

A NEW ERA IN TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS

It came as no surprise to hear Turkish and Armenian policymakers announce that they are launching final talks to establish diplomatic relations. This is the third move towards normalisation – after football diplomacy and the April 2009 road map – which has resulted from Swiss-mediated talks behind the scenes. The new framework proposes the signature of two protocols on the establishment of diplomatic ties and the development of bilateral relations. These protocols should be ratified by the parliaments of both states, a challenging task which requires intensive work at domestic level in the two countries. No matter what problems the future holds for Turkish-Armenian relations, the two countries have never been so close to normalisation in the past fifteen years. Both sides have declared their shared aspiration of having a good neighbourly approach towards each other. The political will to normalise the relations in both countries *vis-à-vis* serious domestic and international challenges could be explained by the actual motives for normalisation in both countries.

Turkey has solid and well-grounded foreign policy motives for the normalisation of its relations with Armenia. Turkey's new policy to minimise problems with its neighbouring countries has been successful, with the exception of Armenia. Turkey is engaged in mediation and facilitation activities in the Middle East and follows an active policy in the surrounding regions. The Russia-Georgia conflict, the stalemate in Azerbaijan-Armenian relations, the emergence of a Cold-War style West-Russia rivalry, and the formation of regional groupings around this binary opposition are immediate sources of concern. These can lead to further armed conflicts and constitute threats to the stability and security of the region. Furthermore, the



Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, left, is welcomed by his Turkish counterpart Ali Babacan upon he arrival for their meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, Monday, 24 November 2008.

problems of ethnic conflicts and separatism are not yet fully under control. In these circumstances, Turkish foreign policymakers wish to assume a constructive role for Turkey in inter- and intra-state conflicts of the Caucasus.

One requirement for Ankara in preparing the ground for a Stability and Cooperation Platform is to normalise Turkey's relations with Armenia. Turkey would be open to criticism for keeping its borders with Armenia sealed, while at the same time initiating a regional peace initiative. Given domestic polarisation on this matter, as well as possible Azeri reservations, Turkey is following a thorny path towards normalisation. With the outbreak of war in the region, the Platform initiative gave Turkish authorities a legitimate reason

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to pursue direct and public contacts with Yerevan. Turkish-Armenian *rapprochement* is likely to have a positive impact on the Azeri-Armenian problem and should put an end to the isolation of Armenia. Until now, Yerevan had no option but to remain close to Russia. Turkey's isolation of Armenia hurt the Armenian economy, shutting it out of regional economic projects and thus contributing to the destabilisation of the Armenian domestic political environment. However, the likely impact of Turkey's isolation policy has reached its limits. The utmost this policy aimed to achieve was to generate a political will within Armenia for the normalisation of relations with Turkey. In addition, Turkey wished to push Yerevan to find a just solution to its territorial problems with Azerbaijan. After long years of stonewalling and insisting on pre-engagement conditions from Turkey, the Armenian leadership has finally come around to a policy of normalising relations with Turkey. Given the burgeoning of regional diplomatic attempts to resolve Azeri-Armenian problems, time was ripe to replace Turkey's isolation policy with a more inclusive approach. As Turkish President Abdullah Gül pointed out to his Azerbaijani counterpart President İlham Aliyev, the new perspective of Turkish policy-makers is predicated on the expectation that Turkish engagement with Armenia will facilitate a solution to the Karabakh problem and other outstanding territorial issues.

Armenia suffers from the consequences of long isolation in the region. It is a landlocked country unable to use land transportation for people and goods because of the sealed border with Turkey. It has to rely on Iranian and/or Georgian roads for land transportation, which means a great deal of extra cost for foreign trade. Almost 80 percent of Armenia's imported goods pass through Georgia. Therefore, the fragile security situation in that country is of great concern for Yerevan. The Russian bombing of Georgia's Poti port is the most recent development to confirm Armenia's concerns. Armenia suffers not only from the high cost of transportation but also from the danger of a drop in foreign trade brought on by the fragile security situation in Caucasus. In addition, Turkey is the most natural trading partner for consumer and industrial goods in the region. At present, Turkish goods reach Armenia

via Georgia at an inevitable extra cost. At the same time, Turkey is an emerging economy which could offer employment opportunities for Armenians. It is a known fact that tens of thousands of Armenians work in Turkey without a work permit. Therefore, in economic terms, it is quite easy to see how Armenia will benefit from the opening of the borders.

The third imperative of normalisation from the Armenian perspective is Armenia's current absence from regional energy supply projects due to its isolation. There is a considerable amount of oil and gas in the Caspian region. Turkey and Georgia benefit from this wealth thanks to the pipelines that pass through their territories. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is an important project that created a regional scheme to the immense benefit of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. While a trans-Armenian passage was the most feasible route, it was never even considered because of Yerevan's ongoing problems with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Russian-Georgian crisis brought forth novel projects for improving energy security and for diversifying energy supplies and supply routes to Europe. Armenia was not considered in any of these projects. As a result of this isolation, Armenia lost out considerably. A normalisation of relations with Turkey will pave the way for Armenia's involvement in future energy transit projects.

In a region marred by many factors of instability such as increased nuclear activity, international terrorism, violent regional rivalries, ethnic tensions, drug trafficking and illegal immigration, Turkey's policy towards Caucasus seeks to contribute to peace and stability. The Russia-Georgia crisis has demonstrated to countries of the region the importance of order and peaceful relations. The regional *status quo* should change and the new regional order should have a new cogency based on economic interdependence, political cooperation, regional stability and prosperity.

Turkish-Armenian *rapprochement* is a necessary step towards achieving this new regional order. Nothing can serve this goal better than the current scheme which would see the opening of a common border within two months after the implementation of the protocol.

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