

On the Road to 2015

CAN GENOCIDE COMMEMORATION LEAD TO TURKISH-ARMENIAN RECONCILIATION?

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The one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire will be commemorated in April 2015. Armenians and Turks plan to call special attention to this tragic centenary. The occasion provides a major opportunity for change in Armenian-Turkish relations. Whether that change will be toward rapprochement or a new rise in tension remains to be seen.

Armenia Passes a Psychological Threshold

The one-hundredth anniversary of the genocide is likely to have a strong psychological impact on Armenian society. Crossing the threshold of the tragedy's centennial can reduce the emotional burden and feelings of victimization that exist inside Armenia and within the Armenian diaspora.

Many believe that the anniversary will spark greater international attention and encourage more countries to officially recognize the genocide. Some hold out hope that even Turkey will bring itself to recognize and atone for the crimes committed by its predecessor. For Armenia, recognition of the genocide is not only important as a form of moral compensation and recovery from past victimization. It is also viewed as a means to increase Armenians' sense of security.

At a minimum, the centenary of the genocide has the potential to be a vehicle for renewing efforts at normalizing Armenian-Turkish relations. The previous effort at rapprochement, the "football diplomacy" of 2009, stalled a year later due to domestic opposition in Turkey and Azerbaijan's jealous but successful efforts to stymie the process.

The Turkish-Armenian protocols that were signed in October 2009 but never ratified continue to be key to this rapprochement. Ankara's refusal to ratify the protocols without preconditions, continuing blockade of Armenia, and open support of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict led to heavy criticism among Armenians; some opposition and diaspora groups have called for rejecting the protocols outright, insisting that keeping them alive only blocks efforts at genocide recognition. Officially, however, Yerevan insists that the logic of the protocols remains the foundation of any future progress in Armenian-Turkish relations as they are the result of difficult and painful compromise reached in bilateral negotiations.

In early June 2014, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan unexpectedly invited Turkey's next president to visit Armenia in April 2015 to pay tribute to the victims of the genocide. The invitation was issued partially as a response to then-Prime Minister (and now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's unprecedented condolences to Armenia and the diaspora on the 99th anniversary of the genocide. Certainly, if Erdoğan accepts the invitation, it will be a convenient opportunity to revitalize the Armenian-Turkish process of normalization.

Turkey: Tentative New Steps or the Same Old Façade?

Erdoğan's official condolences in April 2014 were an important step as it was the first time when the highest Turkish official expressed official condolences to Armenia and the Armenian diaspora. True, many Armenians perceived these to be nothing more than an updated and more flexible form of genocide denial, an expression of moral sympathy *without* recognition of historical responsibility. However, at least some Turkish and foreign observers perceived Erdoğan's statement to be a genuine step toward recognition and atonement, if without using the politically-sensitive "G-word." After this, Turkish officials could even conceivably follow the lead of U.S. President Barack Obama, who to avoid the term "genocide" in official speeches ritually uses the Armenian term *Meds Yeghern* ("Great Disaster").

Domestic perceptions of the issue are important in Turkey and can influence Ankara's position. Already, discussing the genocide is no longer taboo within Turkish society, partially thanks to the rapprochement efforts of 2008-2010. Erdoğan and his political team would like to dispose of Turkey's Kemalist legacy, of which both the genocide and its denial are part; in theory, they could find themselves in alliance with those Turkish intellectuals and part of Turkish society that support genocide recognition. However, such a move would provide easy fodder to the opposition (Kemalist) Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Moreover, there are signs that the government is seeking to avoid the issue domestically, for instance organizing a series of pompous events in April 2015 to mark the centennial anniversary of the Battle of Dardanelles.

If sincere, Ankara will have to accept that moving toward normalization of relations with Armenia will not mean the end of Armenian efforts to achieve full international recognition of the genocide. This struggle depends on more than the commemoration of symbolic dates or the dynamics of Armenian-Turkish relations. The genocide and its international recognition are key elements of the political identity of the Armenian diaspora, which became scattered around the world mainly as a result of that tragic event. Diaspora-led efforts to secure Turkey's recognition of (and possible restitution for) the genocide will continue, even if Armenia and Turkey make tangible steps toward normalizing relations and opening their borders.

In the end, the most difficult but critical challenge for those seeking to promote Armenian-Turkish normalization is determining whether Ankara's efforts are fake or sincere, and, more precisely, whether Ankara's approaches in this normalization process are based on pure posturing or are attempts to make small but sincere steps ahead. Contradictory statements on the Armenian-Turkish normalization process by Turkish officials only sustain this uncertainty. Unfortunately, sometimes it seems that even Ankara itself may not know where imitation ends and *realpolitik* begins. Turkish authorities have significant external and internal limitations in moving toward normalization with Armenia. But dragging the process on requires Turkey to spend significant resources and to bear foreign policy costs. According to one account, "Approximately 70 percent of the Turkish Embassy's time in Washington is spent trying to persuade leading Americans to support Turkish positions on the Armenian question."¹

Regional Context and External Actors

Recent developments in the Middle East have altered Turkey's position in the region, increasing Ankara's political and geographical significance to both Washington and Brussels. Accordingly, Turkey has become less vulnerable to the West, especially the EU. Turkey's fading hopes for EU membership in the near future and the EU's preoccupation with its domestic problems and geopolitical challenges on its periphery have reduced Ankara's readiness to listen to the EU. So too have Turkish elites' unconcealed ambitions for a more independent political and economic international role, in part on the basis of a decade of self-sustainable economic development and Turkey's own penetration into European markets (as compared to the EU's permanent economic crisis and serious institutional problems). Moreover, Turkey's importance to the EU from a geopolitical point of view has grown given the Arab Spring, the Syrian and Iraq crises, and the international negotiations with Iran. Ankara's longstanding efforts to become an alternative energy hub for Europe have also reinforced Turkey's significance.

¹ Osman Bengur, "Turkey's Image and the Armenian Question," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (Spring, 2009), 45.

Nonetheless, Turkey's political priorities still lie with the West, and the political perceptions of the Turkish political and economic elites remain "Western-centric." Thus, the positions of the EU and the United States on the Armenian-Turkish process still matter. It is crucial to take into account that the position of the United States and a number of key European states toward Turkey is formulated in part with the input of Armenian, Greek, and even pro-Israel lobbies. These lobbying structures often use the dark pages of Turkey's past, such as the Armenian genocide and its ongoing denial by Turkish authorities, as leverage to pressure the legislative and executive powers in their own countries. Washington, Paris, and Brussels, and recently even Tel Aviv, keep recalling this fact on different levels when problems arise in their dealings with Ankara. For example, in regard to the former Turkish prime minister's toughening remarks about the Israeli political elites, there can be traced a willingness to officially acknowledge the Armenian genocide, which Tel Aviv has been overcoming for different reasons. In such a way, Turkish policy toward Armenia partially represents the continuation of Turkey's relations with the West.

The Ukraine crisis and Armenia's decision in September 2013 not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU but to join the Russia-led Customs Union have also affected the political situation in the South Caucasus. At the same time, Russia's further political and economic isolation by the West can stimulate overtures by Moscow to Turkey, recalling the situation in the early 1920s, when Bolshevik Russia and Kemalist Turkey found common ground.

If, however, the West seeks to revive a containment policy against Russia, it may seek Turkey's cooperation to help deny Russia a position of influence in the South Caucasus. One of the elements of such a strategy could be the restart of the Armenian-Turkish normalization process, as the Turkish blockade and Ankara's support for Azerbaijan reinforce perceptions of insecurity in Armenia and cement Russia's military and political presence there. Accommodating these revived Western efforts may serve Ankara's long-term interests. Although Turkey and Russia are large-scale trade and economic partners, and sometimes even exhibit a common tactical convergence (such as during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war), they remain "competing allies" from a strategic perspective in their common neighborhood.

Conclusion

It is not normal for two neighboring states at peace with each other to have an absence of diplomatic relations and closed borders. The one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide offers an opportunity to resume efforts at normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia. Despite the complexity of the historical past, Armenia declares a readiness to normalize relations with Turkey without preconditions.

It remains costly for Ankara to continuously ignore these overtures, which have the support of the international community. Ankara can choose from several courses of action: accept an invitation to visit Yerevan in April 2015 that might begin a new political process, open the border with Armenia, establish diplomatic relations, and/or ratify the Protocols. Unfortunately, the new Turkish government could also go in another direction. It could create simply the illusion of a new process, something that will only fuel further Armenian mistrust.

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