

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND ARMENIA - THE DIPLOMATIC OBSERVER - APRIL 2020

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In the aftermath of the demise of the Tsarist regime in Russia through the Bolshevik revolution, an initiative was taken in the South Caucasus to establish a Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic. As this could not be sustained, it gave birth to three independent states: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Democratic Armenian Republic, founded on 28 May 1918, was looking for ways to expand. Its western neighbor the Ottoman Empire, having capitulated following its defeat in the First World War and having had to sign the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918, was obliged to withdraw its forces from its eastern borders drawn with Tsarist Russia at the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty of March 1918.**[1]** This was the opportunity for the newly independent Armenian state to start operations for territorial gains and renewed ethnic cleansing to expand its territory further in eastern Anatolia.

The inauguration of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) on 23 April 1920 and the proclamation of the TGNA Government to represent Turkey in place of the Ottoman Government in Istanbul also heralded contacts and talks with the Soviet Government in Moscow, taking up also the issue of the eastern borders of Turkey. Simultaneously, in view of the urgent need to put an end to the incursion of Armenian forces and their vicious and merciless massacres, the 15th Corps under the command of General Kazım Karabekir started a counteroffensive on 9 June 1920, fully recovering the occupied territories by 30

October and advancing further to capture the border town of Gyumri.**[2]**

With the fall of Gyumri, the Tashnak government in power in Armenia called for peace talks, which started in Gyumri on 22 November. The Peace Treaty of Gyumri was signed on 3 December 1920. The signatories on the Turkish side were General Karabekir, the Governor of Erzurum Kapancızade Hamid Bey, and Member of Parliament for Erzurum Süleyman Necati. For the Armenian side, the signatories were Aleksandr Hatisyan, Avram Gulhandaniyan, and Stepan Georgiyan.**[3]**

The Treaty of Gyumri was a major achievement for the TGNA government. Having secured its eastern borders, it was then able to fully shift the Turkish army to its western front. The Treaty of Gyumri had its own firsts; it was the first international military and political success and the first treaty signed by the TGNA government. With this treaty, Armenia became the first state to recognize the TGNA government and the national borders of Turkey.

The following day of the signing of the Treaty of Gyumri, on 4 December, the Bolshevik Red Army took over the government of the Democratic Armenian Republic, thereby putting an end to the very first independent republic of Armenia and making it a subservient state ruled from Moscow. As a consequence, the Treaty of Gyumri could not be submitted to the Parliament of Armenia, thus the legal procedure could not be completed. Present day Armenian authorities state that the Treaty of Gyumri was not valid or binding as the legal procedure of endorsement by the parliament was not implemented.

Conscious of the necessity and importance of establishing its eastern borders as drawn with the Treaty of Gyumri in a legally binding manner, the TGNA government was meticulous in also including it among the articles of the Treaty of Moscow signed on 16 March 1921 between the TGNA government and the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic whose delegation included representatives of the three South Caucasus states as federal Soviet republics. The present-day eastern borders of the Republic of Turkey were thus basically acknowledged with a legal, valid international agreement, the Treaty of Moscow, with the presence of all interested parties. With prudent, wise foresight, the TGNA government took a further step to avoid any future misunderstanding. On 13 October 1921, the TGNA government signed the Treaty of Kars with the fully authorized representatives of the three South Caucasus Soviet republics, namely Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the presence of the representative of Soviet Russia. The Treaty of Kars, signed by General Karabekir on behalf of the TGNA government, reiterated and confirmed the borders as depicted in the Treaty of Moscow.**[4]**

So long these treaties were respected; the relations of Turkey with the South Caucasus republics represented by Soviet Russia were conducted within the framework of friendship and good neighborly relations. At the end of the Second World War, Soviet Russia as one of the victors took part in the Yalta Conference together with the United States and the United Kingdom in reshaping the world. With that ambitious hubris, Russia endeavored to put claims on the eastern territories of Turkey on behalf of Georgia and Armenia. This brought about a sharp break in relations with Russia and prompted Turkey to take its

place in the West in the global geopolitics that was becoming bi-polar. The archives record that Nikita Khrushchev who succeeded Joseph Stalin accused his predecessor, stating -in essence- that Stalins policies caused Soviet Russia to lose Turkey.**[5]**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, along with 15 republics, Armenia proclaimed its independence for the second time in September 1991 (in contrast to Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenian authorities call it the third, counting the Soviet republic as the second). The newly independent Armenia emerged, astonishingly, as a state putting peace and stability in the region in jeopardy with territorial demands from neighbors. Armenian military operations against Azerbaijan and the continuing occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the surrounding Azerbaijan territory is outside the scope of this article.

Turkey was among the first to recognize the independence of Armenia. Despite the fact that Armenias Declaration of Independence of 23 August 1990 and its constitution adopted on 23 September 1991 included provisions and ambitions against Turkey (denying historical facts, international law, present day realities, and questioning the validity of not only the Treaty of Gyumri but also of the Treaty of Moscow and the Treaty of Kars), Turkey recognized Armenias independence on 16 December 1991 with the understanding that a newly independent neighboring state needed support and with the hope and expectation that common sense and rationality would prevail. In that same constructive vein, Turkey did not hesitate to invite Armenia in August 1992 to take part as a founding member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation with headquarters in Istanbul. **[6]**

It did not take long to see that the newly independent state of Armenia misconstrued the extended good will and understanding and took it as encouraging signs for its expansionist ambitions. It could be argued that Armenia got this courage to a certain extent from the re-flaming of the historical conflicts in the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russias active involvement in these developments. As Armenia occupied the Azerbaijan territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and continued with its military incursion to surrounding areas of Azerbaijan and with the fall of Kelbecer in 1993, Turkey reacted to this occupation as well as the hostile attitude of Armenia towards Turkey by deciding to close its border with Armenia, which had been open until then.**[7]**

Turkey showed the good will to give a second chance to Armenia to enable Armenia to realize its option to open up to the West and therewith also to normalize bilateral relations by signing on 10 October 2009 two protocols with Armenia: Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and Protocol on Developing Bilateral Relations. Turkey duly submitted these protocols to the TGNA to be endorsed. Armenia on the other hand, before submitting it to the parliament, presented them to the Constitutional Court for it to see if the provisions were in accordance with the constitution. In its decision of 18 January 2010, the court brought in preconditions and restrictions contrary to the wording and spirit of the protocols, leading to the interruption of the process. The process was eventually ended by -again- Armenia, as the President of Armenia officially announced on 1 March 2018 the protocols as null and void.**[8]**

Armenia was led by President Robert Kocharyan from 1998 to 2008 and by President Serzh Sargsyan the next ten years from 2008 to 2018. The common attributes of the two presidents are that they were both from Nagorno-Karabakh and the same political party, and they both actively participated at a high level in the occupation of and massacres in Nagorno-Karabakh. With such attributes, it is not surprising that progress in relations with Turkey was not in the cards. To the contrary, targeting the year 2015, the Armenian governments concentrated their efforts on how to better exploit the centennial anniversary of 1915 events, dubbed as genocide. However, the results have fallen far short of their expectations and proved to be a great disappointment. Particularly, during this period, the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights of the Council of Europe, of which Armenia is also a member, on the Perinçek vs. Switzerland case, has dealt a decisive judicial blow to Armenian claims and narrative.

Armenia shifted in 2018 from presidential to the parliamentary system. Widespread street demonstrations labelled as the Velvet Revolution brought Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister to power. He initiated an account taking with the previous administrations and legal procedures were started against Kocharian and Sarkisyan. This raised the hope that Armenia was on its way towards a reformist future with policies that would be guided only by the interests of Armenia. However, it soon transpired that initiatives to find a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would be effectively exploited by radical and militant circles, that multifaceted bonds with omnipotent Russia had no alternatives, and that dependency on the diaspora for economic and political support had its price. Consequently, the expectations that Armenia could follow a new, liberal policy have been dimmed. In the face of these realities, the new administration has resorted once again to populist nationalism, has carried the ties with the diaspora to a concept of pan-Armenism, and elevated the traditional adversity to Turkey to a new level of enmity.

This situation does not augur well for normalization, reconciliation, or resetting of relations. It reflects the fact that in all these one hundred years of state to state Turkish-Armenian relations, Armenia cannot take steps to change (although the need is obvious to them also) its old-fashioned, outmoded, and well-worn narratives for a new discourse and perspective. Throughout these years, Armenian narrative and claims have been based, with differing weight or priorities in times, on the below three dimensions or legs.

The historical dimension is no more in the monopoly of the Armenian narrative. The categorical rejection by Armenia of the proposal to establish an international commission of experts and historians to investigate historical facts is a clear indicator of the weakness of their historical narrative. At the end of the First World War, at the Paris Peace talks in 1920, the Armenian delegation pressed the Allied Powers to grant Armenia territory extending from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and to the Caspian, reassuring that they had the sufficient population. As this pipe dream was rejected, their improvised accusation that nearly the total Armenian population was subjected to genocide is hardly convincing. An article by Dr. D. Akçay published in the journal of International Crimes and History is an academic study on this subject that merits attention.**[9]** Likewise, the academic works of Professor E. Erickson, a military historian, to the effect that relocation and resettlement was a vital military necessity reflects a historical fact that is hard to

deny.**[10]** The efforts of Armenians to liken the events that took place in and around the First World War to the Jewish Holocaust, however incongruous, are seriously advocated. A recent commentary titled Roving Revolutionaries or Terrorists published by AVİM regarding a recent book of an Armenian author titled Roving Revolutionaries exposes the irrelevance of such claims both in the words of a Jewish community leader as well as the revelations of the author.**[11]**

The judicial-legal dimension has become a total disillusion for the Armenian arguments and claims. The verdicts of the European Court of Human Rights, the Constitutional Council of France, and the Court of Justice of the European Union speak for themselves. Numerous articles by Ambassador (R) Pulat Tacar on this field leave no doubt to the irrelevance of the legal-judicial aspects of the Armenian discourse.**[12]** Court cases in the US for reparations or compensation have proven to be futile. A commentary published AVİM titled The Agreement signed between Turkey and the United States on 25 October 1934 and its binding effect on the compensation appeals of American citizens of Armenian origin recalls a little known but significant aspect of the issue.**[13]**

As for the political dimension (which also covers religious unity, Christian support, and solidarity for Armenian people despite their adherence to an idiosyncratic sect of Orthodox Christianity) has gained weight and priority at the present. The aim is to ingratiate and gather strong sympathizers to put pressure in the international arena on Turkey so as to be able to politically impose demands that cannot be justified on judicial or historical grounds. The starting phase is to focus on eliciting resolutions from the parliaments of sympathizing countries. Professor Brendon Cannon has written a scholarly book on the parliamentary resolutions and analyzed their non-binding nature.**[14]** The tactic to gain sympathizers employs exploiting the crisis or adversities Turkey faces in its international relations and siding with those countries or groups countering Turkey.

The outlook today, unfortunately, indicates that Turkey-Armenia relations are not on a track for normalization or reconciliation. This state of affairs presents a serious impediment for Armenia to open up to the World, to realize its reforms and liberalization, and to have a new vision for the future. Instead, it sustains the adage so it was in the past, so it will be in the future. On part of Turkey, although this situation does not carry the same weight or present a vital interest, it is not a desirable outcome. From the Turkish point of view; stability, good neighborly relations, and cooperation in the South Caucasus would be a win-win solution for all the parties. In such an atmosphere, the deeply rooted minority of Turkish citizens of Armenian origin would also have a role to play, to be a bridge and bond to develop ties rapidly and on solid grounds. If anniversaries of a hundred years have any bearing, the one-hundredth anniversary of Turkey-Armenia relations should be a reminder that it is time to draw lessons from history, have a forthcoming political understanding, and a wise approach.

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