protocols on opening diplomatic relations and their land border, the prospects for a full normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations in the absence of progress on the Karabakh conflict are slim.² The efforts of many Turks, Armenians, and outside stakeholders to comprehensively decouple Turkish-Armenian relations from the Karabakh conflict have not borne fruit. But there is also little sign of a breakthrough in the Karabakh conflict-resolution process, spearheaded by the OSCE Minsk Group, which has the United States, Russia, and France as co-chairs.

* Associate Director of the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies and Professorial Lecturer of International Affairs at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs and Adjunct Fellow at the Center for American Progress. Law at the University of Edinburgh.

To assert the absence of a linkage between Turkish-Armenian normalisation and the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is to depart from a longstanding reality of Turkish foreign policy.

Given these impasses, this article proposes one alternative way forward: an unconditional opening of Turkish-Armenian diplomatic relations followed by the retooling of the Basic Principles underpinning the Minsk Group-led Karabakh peace process into a set of “interim principles” that can guide the work of international peacemakers. These interim principles would accept a linkage between the Karabakh conflict and the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border while reducing certain ambiguities that have stalled the peace process to date. At the same time, they are more modest than the Basic Principles in their pursuit of the intermediate goal of conflict transformation rather than a final settlement of the conflict.

The article first analyses the failure of the Turkish-Armenian protocols. It argues that the Turkish government erred by gambling on the success of the Karabakh peace process, allowing Armenia and international mediators to persuade themselves that Turkey was prepared

to forgo its policy of conditionality. It next justifies a change in the current international approach, explaining why arguments for dropping the linkage are not fully compelling, and why the Basic Principles have run aground. It concludes by proposing a retooled set of interim principles, which includes the opening of the Turkish-Armenian land border and focuses on intermediate steps that would help normalise Armenian-Azerbaijani relations while deferring the final settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh’s political status for a later time and context.

The failed Diplomacy of the Turkish-Armenian Protocols

“We will not sign a final deal with Armenia unless there is agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia on Nagorno Karabakh.” Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (10 April 2009).³

“The United States welcomes the statement made by Armenia and Turkey on normalization of their bilateral relations. It has long been and remains the position of the United States that normalization should take place without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe.” US Department of State Press Statement (22 April).⁴

“Our borders were closed after the occupation of Nagorno Karabakh. We will not open borders as long as the occupation continues. Who says this? The prime minister of the Turkish Republic says this. Can there be any

guarantee here apart from this?” Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (13 May).⁵

“I want to reiterate our very strong support for the normalization process that is going on between Armenia and Turkey, which we have long said should take place without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe.” US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (28 September).⁶

To assert the absence of a linkage between Turkish-Armenian normalisation and the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is to depart from a longstanding reality of Turkish foreign policy. In 1993, Turkey sealed its land border with Armenia, previously open to humanitarian shipments of wheat, after Armenian forces seized the large mountainous Azerbaijani region of Kelbajar, sandwiched between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷ The Turkish government said the border would remain closed- and diplomatic relations unopened- until Armenian forces withdrew from Azerbaijani territory.⁸ This policy has remained in place for 20 years.

In April 2009, after months of quiet preparation, Turkey appeared to reverse course, issuing a joint statement with Armenia that the two countries had “agreed on a comprehensive framework for the normalization of their bilateral relations.”⁹ Six months later, under the

eager gaze of top diplomats from the United States, Russia, the European Union, and Switzerland, the Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers signed two protocols for establishing diplomatic relations and opening the land border that contained no preconditions regarding the Karabakh conflict.¹⁰ Many assumed that Turkey had dropped its longstanding insistence that normalisation was contingent on Armenian troop withdrawal.

The sea change in Turkey’s Armenia policy in 2009, therefore, was not to delink Turkish-Armenian normalisation from the Karabakh conflict but to open negotiations.

Within a few weeks, however, it was clear that conditionality had not been dropped. Instead of ratifying the protocols, Turkish parliamentarians from the ruling party and the opposition insisted that normalisation would proceed only after progress was made on the Karabakh conflict, a position Turkish officials subsequently affirmed.

What went wrong? Did the Turkish government intentionally mislead its Armenian counterpart and international mediators, who had been regularly

insisting upon normalisation “without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe”?¹¹ Not if you judge by the public statements of Turkish officials. Throughout the process, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly linked a successful conclusion of the normalisation process to progress on Karabakh (see, for example, his quotations at the top of this article). While Turkish Foreign Ministers Ali Babacan and, after him, Ahmet Davutoğlu were more circumspect in their public statements, observers interpreted their statements emphasising the importance of achieving parallel solutions as an echo of the Prime Minister’s assertions.¹²

The sea change in Turkey’s Armenia policy in 2009, therefore, was not to delink Turkish-Armenian normalisation from the Karabakh conflict but to *open* negotiations- carry them, really, to their very end- without waiting for signs of progress on Karabakh. While some in the Turkish government may have supported the dropping of conditionality, in the end official policy only sought to make conditionality more respectable. The Turkish leadership appears to have believed that participating in negotiations would allow it to signal a sincere desire to normalise relations, chart a clear vision for the future of Turkish-Armenian relations, and, possibly, ease the way for Armenia to adopt a more pliable position on the Karabakh conflict.

This, however, was not the way many supporters of normalisation understood the disconnect between Turkish officials’ public statements and their seemingly sincere pursuit of normalisation. One reading was that Turkish officials may have been insisting on progress in Karabakh for domestic purposes or to reassure Azerbaijan, but they had genuinely embarked on a new course and were committed to seeing it through to its end. Another was that the Turkish political elite was divided, but that the “doves”, including President Abdullah Gül, supported normalisation and would ultimately be victorious.¹³ Yet another was that the government had belatedly come under heavy pressure from Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev, who came to the realisation that Turkey might actually move forward with normalisation if he did not derail the process, but that Baku’s efforts to influence Turkish decision making, including threats to divert natural gas exports passing through Turkey, were destined to fail. The Turkish government’s decision to let Davutoğlu sign the protocols in a high-profile international venue inescapably strengthened the view that the government was serious about normalisation without preconditions.

But in the end, the government did not try very hard, if at all, to secure parliamentary approval of the protocols.

One day after signing the protocols, Prime Minister Erdoğan emphasised the linkage that had been conspicuously absent from the documents themselves, noting that “as long as Armenia does not withdraw from occupied territories in Azerbaijan, Turkey cannot take up a positive position.”¹⁴ This statement led many to conclude that the Turkish government had been misleading Armenia and international supporters of normalisation all along.¹⁵

Insincerity, however, is not the only possible explanation for the protocols’ failure. One might say that the Turkish government was instead guilty of sloppy diplomacy. It expected Armenia and international mediators to treat its representatives’ informal public statements with the same significance as their formal negotiating stance. It also failed to directly counter Armenian and US government assertions that normalisation was to be achieved without preconditions. Most astonishingly, Turkish officials do not appear to have warned the Armenian government or international mediators that the protocols, if signed, would almost certainly not be ratified.

At the same time, the Turkish government appears to have been playing a risky game—betting that the latest stage of the Karabakh conflict resolution process, specifically agreement

on a set of so-called Basic Principles for settling the Karabakh conflict, could be brought to a successful close before the Turkish parliament was to ratify the protocols.¹⁶ In this way, Turkey would be able to square the circle of its Armenia policy: conditionality would be satisfied informally without it having been made an explicit part of the process.

While there were some grounds to believe progress on the Basic Principles might be possible, the prospect of an agreement was still highly uncertain. The chances for success were certainly not so great as to make a prominent endeavour like the normalisation process dependent upon it. But it was either this or ending the “feel-good” diplomacy of the protocols, an outcome that no stakeholder wanted.

Subsequently, Turkish officials blamed the Armenian government for the protocols’ fate. In January 2010, Armenia’s constitutional court ruled that the protocols “cannot be interpreted or applied... in a way that would contradict” an article in Armenia’s declaration of independence underlining Armenia’s support for the “international recognition of the 1915 Genocide claims in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia.”¹⁷ Following this decision, Turks accused Armenia of belatedly introducing its own precondition for implementing the protocols, namely

Turkish genocide claims recognition. However, the ruling did not in fact change the *status quo*: clearly the Armenian government had not repudiated the country's declaration of independence when it signed the protocols. Nonetheless, Turkish dissatisfaction with the constitutional court's ruling ensured that the government would make no further effort to have parliament ratify the protocols.

Supporters of normalisation rightly seek to implement more modest steps to incrementally regain confidence and trust.

In the end, the diplomatic consensus to ignore Turkey's consistent, if informal, linkage between normalisation and conflict resolution alienated Turkey from Azerbaijan; lent Armenia an unwarranted optimism that change was in the air; made Turkish policymakers look inconsistent, duplicitous, or uncertain; reinforced the fragmentation of US policy across the region; and, in the end, had terminal consequences for the Turkish-Armenian protocols.¹⁸

What Now?

More than three years later, the prospects for full Turkish-Armenian

normalisation in the absence of progress on the Karabakh conflict remain slim. At a press conference in Baku in September 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan emphasised that the withdrawal of Armenian forces from at least “one or two districts” is a precondition for the opening of the Turkish border.¹⁹

This may be disappointing but it is not that surprising. Indeed, arguments for opening the Turkish-Armenian border unconditionally may be attractive, but they have never been fully compelling. One argument is that Turkey has long had new economic and foreign policy priorities that would benefit from the border opening. But economic interests and Turkey's aspirations to become a regional “center of gravity” are equally well served by keeping the interests of Azerbaijan, their co-religious and co-ethnic neighbour and energy partner, close to heart. A second argument is that the border closure has failed as a mechanism of conflict resolution. But while this is demonstrably true, Turkey might still wish to implement it as a punitive sanction, until Armenia decides for other reasons to withdraw from Azerbaijani territory.

A third argument is that opening the border could facilitate conflict resolution. Armenia's sense of security might increase, which could lead it

to impute a lesser sense of risk in its dealings with Azerbaijan and enable Turkey to become productively involved in the Karabakh conflict-resolution process. Normalisation's role as an element of conflict resolution has had great rhetorical appeal for the US government, a principal backer of normalisation without preconditions. In two speeches in 2010 and 2011, Assistant Secretary of State Phillip H. Gordon noted that normalisation is "a step towards genuine reconciliation in the region", a "contribut[or] to further trust and peace and stability, not just for Turkey and Armenia but elsewhere as well", "the true path to peace and stability and reconciliation in the region", and something that "holds out the prospect of positive transformative change in the region".²⁰ However, these laudable sentiments remain untested: increased security on Armenia's western front could just as well provide Yerevan with the "strategic depth" it needs to avoid making compromises on its eastern front.

A final argument is simply that *something* must be done, as the status quo is increasingly tenuous and risks renewed war.²¹ An Azerbaijani-Armenian arms race, Azerbaijan's loss of faith in negotiations, the ambiguity of Russian treaty obligations to Armenia in the event of an internal conflict, and the

allure of trying to retake at least some territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh all increase the odds of an eventual renewal of conflict. In this context, supporters of Turkish-Armenian normalisation need not guarantee it will have a positive impact on the Karabakh peace process; they simply have to suggest that it *might*. On the other hand, the border opening could also have the unintended effect of increasing Azerbaijani desperation to the point that Baku concludes that war is its best option.

So, while there are good arguments for opening the border without making progress on the Karabakh conflict, none are so compelling to push Turkey toward full normalisation. This does not mean that the process of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement must be halted however. In the absence of forward movement on Karabakh, supporters of normalisation rightly seek to implement more modest steps to incrementally regain confidence and trust. Thomas de Waal, for example, has proposed an appealing list of measures that include increased Turkish connections to the Armenian diaspora (primarily via tourism), direct Turkish Airline flights to Yerevan, limited border crossings, and electricity sales.²² It is also vital to continue efforts to promote cross-border business, civil society, academic, media, film, and cultural connections, along

the lines of the multifaceted “Support for Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement (SATR)” project that the US Agency for International Development funded, with implementation by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and Armenian and Turkish partners from 2010-2012.²³

At the same time, irrespective of the fate of the protocols, it would be prudent to continue pushing for at least one of the two goals of the protocols: the unconditional establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia. In retrospect, the absence of diplomatic relations appears to have been more a casualty of the early decision to close Turkey’s borders than the reasoned intervention of an external actor seeking leverage. The Armenian state has lost little from the absence of diplomatic relations and has relatively little to gain from their establishment. At the same time, establishing diplomatic relations would offer a promising foundation for Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. It would provide consular and representative services to assist travellers, workers, and businesses of both countries; establish a mechanism for formal communication between Turkey and Armenia that could maintain momentum for full normalisation; and conceivably help facilitate Turkey’s productive engagement in the Karabakh peace process.

From Basic Principles to Interim Principles

A further- if more controversial- way forward would be for international peacemakers to accept a linkage between the border opening and the Karabakh conflict. This does not mean positioning the border opening as some kind of looming demand or precondition. Instead, it could be included as one element of several in a retooled set of “interim principles” peacemakers could use to guide their work rather than continue to push for Armenian and Azerbaijani acceptance of the more ambitious Basic Principles that have underpinned the Karabakh conflict resolution process for years.

While laudable in intent, the Basic Principles have proven too difficult to swallow. The main problem lies with what originally must have seemed their greatest strength: a “constructive ambiguity” that creates the appearance of agreement by papering over critical differences between Azerbaijan and Armenia.²⁴ For instance, the Basic Principles call for “return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control” and the establishment of “a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh,” but Azerbaijan and Armenia have been unable to agree on the timing of the return of territories (whether

or not to allow Armenia to hold some territories as “insurance” pending a final settlement) and the size of the corridor (a road? a region? two regions?). While the Basic Principles call for “the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence”, they fail to address the timing and sequence of that return. Most importantly, while the Basic Principles call for a “future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will”, this principle has run aground on the details of its referendum-sounding measure (who will vote? when?). In essence, Armenia seeks guarantees that the population of Nagorno-Karabakh will be able to vote for independence at a specified time in the future, while Azerbaijan seeks to promote an intentionally ambiguous proposal on Nagorno-Karabakh’s final status that, in President Aliyev’s words, is to be “put forward at an unspecified time in the future and in an indefinite form”.²⁵ Other principles- an “interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance” and “international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation”- are less disputed on the surface, although these terms also hide differences that will emerge in efforts to make these elements more concrete.²⁶

Rather than continuing to search for the magic formula that will secure agreement on the Basic Principles as they stand, it may be time to contemplate a set of more explicitly interim principles. The aim of such interim principles would not be to establish a framework for finalising Nagorno-Karabakh’s political status. It is much too early for that.

Instead, the aim is to achieve a feasible *interim* stage that would increase security for all parties, redress at least some of the consequences of conflict, catalyse trans-boundary activity, and ultimately transform the conflict environment in a way that could facilitate the parties’ eventual entry into the final, more difficult, stages of a political settlement. Such interim principles would accept the existing linkage to the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border while reducing the number of unbridgeable ambiguities enshrined in the Basic Principles. At the same time, they would not be complete: they would not resolve the Karabakh conflict in its entirety, and they would not strive to give Azerbaijan or Armenia all that they have sought in the negotiations to date. They also would not represent a package to be delivered to the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments for their formal consent. Instead, they would serve as mutually agreed-upon guidelines for the work of the OSCE Minsk Group and other

international peacemakers, who would then convey to Armenia and Azerbaijan their intention to direct resolution efforts towards achieving these interim elements of a peace process.

After raising hopes, the Turkish-Armenian normalisation process of 2009 failed to come to fruition or spur a breakthrough in the Karabakh peace process.

One set of interim principles that fits this bill is the following:

- the opening of the Turkish-Armenian land border;
- the return of all territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control, except the Lachin and Kelbajar districts, which will remain under interim Armenian control;
- the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to voluntarily return to their former places of residence or seek property restitution, with the modalities of return to Lachin, Kelbajar, and Nagorno-Karabakh to be determined at a later time;
- a commitment by all parties to the non-use of force, including the

removal of snipers and mines along the line of control;

- an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh that provides guarantees for security and self-governance;
- international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.

Such retooled interim principles would be of benefit to both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azerbaijan will have retained Turkey's commitment to make the opening of the border contingent on the withdrawal of Armenian forces. It will have the prospect of receiving much of its territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh, enabling the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia will be allowed to assert their right of return or restitution.²⁷ Finally, the agreement would not bring about any change in international interpretations of Azerbaijan's *de jure* territorial integrity.

Armenia would also gain from such an agreement. It would receive the expected benefits of a border opening with Turkey and it would continue to retain control (on an interim basis) of the two territories it deems most strategic for the defence of Nagorno-Karabakh. The latter would receive an internationally-mandated codification of its rights

of self-government (“interim status”) for the foreseeable future. Armenian refugees and IDPs from Azerbaijan would be able to assert their right of return or restitution, while the return of Azerbaijani IDPs would be managed in phases. Nagorno-Karabakh would be provided with international security guarantees to prevent Azerbaijan from deploying military forces against it.

This does not mean it will be easy to reach an agreement on or implement a retooled set of interim principles. The Armenian government has long insisted that any linkage between the border opening and the Karabakh conflict is a non-starter, and the US government has repeatedly and vocally agreed with that. Armenia has also long been unwilling to give up territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh without a clear guarantee that the breakaway autonomous region will eventually have the opportunity to opt for formal independence. For its part, the Azerbaijani government will not want to risk signalling any kind of consent to the continued occupation of Lachin and Kelbajar, the drawing of distinctions among groups of IDPs, or the right of IDPs to seek restitution instead of return.

These interim principles also do not resolve all ambiguities. They do not insist upon a specific formula for the timing of Armenian withdrawals from the rest of the occupied territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh, for example. They also do not clarify the content of “interim status” and “international security guarantees”. Hammering out the details of such points in mutually acceptable fashion and with a unified approach by the international actors who will have roles in these structures will remain challenging.²⁸

Conclusion

After raising hopes, the Turkish-Armenian normalisation process of 2009 failed to come to fruition or spur a breakthrough in the Karabakh peace process. With neither the protocols nor the Basic Principles offering a promising way forward along separate tracks, it is worthwhile to consider how the two processes might be constructively linked. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that neither track is ripe for a “grand” solution.

The above analysis offers one way to weave the two processes together with an eye toward gradual- and, in the case of Karabakh, open-ended- resolution. Other models, for instance alternating incremental steps on each track, might also be worth considering: for starters,

Armenian withdrawal from one or two territories in exchange for the Turkish border opening, for example.

Any such approaches will encounter many challenges, as have the approaches before them, and success is not guaranteed. At the same time, all formal conflict-resolution processes require

substantial and courageous on-the-ground efforts to prepare populations for peace that, to varying degrees, the Turkish, Armenian, and Azerbaijani governments have not been willing (or able) to make. But the protocols and the Basic Principles have run their course. It's time to find something to take their place.

Endnotes

- 1 This article is a revised and updated version of “To Link or Not To Link? Turkey-Armenia Normalization and the Karabakh Conflict”, *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 53-62. The author thanks the editorial board of *Caucasus International* for their reprint permission.
- 2 In this article, “Karabakh” refers to all the territories that are the focus of conflict, including the territory of what was known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (Region) in Soviet times and the territories around Nagorno-Karabakh that are presently occupied by Armenian forces. “Nagorno-Karabakh” refers to the territory of the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.
- 3 “Turkish PM Sets Conditions to Armenia Reconciliation: Report”, *Agence France Presse*, 10 April 2009.
- 4 US Department of State, “Press Statement: Turkey and Armenia: Normalization of Relations”, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/04/122065.htm> [last visited 22 January 2013].
- 5 *ANS TV (Baku)*, 13 May 2009.
- 6 U.S. Department of State, “Remarks With Armenian Foreign Minister H.E. Edward Nalbandian After Their Meeting”, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/09/129687.htm> [last visited 12 January 2012].
- 7 Armenian forces captured a smaller amount of territory, the so-called “Lachin corridor”, outside Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992, and additional territories later in the war. For a history of the Karabakh conflict, see, Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, New York, NYU Press, 2003.
- 8 “Turk Says Russia is Tangled in Caucasus War”, *New York Times*, 15 April 1993.
- 9 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement of The Ministries of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Turkey, The Republic of Armenia and The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs”, at http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-56_-22-april-2009_-press-release-regarding-the-turkish-armenian-relations.en.mfa [last visited 28 January 2013].
- 10 The protocols are available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?93e41cc9-832f-4ec7-a629-a920bfdbb432>.
- 11 See, the two US Department of State statements that opened this article, as well as, “President Serzh Sargsyan met in Prague with the President of Turkey, Abdullah Gül”, *Office to the President of the Republic of Armenia*, at <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2009/05/07/news-511/> [last visited 03 February 2013].
- 12 See, for example, Charles Recknagel and Andrew Tully, “Turkey Signals Opening to Armenia Must Include Nagorno-Karabakh Process”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, at http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Signals_Opening_To_Armenia_Must_Include_NagornoKarabakh_Progress/1613844.html [last visited 21 January 2012]; “Turkey Still Committed to Preconditions in Armenia Talks”, *Asbarez*, at <http://asbarez.com/68790/>

- turkey-%e2%80%98still-committed%e2%80%99-to-armenia-talks-with-preconditions/ [last visited 22 January 2012].
- 13 Turkish President Abdullah Gül avoided making explicit statements linking the two processes and did not attempt to debunk the notion put forward by Armenian president Serzh Sarkisian in May 2009 that the two had agreed to “move forward with normalization without preconditions and within a reasonable time frame”. See the two US Department of State statements that opened this article, as well as “President Serzh Sargsyan met in Prague with the President of Turkey, Abdullah Gül”, *Office to the President of the Republic of Armenia*, at <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2009/05/07/news-511/> [last visited 03 February 2013].
 - 14 See, for example, “Little Fun for Soccer Fans, Giant Leap for Rapprochement”, *Today’s Zaman*, 13 October 2009.
 - 15 In particular, the suspicion was that the Turkish government had agreed to declare the formal start of the normalisation process only to avoid a vote in the US Congress on recognising the Armenian genocide claims. Many believed it was no coincidence that the Turkish-Armenian statement was issued just two days before the annual 24 April commemoration of the genocide claims. For an expression of such suspicion prior to the signing of the protocols, see the US Congressional letter reprinted in Armenian National Committee of Armenia, “Over 80 House Members Slam Turkey’s Reversal on Proposed ‘Roadmap’”, at http://www.anca.org/press_releases/press_releases.php?prid=1745 [last visited 12 January 2013].
 - 16 The last publicly available statement of the Basic Principles is the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries”, at <http://www.osce.org/item/51152> [last visited 20 January 2013].
 - 17 The text of the constitutional court’s ruling is available at <http://www.concourt.am/english/decisions/common/pdf/850.pdf> [last visited 08 January 2013]; The text of Armenia’s declaration of independence is available at <http://www.gov.am/en/independence/> [last visited 08 January 2013].
 - 18 For a detailed account of the rise and fall of the Protocols, see, David L. Phillips, *Diplomatic History: The Turkey-Armenia Protocols*, New York, Columbia University, Institute for the Study of Human Rights, March 2012; Also see, Alexander Iskandaryan and Sergei Minasyan, “Pragmatic Policies vs. Historical Constraints: Analyzing Armenia-Turkey Relations”, *Caucasus Institute Research Papers*, No. 1 (January 2010); Aybars Görgülü, Alexander Iskandaryan and Sergei Minasyan, “Assessing the Rapprochement Process”, *TESEV Foreign Policy Programme- Turkey-Armenia Dialogue Series*, May 2010; D. Nigar Göksel, “Turkey and Armenia Post-Protocols: Back to Square One?”, *TESEV Foreign Policy Programme*, Istanbul, Turkey, October 2012.
 - 19 “Joint press conference of Ilham Aliyev and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was held”, at <http://en.president.az/articles/6053> [last visited 27 December 2012].
 - 20 See, U.S. Department of State, “The U.S. Relationship With Central Europe Under the Obama Administration”, at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2011/157707.htm> [last visited 12 January 2013]; “The United States and Turkey: A View from the Obama

- Administration”, at www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/138446.htm [last visited 12 January 2013].
- 21 To these justifications might be added two others that could help explain US support for dropping conditionality: responsiveness to domestic lobbying and a possible opportunity to shift the balance of influence in the Caucasus away from Russia and toward the West. These, however, have not been publicly articulated justifications.
 - 22 See, Thomas de Waal, “Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/10/05/armenia-and-turkey-bridging-gap/22p> [last visited 25 January 2013].
 - 23 Information about the project is available at <http://armturkdialogue.net/>. Also see, Sinem Cengiz, “Turkish, Armenian Journalists Want the Border Opened”, *Today’s Zaman*, 3 June 2012; Susanne Güsten, “Using Cheese To Bridge the Turkey-Armenia Gap”, *The New York Times*, 24 October 2012; Göksel, “Turkey and Armenia Post-Protocols: Back to Square One?”. On a separate EU-funded collaborative film endeavour by the UK-based NGO Conciliation Resources, see, Laurence Broers, “Turks, Armenians and Azeris: Mirrors and Memories”, *Journal of Conflict Transformation (Caucasus Edition)*, 1 November 2012, at <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/turks-armenians-and-azeris-mirrors-and-memories> [last visited 12 January 2013].
 - 24 On the “constructive ambiguity” of the Basic Principles, see, Thomas de Waal, “The Karabakh Trap: Dangers and Dilemmas of the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict”, *Conciliation Resources*, December 2008, p. 10.
 - 25 “Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers”, at <http://en.president.az/articles/4105> [last visited 22 December 2012]. In an earlier interview with Russian state television, President Aliyev also said that the determination of final status “could happen in one year, maybe in ten years, or in 100 years, or this could never happen. Time will tell”, *Azertag*, at <http://www.azertag.com/ru/newsarchive?mod=1&date=2009-7-6&id=252&partition=1> [last visited 11 December 2012]. The quotation is cited in translation in, “Nagorno-Karabagh: Getting to a Breakthrough”, *International Crisis Group*, Europe Briefing No. 55 (October 2009), p. 7.
 - 26 See, for instance, the discussion of “interim status” in, Conciliation Resources, “Beyond Exclusion: Rethinking Approaches to Status in the Nagorno Karabakh Peace Process”, Discussion Paper (February 2012).
 - 27 On problematising the issue of “return” and a discussion of restitution and other alternatives, see Gerard Toal, “Return and its Alternatives: International Law, Norms and Practices, and Dilemmas of Ethnocratic Power, Implementation, Justice and Development” and the other contributions in *Forced Displacement in the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict: Return and its Alternatives*, London, Conciliation Resources, August 2011.
 - 28 See, Conciliation Resources, “Beyond Exclusion”, p. 7.