

“Football Diplomacy”: Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement

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Before the end of the year, if all goes according to plan, Armenia and Turkey, after having reestablished normal diplomatic relations, will reopen their common border. This is not only good news for the two parties, but could set a precedent for dealing with similar log-jammed situations in other parts of the world. But, if the formal steps toward mutual recognition are to lead to reconciliation, it will require more than a settlement of outstanding political and territorial disputes. Although the borders were closed following the 1988-1994 Armenian military campaign to liberate Nagorno-Karabagh, the Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan, the enmity has more remote origins and carries more highly charged emotional issues. What has poisoned relations between the two neighbors for almost a century is a deep-rooted hatred, engendered by the 1915 genocide of Armenians, an event the Armenians demand be recognized and which the Turks deny ever occurred. Unless the historical truth is uncovered and acknowledged, there can be no perspective for transforming an adversary relationship into coexistence, much less true peace.

This does not apply only to the Armenian-Turkish dossier. The most immediate comparable case is the Arab-Israeli conflict, whose roots lie in the 1948 Zionist expulsion of the Palestinians, an event the victims lament as the Nakba (Catastrophe) and the Israelis devoutly swear never happened. As I argue in an upcoming book, true reconciliation is possible, but only as the result of a fundamental shift in outlook on both sides, a virtual revolution in thinking, which paves the way for extraordinary actions.(1)

The Formalities

On August 31, the Swiss Federal department of Foreign Affairs, together with the Foreign Ministries of Turkey and Armenia, issued a press release announcing agreement to initiate “internal political consultations” on two protocols, mediated by Switzerland, for the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of relations between the two republics. Following a six-week discussion process in each country, the protocols are to be signed and then ratified by the respective Parliaments.

According to the texts carried on the Armenian Foreign Ministry’s website (www.armeniaforeignministry.com), the two, “desiring to establish good neighbourly relations and to develop bilateral cooperation in the political, economic, cultural and other fields for the benefit of their peoples,” and stressing the importance of mutual “trust and confidence” for “strengthening of peace, security and stability of the whole region,” announce their intention to open their common border and to establish normal diplomatic relations. Following ratification, the protocol is to enter into effect, and, two months later, the border should be opened. In addition they are to “conduct regular political

consultations” at the foreign ministry level, “make the best possible use of existing transport, communications and energy infrastructure and networks” between the two, and take other measures to enhance cooperation in multiple fields. A timetable is provided to chart out when the agreed upon steps will be taken, and when an intergovernmental commissions with sub-commissions will commence their work.

Specifically regarding the genocide issue, the second protocol says the two will “implement a dialogue on the historical dimension with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations, including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations.” In the timetable, a sub-commission charged with this task is to convene a month after the first meeting of the intergovernmental commission, and “Armenian, Turkish as well as Swiss and other international experts shall take part.”

This announcement is the latest step in the “football diplomacy” launched by Turkish President Abdallah Gul and his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan when Gul attended a World Cup 2010 qualifying match in Yerevan on September 6, 2008. (2) (Sarkisian is due to reciprocate by attending the next game in Bursa on October 14 this year.) In addition to the Swiss, who have been mediating contacts for months toward this “road map” — first declared on April 14, 2009 — the U.S. has also been involved. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had a half-hour telephone discussion with Secretary of State Clinton on the eve of the announcement. France was reportedly also supportive; Russia’s ITAR-TASS put out a release on the event, and the EU welcomed it.

But in Ankara and Yerevan, reactions were mixed. Among the Armenian opposition parties, there is fear that concessions may have been made to Turkey on the issue of Nagorno-Karabagh, i.e. that Armenian would withdraw. Turks and Azeris harbor similar fears, but in the other direction. Azerbaijan’s position is that no borders should be opened until the Nagorno-Karabagh issue has been settled. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan appeared to endorse this approach in remarks made on May 14 to the Azeri parliament, that the border opening would be contingent on the “full liberation of the Azerbaijani occupied territories.” On the other hand, Sargsyan’s remarks to BBC, that Turkish recognition of the 1915 genocide was not a precondition for establishing relations, have fuelled suspicion in Armenia that concessions may be being made on this issue.

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/video_and_audio/8231637.stm)

Notwithstanding such caveats, fears, and hesitation, the fact is, the football diplomacy has taken a further step forward. Whether or not it will succeed will depend on purely subjective factors of political will.

The Historical Record

There can be no doubt in my mind that what was perpetrated against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1916 was genocide. Both my parents, who came from villages near Arabkir in eastern Anatolia, were orphaned. Their parents and family members were taken out in groups of men, women, and children, and shot, while others were killed in the course of deportations. First-hand reports by victims, like my parents, have contributed to compiling the oral history of the developments. Those who doubt the versions of such victims can peruse the accounts of unbiased eye-witnesses, like German pastor and humanitarian Johannes Lepsius, who issued the first documented account of the genocide in 1916, in his Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey. Lepsius, who had

responded to the Hamidian massacres of Armenians in the 1890s by establishing a Deutsch-Orient Mission in Urfa, learned back in Germany of the new massacres by the Young Turks, and travelled to Constantinople in 1915, in hopes of going farther inland to help those Armenians threatened. He was prevented from doing this by Interior Minister Mehmed Talaat, and had to content himself with collecting first-hand accounts of the massacres from Armenian refugees and foreign missionaries who arrived in the capital. Lepsius's account of the genocide was the first systematic work, but not the only one; Jakob Kuenzler, a Swiss doctor and humanitarian who went to work with Lepsius in Urfa, chronicled his experiences. Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Sublime Porte (1913-1916), documented the massacres and cited personal discussions with Young Turk leaders who declared that they were intent on eliminating the Armenians.(3)

In the course of World War I, culminating in 1915-1916, the Turks succeeded in killing up to 1.5 million Armenians, either by executions or deportations. But it was not "the Turks" who were responsible. In fact, thousands of Armenian orphans, like my parents, were saved by Turkish families who intervened at the risk of their lives. So, it was not the "Turkish people" who were responsible. It was a very specific political-military organization.

The genocide was carried out on three levels. On the ground level were the Special Operations, groups of gangsters, brigands, freed prisoners, and Kurds, who had been given orders to round up and kill Armenians. On the next level was the Executive Committee of Three, which the Young Turk leadership had put together, to map out, schedule, plan, and organize deportations. On the top level was the Committee of Union and Progress (Young Turk) leadership, made up of the triumvirate that emerged in 1913 coup: Talaat Pasha, Interior Minister, Enver Pasha, Minister of War, and Djemel Pasha, Military Governor of Constantinople and Minister of the Navy.

It was this apparatus that was politically and materially responsible for the genocide of 1915. By 1911, the CUP had abandoned earlier ideological commitments to pan-Islamism in favor of pan-Turkism, the idea that all peoples of Turkic languages belonged together in an entity which should become an entity stretching across Eurasia. This pan-Turkic ideology fuelled the military thrust against the Armenians.

After the capitulation of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Young Turk leaders conveniently managed to flee and seek refuge abroad. Thus, in 1919, when, under international pressure, a trial was opened in Turkey to try the former CUP leaders for organizing the massacre and destruction of the Armenians, the leading defendants had found refuge abroad. They were tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. But, since they had managed to escape, they could not be executed; instead, under an informal agreement among the Great Powers (England and Russia), information about the whereabouts of the Young Turk fugitives was made available to Armenian terrorists, who proceeded to gun them down one by one. Those who survived this round of executions were inculpated later for having plotted against the founder of the Turkish Republic, Ataturk, and were duly executed. Thus, all the material perpetrators and leading witnesses of the genocide were allowed to flee and/or were killed. Whatever they knew about the influence of foreign powers in the genocide went with them to the grave.

Although the 1919 trials attest to the fact that specific Young Turk leaders were responsible - and not "the Turks"-, the role of outside players was not dealt with there. Yet, the tragedy cannot be viewed as a "Turkish" phenomenon. It was, after all, the British who nurtured the

Young Turks and their Masonic and Zionists colleagues in Saloniki prior to the 1908 seizure of power; it was the British who supported the Young Turks' early pan-Islamist and pan-Turkic delusions, as a battering ram against the Russian empire. Most important, it was Britain which manipulated events leading into World War I, and, quickly abandoning the pan-Islamic/Turkic thrust, mounted an Arab rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, intent on breaking it up and reorganizing it into puppet states, according to the 1916 Sykes-Picot treaty with imperial co-partner France.

Britain's strategic enemy was Germany, which had developed far-reaching economic and military cooperation with the Ottoman Empire. Among the joint economic projects of strategic import was the ambitious Berlin-Baghdad railway, which London viewed as a threat to its position in the region. More fundamentally, Britain sought to prevent any continental partnership between economic powerhouse Germany and Russia. War against Germany and its Ottoman ally was the means to this end.

The Young Turks seized upon the outbreak of war to implement their "final solution" to the Armenian question, arguing that the Armenians were a "fifth column" of the Russians and had to be deported. Thus, the genocide was an integral part of the tragedy known as World War I, and those ultimately responsible were the Great Powers who unleashed the conflict. The Germans knew that the "fifth column" story was a lie, but they were allied with the Young Turks. That the Russians were not passionate about safeguarding Armenian national interests became clear in the aftermath of the war, when the Soviet Union quietly swallowed up the short-lived Armenian republic.

Facing the Truth

If the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey is to yield anything more than formal protocols, this historical record has to be dealt with. A fitting precedent for such a process can be found in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended decades of religious conflict in Europe. The two extraordinary concepts on which that peace agreement rested were that, whatever atrocities had occurred on either side, they must be forgiven and forgotten; and that, to secure peace, each side must act in the interest and for the benefit of the other.

Translating this into the current context means that the Turkish side must concede that the genocide occurred; it is only after a historical fact has been acknowledged that the atrocities and their perpetrators can be forgiven, and forgotten. In this process it is crucial that the identity of those materially responsible be nailed down. Rejecting any and every misplaced notion of "collective guilt," it must be underlined that it was a clearly identifiable group of political actors (the 1915 Young Turk leadership) and their created instruments (the Executive Committee of Three and the Special Operations) who were responsible. At the same time, one has to identify the higher levels of responsibility, to name the names of the geopolitical puppet masters in the Great Powers who were pulling the strings of the actors moving about on the stage they had set up. Such action is recommended not only to get the historical record straight, but also to inoculate the regional players against being used again as pawns in a geopolitical game.

Geostrategic Realities Today

Here it is useful to reflect on why the Turkish government has made its advances to Armenia. Although feelers had been put out earlier towards renewed contact between Ankara and Yerevan, the turning point came in the wake of the 2008 Georgian attack on

South Ossetia and the prompt Russian military response. That brief war, whose outcome should have come as no surprise to anyone, redefined regional relations; Georgia's role as a stable partner and transit land for oil and other commodities suddenly acquired a giant question mark, and adjacent Armenia emerged as a possible alternative route. It was then that Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan announced his courageous initiative for a Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform, which would include Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. He stated bluntly that it was a question of "prevent[ing] regional tension from turning into global turmoil."

Now, as the new protocols between Ankara and Yerevan underline, the two are taking new steps in the interest of the same key concepts, "regional security" and "stability." Anyone skeptical of Turkey's concerns in this respect should consult a map. Turkey borders on Armenia and also on Georgia, whose government commemorated the first anniversary of the war with Russia with anything but reconciliatory tones. On the contrary, both sides hinted at the possibility of renewed strife. Then, at the beginning of September, it became known that Georgia had held several Turkish freight ships which wanted to unload in ports of Abkhazia, the autonomous republic which declared independence last year, recognized by Russia.

Turkey also shares a border with Syria and Iraq, two countries which have very recently squared off against each other after the Baghdad government accused Damascus of having harbored terrorists responsible for deadly attacks in August. The two governments broke off diplomatic relations, and the Turks quickly moved to mediate. Then there is the border to Iran, a country which, since the June presidential elections, has been undergoing internal political turmoil not seen since the 1979 revolution. Across the Black Sea, Turkey has its border to Russia. So the country is not exactly an island in a sea of tranquility.

The primary aim of the Turkish government in this setting is precisely to take steps, whatever they may be, to pursue security and stability for the region.

The Subjective Factor

It will not be easy for the Armenian and Turkish governments to put a century-old conflict to rest. On the Turkish side, the ideological baggage is weighty, and the issue has come to be a litmus test of national identity. The Turkish Penal Code has a clause, article 301, which makes it illegal to say that there was genocide against the Armenians in 1915. Numerous Turkish intellectuals and human rights activists have challenged this clause, many paid with prison sentences, and others with death. Hrant Dink, and Armenian editor of the bilingual *Agos*, spoke out about the genocide in the context of his plea for reconciliation. He was gunned down by an extremist on January 19, 2007. In a development which no one could have or did forecast, Hrant Dink's funeral turned into a mass phenomenon, and an outpouring of grief and solidarity on the part of hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens, who carried hand signs saying "We are all Hrant," "We are all Armenians." This gives a sense of how polarized the situation is.

That said, the issue continues to create tension and polemics. In Germany, a case has arisen regarding a text book for school children which the Brandenburg state school authorities had authorized. In the text, several cases of genocide in the 20th century are presented: the genocide of Armenians in 1915, the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, state crimes of violence by Stalin's USSR, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, and so forth. The Turkish diplomatic community in Germany immediately reacted, and demanded the text be withdrawn. A similar case had

emerged 3 years earlier, and the Turkish community had won.(4)

A similar outbreak of hysteria occurred recently in Israel, where authorities contested the use of a school-text for Palestinian children, which reported on the “Nakba” (catastrophe), the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their land.

Psychoanalysts consider such phenomena as clinical expressions of denial, which arise from an existential fear. The reason why a modern-day Turk or Israeli finds it difficult to acknowledge the historical record has direct bearing on personal and national identity. If an Israeli says yes, we drove the Palestinians out, killing many and stealing their land, then the right to existence of the Israeli state is put in question, and the same holds for Turks who deny the genocide, even though the modern Turkish republic was not rooted in that event.

How to break through this psychological bind?

In my book, I have tried to suggest an approach. Its title, *Through the Wall of Fire*, is taken from an episode in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, actually its turning point. At the end of Purgatory, the pilgrim Dante is confronted with a Wall of Fire which he is told he must pass through in order to enter Paradise. Paralyzed by fear and the vivid memories of those he had seen in Hell tormented by fire, he is unable to move. It is only when his guide Virgil tells him that his beloved Beatrice is on the other side of the Wall of Fire that he is able to act. Abandoning his obsession with himself to shift his focus to the Other, and willfully casting aside all irrational emotions that had governed him earlier—wrath, hatred, fear, and desire for revenge,—Dante succeeds in entering the flames and crossing into a new, morally superior realm. There in Paradise he joins with political leaders, intellectuals, religious leaders, and others to build a society founded on justice, a reflection of the City of God.

The episode is a powerful metaphor for the challenge posed to the leaders of Armenia and Turkey today: can they, through a determined act of personal and political will, cast off the heritage of a century of enmity and mistrust, and, dealing rationally with the historical past, enter a new universe of political discourse?

Notes

1. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, *Through the Wall of Fire – Armenia – Iraq – Palestine – From Wrath to Reconciliation*, R.G. Fischer, Frankfurt, 2009.

2. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, *Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation is Possible—and Necessary!* www.globalresearch.ca, September 5, 2008.

3. Jakob Kuenzler, *In the Land of Blood and Tears: Experiences in Mesopotamia During the World War (1914-1918)*, Armenian Cultural Foundation, Arlington, Massachusetts, 2007. Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918.

4. There is also the case of the Lepsius house in Potsdam. It has only been after years of opposition by the Turkish Community in Germany that the Lepsius society has just recently received the go-ahead from the German government to establish a research center, meeting place, and memorial in the home of the humanitarian Johannes Lepsius.

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