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Changing Armenia-Turkish Relations¹

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Summary

After nearly a decade and a half of tense relations, closed borders and a lack of diplomatic relations, Armenia and Turkey are moving quickly to normalize relations. Following an official invitation extended in July 2008 by Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian, Turkish President Abdullah Gul became the first-ever Turkish head of state to visit Armenia. The September 2008 visit marked the public opening of a new process of engagement after months of secret meetings between Armenian and Turkish officials in Switzerland. The changing relationship between Armenia and Turkey can result in a “win-win” situation for both countries. For Armenia, it provides a much-needed foreign policy success and a new economic opportunity. For Turkey a possible rapprochement in Turkish-Armenian relations would do much to improve Turkey’s standing in the eyes of both the European Union and the United States. A border opening and subsequent diplomatic relations would enhance Turkey’s record of domestic reform. Just as crucially, the regional landscape has also changed in the wake of the August 2008 conflict in Georgia, offering a new impetus for opening the Armenian-Turkish border and heralding a new level of Russian support for a breakthrough between Armenia and Turkey.

¹ The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of FES.

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A Breakthrough in Armenian-Turkish Relations

In July 2008, Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian extended a public invitation to his Turkish counterpart, President Abdullah Gul, to attend a 2010 World Cup qualifying match between the Armenian and Turkish soccer teams hosted in the Armenian capital in September 2008. The invitation and subsequent visit by the Turkish president followed months of secretive closed meetings between Armenian and Turkish officials in Switzerland. Those talks, aimed at forging a preliminary understanding of the issues dividing both sides, culminated in the historic first-ever visit of a Turkish head of state to Armenia.

Following the historic visit, the Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers held two follow-up meetings, thereby pursuing a new, high level round of bilateral talks and engagement. This engagement offers both countries a new opportunity to move forward in seeking to normalize relations.

Although both Armenia and Turkey are committed to pursuing a new round of direct negotiations and dialogue, the division between the two sides remains far from resolved, however. Turkey seeks three specific goals prior to a normalization of relations. First, the Turkish Government is adamant in demanding an end to international efforts to recognize the Armenian genocide,³ offering to overcome the genocide issue by placing under the jurisdiction of a bilateral “historical commission” empowered to tackle this issue as part of a broader package of

outstanding issues. Second, Turkey also wants Armenia to more clearly renounce any territorial claims on Turkey or, at a minimum, to formally recognize the territorial integrity and current borders of the Republic of Turkey.

Turkey’s third goal, although a less stringent demand, centers on its desire for some progress from the Armenia side over the unresolved Nagorno Karabakh conflict. This third goal of progress over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is largely driven by Turkey’s strategic relationship with Azerbaijan, which lost control of the Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh enclave along with several districts bordering Karabakh in the early 1990s. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is seen as a “frozen” conflict that has both impeded regional development and triggered Turkey’s initial imposition of a blockade of Armenia in support of Azerbaijan.

The Evolution of Armenian-Turkish Relations

Despite the fact that Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Armenian independence in 1991, Turkish-Armenian relations have been marked by a period of tension and conflict. During the early 1990s, the war between Armenia and neighboring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh prompted Turkey to seal its border with Armenia and withhold normal diplomatic relations.

For both Turkey and Armenia, the last decade and half has been a period of stalemate. Turkey’s closure of the border failed to coerce Armenia and the lack of diplomatic relations only deprived both sides of options or dialogue.

The deadlock also deepened mutual misunderstandings, largely centered on

³ The Turkish Government does not recognize the World War I-era massacres and ethnic cleansings of the Armenian minority population of the Ottoman Empire as genocide.

Armenian Diaspora efforts to pursue international recognition of the events of 1915 as genocide triggered a defensive Turkish reaction that tend to view the same period as anything but genocide.

In the early- to mid-1990s, there was an effort by the Armenia state to pursue a two-track effort aimed at establishing normal “neighborly” relations with Turkey. On a state level, Armenian diplomats held a series of meetings with their Turkish counterparts spurred by the vision of then-President Levon Ter Petrossian for a new chapter in Armenian-Turkish relations based more on the future than on the past.

In addition, the diplomatic efforts of the Ter Petrossian Administration were bolstered by a second, private “track-two” attempt to engage Turkey. This private initiative, through the so-called “Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission” (TARC), sought to provide a closed arena for discussing the more controversial issues, including the Armenian genocide, which divided both sides.

Although these early attempts at engagement failed, they did provide an important preliminary round of talks that the more recent diplomatic engagement has been able to use as a foundation for dialogue.

Yet, the most powerful impetus for a possible breakthrough in relations between the two countries was not a state initiative, but arose in the wake of the tragic killing of prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007, with a mass outpouring of grief as over 100,000 ordinary Turks joined a public funeral in Istanbul. The tragedy of Dink’s death went beyond influencing Turkish public opinion, but also prompted a new opening within the Turkish state.

Drivers and Determinants

In terms of assessing the recent changes in Armenian-Turkish relations, there are several key factors that serve as drivers or determinants.

First, Turkey is undergoing a dynamic period of strategic reorientation, involving Turkey’s role within the region, including its relations with its neighbors. As part of a broader Turkish initiative to assert its geopolitical influence, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has recently launched a new bid for bolstering stability and security in the region. Hailed as the “Platform for Stability and Cooperation in the Caucasus,” this new Turkish initiative seeks to forge a cooperative attempt at conflict-prevention, multilateral security and regional stability, as well as for securing the vulnerable energy export routes running from the Caspian basin to Europe.

Although Azerbaijan and Georgia have obvious vested interests in the Turkish proposal driven by their shared energy ties, the exclusion of Armenia from the regional energy infrastructure will only exacerbate the challenge of convincing Armenia of the need to accept and support the initiative.

Although this challenge seems to be recognized by Ankara, Armenia seems by no means ready to follow Ankara’s lead without any serious improvement in the two countries’ non-existent relations and closed borders.

A second, related factor driving Turkey’s engagement of Armenia relates to the potential benefits from a much-needed economic opportunity. In this way, the opening of the border has also acquired a new significance for Turkey, as the need to stabilize the eastern Kurdish regions of Turkey has become an even

more essential element of Turkish national security.

Yet equally important, the potential economic benefits for Armenia from an opening of the border with Turkey are substantial. First, an open border with Turkey would provide immediate relief to the years of isolation imposed from the virtual blockade and embargo of Armenia resulting from the closure of its borders with both Turkey and Azerbaijan. The opening of at least one of the two closed borders would result in a significant alternative to Armenia's reliance on Georgia as its sole external outlet, thereby lowering excessive transit costs for Armenian importers and exporters.

Second, an open border with Turkey would provide greater market access, even beyond the Turkish market, with potential market penetration into the European and Middle Eastern markets.

The third economic benefit is the promise of greater competition from an open border, a crucial development to counter the power of import and export monopolies within Armenia. Specifically, the emergence of several commodity-based cartels in Armenia, mainly due to the isolation from closed borders, has only tended to distort economic development in Armenia. But with the competition inherent in an open border with Turkey, the Armenian economy can pursue a more natural course based on its comparative advantage.

The economic promise of open borders is also a mutual gain, as the impoverished regions along the Turkish side of the border are in desperate need for new economic activity and new trading partners. Similarly, Armenia offers specific benefits to Turkey as an energy supplier, through the possible export of surplus electricity to eastern Turkey, and as an agricultural producer.

In addition the lower labor costs on the Armenian side may entice Turkish textile producers and small manufacturing to set up new factories within neighboring Armenia.

The August 2008 conflict in Georgia is the third factor. As the most recent determinant of Armenian-Turkish engagement, the Georgia conflict spurred a new breakthrough in talks, with an added impetus for at least opening the closed Armenian-Turkish border and offering both countries a potentially important new economic and trade route alternative to Georgia. And side from the Georgian factor, another key to this new diplomatic opening, however, was Russia's support for such a breakthrough between Armenia and Turkey.

For Turkey, the process of engaging Armenia is also important in terms of foreign policy, as for far too long, Turkey was actually limited in its options for dealing with Armenia due to its close partnership with Azerbaijan. Many Turkish officials are trying to balance their desire for closer relations with Azerbaijan while recognizing the need to open the borders and engage Armenia.

A possible rapprochement in Turkish-Armenian relations would also do much to improve Turkey's standing in the eyes of both the European Union and the United States. A border opening and subsequent diplomatic relations would relieve the strain on Turkey from Western pressure and would only enhance Turkey's record of domestic reform.

There is also a more strategic advantage for Armenia as well. Even beyond the economic drivers, Armenia would gain from the new geopolitical context offered by a new relationship with Turkey. Most importantly, Armenia may exploit the new-found opening with Turkey as an important new form of

leverage to counter its over-dependence on Russia. Such a move is especially important for Armenia in terms of protecting its already fragile sovereignty and independence in the wake of Russia's recent reassertion of power and influence in the South Caucasus region.

In addition, there is also an added element of the role of Armenia's domestic political situation. After his election in February 2008, Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian still faces a domestic political crisis marked by vibrant opposition movement and his own dangerous lack of legitimacy. In this context, both the Armenian president's invitation and the Turkish president's visit reflect a mounting need for the Armenian government to garner a bold foreign policy success. And the necessity for such a breakthrough is rooted in the Armenian president's desire to both boost his meager legitimacy in the eyes of the Armenian public, and to divert attention from the domestic political situation among the international community.

The Role of Russia

Overall, the Russian role in Armenian-Turkish relations represents an important positive shift. This shift is due to the fact that it is now in Russia's interest to maximize the Turkish-Armenian opening for its purposes. More specifically, Russian policy has long been opposed to any significant improvement in relations between Armenia and Turkey and the closed border was seen as a helpful way to maintaining Russian dominance over Armenia, as demonstrated by the continued presence of a Russian military base and Russian border guards in Armenia. But Russian policy shifted dramatically in the wake of the crisis in Georgia, with a possible Armenian-Turkish rapprochement only serving to

bolster the Russian strategy to more completely isolate, marginalize and surround Georgia. Nevertheless, Russia will only remain supportive as long as the future direction of Armenian-Turkish relations remains under its control.

Conclusion

Clearly, the changing relationship between Armenia and Turkey can result in a "win-win" situation for both countries. For Armenia, it provides a much-needed foreign policy success and a new economic opportunity. For Turkey the Georgian conflict prompted a need for a breakthrough in relations with Armenia.

But the opening of the closed border between the two countries is the first imperative to any longer-term progress, without which, months of diplomacy and public expectations will have been for nothing.