

Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement Puts Ideologies to the Test

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When Armenian and Turkish Foreign Ministers Nalbandian and Davutoglu signed the protocols on reestablishing diplomatic relations on October 10 in Zurich, one would have thought that that event would mark the beginning of a new era in the troubled, if not tormented, history of the two countries. Instead, the protocols became the hottest new potato being tossed back and forth in the arena of politics in the Caucasus. Opinions, editorials, and in some cases, just plain gripes vied for attention in the pages of the Armenian and Turkish press, not only at home but especially in the Armenian Diaspora.

Notwithstanding the tendentious and — not infrequently — hysterical tone of some commentaries, the issues that they raised do merit serious discussion, discussion which should be conducted rationally and by cool heads: Because what is at stake is not the “position” and related public profile of one or another political faction, but fundamental principles of justice. On the practical plane, the outcome of the ongoing rapprochement process will affect life or death questions facing the people living in Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the neighboring countries, including Iran.

The protocols were contested by communities on both sides. Inside Turkey, the government was accused of making a rotten compromise, perhaps even relinquishing longstanding demands that the Armenians give up their international campaign for recognition of the 1915 genocide. The Azeris were upset by the suggestion that Ankara might have made unacceptable concessions on the status of Nagorno Karabagh and Armenian-occupied Azeri territories. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan had indicated in Baku last spring that Ankara considered Armenian military withdrawal a condition for talks, but that seemed to have disappeared from the new agenda.

On the Armenian side, the rejectionist front was far more populous and more vocal. President Serge Sargsyan embarked on what he dubbed a “listening tour” to hear what Diaspora Armenians in Paris, Los Angeles, New York, Beirut, and beyond, had to say. And he got an earful. In Paris on Oct. 2, he was greeted by angry protestors who shouted “Traitor!” and “Votch! Votch!” [“No! No!”]. Demonstrators in New York a day later carried pickets saying “Turkey is Guilty! Turkey Must Pay!” referring to the 1915 genocide. Following his address to leaders of the Armenian groups assembled there, a hefty question-and-answer session went on for hours, only on condition it be kept off the record. On Oct. 4, over 12,000 Armenian Americans turned out in Los Angeles, where he met with organization representatives. They carried signs saying “Don’t Betray the Armenian people!” and “Stop Turkish-Armenian protocols.” In Beirut it was the same story.

The Diaspora Armenians were enraged by two points; first, that the protocols suggested that

long-standing Armenian demands for recognition of the 1915 genocide might be diluted or withdrawn; and, secondly, that the agreement to open “existing borders’ would be tantamount to recognition of borders whose historical legitimacy is hotly disputed. As Raffi Hovannisian, the first foreign minister of independent Armenia, wrote in www.ArmeniaNow.com on Sept. 25, the only border agreed to by a sovereign Armenia and Turkey was the one sanctioned under Woodrow Wilson at the close of World War I. That border was redefined (in the Treaty of Kars and Moscow Treaty) following the invasions of Armenia by the Kemalists and Bolsheviks, who divided up Armenian territory, but those treaties have no legal status.

In an attempt to quell the protest, President Sargsyan issued a statement to all Armenians on October 10, (http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/news/inthenews/naxagh_eng_pdf) and addressed the concerns raised by the Diaspora regarding borders. He said he insisted that “The issue of the existing border between Armenia and Turkey is to be resolved through prevailing norms of the international law. The Protocols do not go beyond that.” Furthermore, that “These relations cannot and do not relate to the resolution of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict, which is an independent and separate process...” He ended by saying Armenia was undertaking no unilateral commitments in signing the Protocols.

As for the genocide, one leading condition posed by Diaspora Armenians was that the Turks had to first recognize the 1915 events before any agreement on redefining relations could be considered. Instead, the protocols foresee a “dialogue on the historical dimension... including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives...” as well as the constitution of an “intergovernmental bilateral commission” to implement this task.

This clause on the “historical dimension” was rightly perceived as an outrageous insult to all those historians, Armenian and not, who have documented the events over the intervening decades. The Zoryan Institute, the foremost center for genocide studies, correctly argued that any such commission “in effect dismisses all of the extensive research that has already been conducted for decades and implies that none of it was impartial or scientific.” The Zoryan Institute stressed that particularly non-Armenian scholars felt offended, and thought their work was being politicized. (1)

In his October 10 statement, President Sargsyan attempted to address these concerns, by stating: “No relations with Turkey can question the reality of the patricide and the genocide perpetrated against the Armenian nation. It is a known fact and it should be recognized and condemned by the whole progressive humanity.” He added” “The relevant sub-commission to be established under the intergovernmental commission, is not a commission of historians.”

Now, this latter specification that it would not be a “commission of historians” was most unsettling, since it is only competent historians who can set the record straight. Reports floated in the press later to the effect that, from the Armenian side, only national historians would participate in the commission, to the exclusion of those in the Diaspora, should be further cause for concern: if the work of the Diaspora historians were to be excluded, there could be no hope for impartial conclusions. (After all, one should not forget, that there would be no Diaspora, had there not been a genocide.)

The fact of the Armenian genocide has been established, not only by meticulously documented historical research by (Diaspora Armenian) scholars like Dr. Vahakn N. Dadrian and Richard G. Hovannissian, as well as Christopher J. Walker and Taner Ackam, — to name

but a few — but also through the first-hand accounts rendered by victims and survivors of the genocide, ordinary people, like my mother and father, who were both orphaned by the massacres in Arabkir. Massive further eye-witness documentation is provided by non-Armenian sources, like the valiant Dr. Johannes Lepsius, a German doctor and humanitarian who, in response to the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s, travelled to Turkey and set up his Deutsch-Orient Mission. Lepsius reported on his face-to-face encounter with War Minister Enver Pasha in 1915, who told him point blank that the Young Turks' policy was to eliminate the Armenians. (2) Jakob Keunzler, a Swiss doctor and humanitarian, joined Lepsius after the 1915 massacres, and set down his eye-witness accounts of the deportations and murders from Urfa. The American Ambassador to the Sublime Porte at the time, Henry Morgenthau, recounted in his book, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, not only what he witnessed as atrocities, but what he was told personally by Young Turk leaders regarding their anti-Armenian policy.

In addition, as the Zoryan Institute notes, there is "incontestable documentation" of the genocide in the national archives of the U.S., Great Britain, and France, as well as Turkey and Germany and Austria, who were allies in the war. On the latter, Prof. Dadrian's "Documentation of the Armenian Genocide in German and Austrian Sources" is exhaustive.(3)

So there is no lack of historical material to establish that genocide occurred and that it occurred as a consequence of a conscious policy on the part of a specific political force, namely, the Young Turk government of Enver Pasha, Djemel Pasha, and Talaat Pasha, which took power in the Ottoman Empire in 1908 and ruled as a "triumvirate" from 1914 until their defeat in the First World War. Most important in confirming responsibility of that Young Turk government for the genocide was a trial held in Ottoman Turkey in 1919, which put all the Young Turk leadership on the bench (in absentia) and found them all guilty of war crimes, specifically of plotting to annihilate the Armenian people. The Zoryan Institute, citing these historical records as yet further proof, emphasizes that the documents, the prosecutors, the judges, and most witnesses were all Turks. Dr. Dadrian's own detailed examination of the Turkish court records shows that those charged and indicted included the "top echelons of the Ottoman government," cabinet ministers, Young Turk party leaders, central committee members, and the Special Operations, the hit squads that carried out the deportations and murders. Dr. Dadrian highlights two aspects: that they were tried under Turkish law, the Ottoman penal code, not international law; and, that the evidentiary material proved incontrovertibly both "genocidal intent" and "genocidal outcome."(4)

There can be no doubt what the historical record is. The problem - the political problem - is that the Turks refuse to acknowledge this. And to demand, as many Armenians in the Diaspora do, that Turkey first recognize the genocide is to engage in a fruitless Catch-22 mechanism. It is not going to happen.

Why?

The Zoryan Institute is one of the few voices to address the crux of this issue, to wit, that if Turkey were to acknowledge the genocide against the Armenians, it would be violating its own sovereign law. In fact, according to Article 301 of the Turkish penal code (TPC), any criticism of "Turkishness" is punishable. Point 1 states: "A person who publicly denigrates Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, shall be sentenced a penalty of imprisonment for a term of six months to three years."(5) Under this clause

numerous journalists and writers have been hauled into court and condemned, among them illustrious names such as Orhan Pamuk and the unforgettable Hrant Dink. In 2008, under pressure from the European Union, which Turkey seeks to join, the wording was altered, and in place of “Turkishness,” the phrase “Turkish nation” was introduced; instead of “the Republic,” “the State of the Turkish Republic” was inserted. That notwithstanding, no substantial change occurred; in the case of Hrant Dink, the Turkish Supreme Court of Appeals argued that “Turkishness” and the “Turkish nation” were virtually interchangeable.(6)

In face of this dilemma, the Zoryan Institute document suggests that, if any progress on the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation agenda is to be achieved, either the protocols must be revised regarding the “historical dimension,” or Article 301 in the TPC must be modified.

Formally speaking, that would appear to deal with the problem. But it is not only a formal point: It is not only that legal constraints would appear to prevent any Turkish government from acknowledging the historical record. The matter implicitly addressed here goes much deeper. The question is: what is the concept of “Turkishness” all about?

Turkishness, Turkism, and Pan-Turkism

Here, I realize I am treading on a political and psychological minefield, one which could blow up in my face if I make one false step — all the more reason to walk gingerly and with caution.

“Turkishness” is the stuff of which “Turkism” and “Pan-Turkism” were made. These are concepts that go back to the early years of the 20th century, in the works of one Ziya Goekalp (1876-1924), the ideologue of the fiercely nationalistic movement of the Young Turks. Goekalp’s ideas, in turn, had their origin in the geopolitical fantasies of a Hungarian Jew named Armínus (Hermann) Vámbéry, who worked closely with the British Foreign Office from 1899-1911. Vámbéry believed that the Turkish people, all those speaking a Turkic language, constituted a Turkish “race.” More broadly, Vámbéry conceived of “Pan-Turanism,” comprising all those peoples inhabiting the region stretching from Persia and Turkey to the borders of China, a vast expanse he designated as “Turkestan.” Vámbéry distinguished very clearly between the true “Turanians,” who were Turks, and the “pseudo-Turanians” or “Osmanians,” members of the Ottoman Empire. The latter were “a mongrel people par excellence,” in his view, because they included Slavs, Armenians, Greeks, and the like.(7)

Goekalp was a member of the Young Turks’ Central Committee until 1918 and later supported Atatürk. He shaped Vámbéry’s vision into a political program, calling for the “Turkification” of the Ottoman Empire, and the constitution of “Turan,” a geopolitical entity with a 100 million population. “All the Turks are one army” was one of his many famous slogans. (8). Goekalp posited “Turkism” as the means to solve the problem he saw in the contradictory co-existence among Turks of a religious culture (uemmet) and the Westernized culture (Tanzimat). Arguing that both ignored what he called the national culture, he hailed “Turkism” as the way out, the “method of right feeling and right thinking for the Turks.”(9) Foremost in this task of reviving the national culture was the purification of the Turkish language, which, for Goekalp, must be purged of Arabic and Persian words. Instead of Ottoman Turkish, the national language should be based on “the Turkish which is the basis of the folk literature” and must “accept the pronunciation of the people—especially of the women of Istanbul.”(10) Alongside purification of the language,

morality also had to be revived: patriotic morality, professional, family, civic, and personal morality, all infused with fervent nationalism.

It was this ultra-nationalistic, chauvinistic ideology of “Turkism” and “Pan-Turkism” that fuelled the wartime Young Turk government’s anti-Armenian policy. Some years after the 1919 trials, which indicted and condemned the Young Turk leadership for war crimes against the Armenians, the issue of “Turkism” and “Turkishness” returned to center stage. This was following Mustafa Kemal’s successful struggle to salvage Turkey as a nation. Goekalp wrote: “Under the leadership and direction of our great Mustafa Kemal, the Society for the Protection of Rights, from which the People’s Party was later born, delivered our country from invasion and, at the same time, called our state, nation, and language by their real names and delivered our political life from the last traces of absolutism and cosmopolitanism”(11). Article 301 of the penal code evolved as a logical consequence of this process. It first appeared as Article 159 in 1926, and went through several revisions and amendments, in 1936, 1938, 1946, 1961, 2002, then, as Article 301, in 2005 and 2008. (12) Despite the linguistic changes, the substance has remained; thus any mention of the Armenian genocide (or any criticism of Ataturk) is forbidden by law.

This is not a matter of legal niceties or formulations. There is something fundamentally problematic with the concept of “Turkishness,” and this takes us to the heart of the matter.

“Turkishness” should not be confused with a healthy patriotic Turkish identity, founded on the historical cultural achievements of those belonging to the Turkic language culture, over hundreds of years, through the Ottoman Empire into the era of modern Turkey. This is a rich culture, with achievements in architecture, science, music, painting, and a 700-year-old literary tradition, reaching back to Yunus Emre in the 13th century, and continuing through the works of Sueleyman Celebi, Barden, Nejati, Pir Sultan Abdal, Baki, and others, up to today’s authors like novelist Orhan Pamuk, or the hundreds of other modern writers who presented their works in 2008 at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Turkey was the guest of honor. Modern Turkey is a key industrial nation in the region, whose ambitious infrastructure projects, especially in the crucial area of water management, have transformed the economic landscape. Politically, it has emerged over recent years as a major regional factor, oriented toward mediation of regional crises, whether involving Iraq and Syria, Iran, or Palestinian factions.

But “Turkism” or “Turkishness” implies something quite different: it implies the existence of a special quality, almost a mystical essence, which only those calling themselves Turks may possess. In the fantasies of Vámbéry and Goekalp, it implied the right to establish a virtual empire (“Turkestan”) composed of all those lands with any Turkic language tradition. As in all such imperial notions, the implication is that this “ism” is not only different and separate from all other “isms,” but also in conflict with them. As Turkish scholars have documented, the notion of “Turkishness,” whether in the Pan-Turkist or the Kemalist versions, “scrutinized very similar racist and nationalist references in their imaginations of Turkish identity as racially superior.”(13).

Addressing this issue today is of special importance, first, because of its direct relevance to sincere efforts to overcome the Turkish-Armenian adversary relationship. The question that should be raised in the context of the ban on recognition of the Armenian genocide, as codified in Article 301, is the following: Was it the “Turkish nation” which was responsible for the 1915 genocide? If so, then the principle of “collective guilt,” an odious and ahistorical concept, should be applied in all comparable cases, including the Nazi holocaust against the

Jews or the 1948 Zionists' expulsion of the Palestinians. Or, was it, as the legal records of the Turks themselves document in the 1919 trials, a discreet, identifiable collection of political forces, individuals and groups — albeit with their international backers — who were responsible? If so, their condemnation should be reaffirmed in full acknowledgement of their crimes. The aberrant ideology of “Turkishness” or “Turkism” was, to be sure, the ideological glue that held the murderous elements together. But can or should that ideology be misconstrued today as the *raison d’être* of the modern nation of Turkey?

Turkey’s National Identity

This is a leading item on the agenda of political and intellectual leaders in Turkey today. It deserves serious consideration – and not because the European Union demands this or that preferred formulation in a legal code, but because it is a fundamental issue of identity for the nation and its people. A broad-based debate has been rife for years in Turkey as to the nation’s essential identity: is it a European country, as the pro-EU faction argues? Or, is it rather oriented to Eurasia? Is it the bridge between Europe and Asia? If so, what are the implications for its economic, cultural, and foreign policy? In a certain sense, the answer to all three questions is “yes.” And that should provide an impetus to creative thinking about Turkey’s potential contributions.

Recent developments in the region especially since the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict, have redefined the roles of certain nations, among them Armenia, which, though small, occupies a key geopolitical position. It offers itself automatically as an alternative to Georgia as a transit land for pipelines from the Caspian Sea region westward to Europe. Raffi Hovannisian is not the only one to complain that, indeed, part of Ankara’s strategic calculations regarding rapprochement with Armenia may include pipeline plans; both the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan and the Nabucco pipeline projects cross this territory. Should such projects be therefore condemned as part of an assumed Turkish bid for regional hegemony? Should they be characterized as “the fruits of genocide” whose benefits Armenia will never enjoy? Or would it be conceivable for Armenia, after having reestablished normal relations with its neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan, on the basis of fair negotiations, to enter into meaningful economic, infrastructure, and trade agreements that will only benefit all involved? One of the most promising ideas in the protocols deals precisely with the need to expand, improve, and maximize the use of transport, communications, and energy infrastructure between Turkey and Armenia – implicitly also with other neighbors. Anyone who has had a glimpse of the dire economic-social reality of Armenia today could only rejoice at the prospect of opening borders and reintegrating the country into the regional context.

The Zoryan Institute is right in suggesting that practical, pragmatic steps be taken, to reopen borders, reestablish diplomatic relations, and so forth, in order to alleviate the unquestioned duress of the Armenian population at home – and that, without preconditions. Then, in the meantime, preparations might be made to expand examination of the so-called “historical dimension.” Since the case has already been settled by competent historians that the genocide did occur, would it hurt if unpublished documents in the Ottoman and other archives were made available to scholarly examination? Fears on the part of some Armenian intellectuals, that such new documentation would undermine their position, might be vastly exaggerated. Given the massive documentation on the public record, there is nothing in any archive anywhere in the world which could nullify the charge of genocide. No one should have any fear of the truth.

Once the incontrovertible fact of the genocide is finally established and acknowledged by all sides — and it must be, even after all the material is placed on the table — then other political considerations will beg for attention. From the Diaspora Armenians, the cry has been raised – a cry that President Sargsyan heard in the U.S. — that Turkey was guilty and Turkey must pay. But pay what? Some say, citing the arrangements made between Israel and post-war Germany, that financial reparations must be made for confiscated territories, loss of life, and livelihood. More extremist voices demand territorial concessions, essentially, that Turkey cede large areas in the east to Armenia. (14)

Aside from such material considerations, there is a moral question: if Turkey were to acknowledge that, yes, a specific Turkish political formation in power at the time had been responsible for the genocide, what should the Armenian reaction be? With all due respect for those who lost everything (among them my parents), I can only plead for a response on the highest moral plane. Armenians are rightly proud of the fact that their nation was the first to officially adopt Christianity as its state religion. That awesome heritage brings with it a tremendous responsibility. The historic revolution which Christianity brought to humanity was the message of love, which superceded the notion of retributive justice; Christianity introduced a higher notion of forgiveness. In the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which ended centuries of religious strife in Europe, the word was to “forgive and forget”: acknowledge all atrocities on whatever side, then forgive their perpetrators, and forget the events, in the interest of forging a new order of peace in which each side would seek to promote the interest of the other.

Viewed from this moral high ground, the notion that “Turkey is guilty” and “Turkey must pay” somehow rings false. While visiting Yerevan last year, as part of a visiting delegation, I had the opportunity to hear His Holiness Catholicos Karekin II respond to questions from Diaspora Armenians. Asked about the importance of achieving recognition of the genocide, he said he deemed it crucial, as a way of rendering justice to the victims, not only of that genocide but of all other mass murders. He added, “We do not preach hatred or bitterness, only justice.”

That is the issue: justice. Whatever practical accommodations may be negotiated – and that is a matter for the governments in question to deal with –, there can be no hope for a new relationship between the former adversaries to come into being, unless a fundamental moral and emotional shift occurs in the minds and hearts of individual Armenians and Turks. As I argue in my new book dealing with this adversary relationship, that is the challenge that the process initiated by the signing of the protocols has put on the table.(15)

Notes

1. <http://www.zoryaninstitute.org>, letter to President Serge Sargsyan, September 30, 2009.
2. The account of this meeting by Lepsius was incorporated in the novel by Jewish Austrian writer Franz Werfel, in his famous *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*.
3. Vahakn N. Dadrian, “Documentation of the Armenian Genocide in German and Austrian Sources,” H.F. Guggenheim Foundation Research Project, Reprinted from *The Widening Circle of Genocide, Genocide: A Critical Biographic Review, Volume 3*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1994.
4. Vahakn N. Dadrian, “A Textual Analysis of the Key Indictment of the Turkish Military Tribunal Investigating the Armenian Genocide,” *Armenian Review*, Spring 1991, pp. 1-36.
5. Buelent Algan, “The Brand New Version of Article 301 of Turkish Penal Code and the

Future of Freedom of Expression Cases in Turkey,"German Law Journal, Vol. 09, No. 12, <http://www.germanlawjournal.com/article.php?id=1066>.

6. Ibid., p. 2243.

7. Vámbéry, Der Islam im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Eine culturgeschichtliche Studie vom Hermann Vámbéry, F.A. Brockhaus, Leipzig, 1875, p. 18 ff..

8. Jacob B. Landau, Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation, Indiana University Press, Bloomigndale and Indianapolis, 1995, p. 30, 37.

9. Goekalp, Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays of Ziya Goekalp, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London,1959, p. 287.

10. Ibid., pp. 290-298.

11. Ibid., pp. 305-306.

12. Algan, op. cit., pp. 2238 ff.

13. Gueldeniz Kibris, Creating Turkishness: An Examination of Turkish Nationalism Through Goek-Boerue, Mssters thesis, Sabanci University, 2005, p. 5.

14. If that demand were ever to be met, as one Armenian intellectual explained to me, it would be no solution, but the creation of new problems. If Armenia were to receive areas of eastern Anatolia from Turkey, it would find itself in a situation similar to that facing the Israelis who have occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank: they have their settlements and all, but are a minority in what they would like to consider their own country.

15. "Through the Wall of Fire - Armenia - Iraq - Palestine: From Wrath to Reconciliation," edition fischer, ISBN 978-3-89950-498-9, September 2009

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