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Prospects for the Latest Rapprochement Attempt between Turkey and Armenia

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Abstract

Turkey and Armenia have had no diplomatic or commercial ties with each other since the 1990s. The key reasons for this have been disagreements over historic issues, particularly Turkey's refusal to recognise the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as a genocide, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, during which Turkey has traditionally been the closest ally of Baku. By the end of 2020, certain signals were sent from Ankara and Yerevan, hinting that the sides were ready to consider the normalisation of relations. Taking into consideration that this is not the first attempt to normalise the relationship and that certain steps in this direction have been taken earlier, although they led to no tangible results, this article explores whether the factors previously blocking the process are still present and the general prospects for this latest attempt at a rapprochement.

Introduction

After the second Karabakh War in 2020, certain positive statements were made by the leaders of Turkey and Armenia, and some promising steps were taken in the direction of normalising the relations between the two countries. In October 2021, Armenia opened its airspace to Turkish and Azeri flights. In December 2021, Turkey issued a licence for charter flights between Turkey and Armenia. Also in December 2021, Turkey and Armenia appointed special envoys—a Turkish diplomat, Serdar Kilic, and the Deputy Speaker of the Armenian Parliament, Ruben Rubinyan—to lead the process of the normalisation of relations. Armenia lifted a ban on the import of Turkish goods that was imposed over Ankara's backing of Azerbaijan in the 2020 war with Armenia. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Armenian counterpart, Ararat Mirzoyan, met during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 12 March 2022 in Turkey and not only stressed their support for the continuation of the normalisation process but also emphasised the need for “normalisation without preconditions” (Chanadiri 2022).

This is not the first time in the past 30 years that the two sides have made some moves aimed at normalising relations. In 2009, Turkey and Armenia signed protocols to open the border and establish diplomatic relations. This process was facilitated by Swiss mediation and was backed by both the European Union and the United States. However, the process was suspended six months later, and the deal was never ratified. There were several factors that led to the failure of this attempt; key among them was Baku's opposition to any normalisation efforts until Armenia withdrew from Nagorno Karabakh. Baku's key concern was that if the border were to open, they would lose major leverage over Yerevan, since

Azerbaijan's strategy was weakening Armenia's economy through the blockade, thereby giving them an incentive to compromise over the issue of Karabakh. Taking into consideration Azerbaijan's close relations with Turkey, its stance had quite an important impact on the overall position of Turkey (Tol 2022). Another factor was the nationalist backlash against the protocols in Turkey. Similarly, a significant part of Armenian society and even a larger part of its diaspora regarded such protocols as the “betrayal of national interests” (Iskandaryan 2010). Therefore, analysts believe that the reason for the failure of the 2008–2009 normalisation attempts was reliance only on diplomatic efforts and not preparing the involved societies for the process of normalisation (Chanadiri 2022).

What Is Different This Time?

There are several features that make the latest normalisation efforts different from previous ones. This process has been unexpectedly fast paced, much more open, and based on face-to-face meetings, in contrast to the many months of secret diplomacy that was the case in 2008–2009. As stated, during previous attempts to normalise relations, Azerbaijan was one of the key factors blocking the process. However, the second Karabakh War in 2020 resulted in Azerbaijan gaining control over all seven territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh that it had lost to Armenian forces in the early 1990s; therefore, many think that the position of Azerbaijan regarding the potential rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey has changed significantly.

On December 27, 2021, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov stated that Azerbaijan “fully supports” Armenia and Turkey's renewed attempt to settle relations (Vartanyan et al. 2022). Another important fac-

tor is that in parallel to the start of the Turkey–Armenian process of normalisation, diplomatic talks started between Armenia and Azerbaijan, focusing on the restoration of trade, transport routes, and delineation of the border, thereby making it easier for Turkey to move ahead (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022).

Interests of Key Parties—Armenia and Turkey

Armenia's interests are driven by economic and political considerations. In terms of economic interests, it should be stressed that Armenia is a landlocked country that borders Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey; therefore, closing its borders to two out of these four states led to Armenia's economic, political and social isolation. Opening its border with Turkey can give Armenia access to alternative routes for its exports (e.g., the port of Trabzon, the Kars–Gyumri railway) and lower its transportation costs, since Yerevan currently has to rely on lengthier, costlier trade routes through Georgia and Iran to reach world markets (Shangoyan 2022). Taking these factors into consideration, it is a direct interest of Armenia to open the border with Turkey, which would end Armenia's isolation by offering a direct route to Black Sea ports and provide a new market for its products and businesses that would extend even beyond the Turkish market, reaching European and Middle Eastern markets as well.

No less important are Armenia's political considerations. To balance threats stemming from Azerbaijan, Armenia has been trying to achieve an external balance by aligning with Russia, subsequently becoming over-reliant on Moscow. Thus, Armenia may use the normalisation of relations with Turkey as an important new leverage to counter its overdependence on Russia and eventually diminish its dependence on Russia (Giragosian 2009).

Turkey also has numerous interests in terms of the normalisation of relations with Armenia. First, a positive outcome in terms of the restoration of diplomatic relations with Armenia could be presented as a diplomatic victory for Ankara, thereby giving it an opportunity to win international approval in times when the country is under scrutiny for its democratic backsliding. It would also contribute to the improvement of relations with the US, which would welcome rebuilding ties between Turkey and Armenia, with the hope that doing so may reduce Russia's influence in the region and decrease Armenia's dependence on Iran (Tol 2022).

Another significant factor for Turkey is that improving regional links would give it an opportunity to strengthen its positions in the South Caucasus by playing a more active role in regional initiatives to restore trade and transportation routes in the region. This

explains why Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is so actively advocating the idea of the 3+3 format (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia + Russia, Turkey and Iran) with the aim of promoting presence and importance in the region (Evstratov 2022). Increasing Turkey's regional stance through greater transport and trade links would benefit its economy and, at the same time, automatically decrease Russian influence in the South Caucasus. New railways and roads, operating with the active participation of Turkey, would naturally diminish the Russian geopolitical leverage over the South Caucasus, since in times of closed borders, most roads and railways have a northwards direction, thereby crossing Russian territory (Avdaliani 2021).

By opening the closed border with Armenia, Ankara would also increase economic activities in the impoverished Kurdish-dominated eastern regions of Turkey and contribute to the economic stabilisation of these regions. In terms of logistics, even though Turkey has promoted alternative routes bypassing Armenia in recent decades (e.g., the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway line and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum pipelines), it can still complement those projects with more efficient connections, i.e., the Baku–Julfa–Yersakh railway line, which is connected to Gyumri and can also lead to Kars (Shangoyan 2022). Turkey is particularly interested in transportation projects that seek to connect Azerbaijan to its exclave, Nakhchivan, on the Turkish border. Such a corridor would significantly contribute to establishing closer ties to Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, thus connecting Turkey to the rest of the Turkic world (Huseynov and Scotti 2021).

Key Challenges for Normalisation Attempts

Even though there is a promising dynamic in terms of a prospective rapprochement, there still exist some contested issues, which may potentially slow down the process. The two sides have been stressing the need for normalisation with “no preconditions”; however, at the same time, both of them have been emphasising specific terms, which they see as important for their national interests. For instance, such issues include the historical interpretation of events, which according to the Armenian side should be recognised as a genocide, the status of the Nagorno–Karabakh region, and the mutual recognition of territorial integrity. Another contested issue is who should control the restored road and rail links that connect western Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Apart from these issues, the Armenian side advocates for the separation of the Armenian–Turkish rapprochement from Armenian–Azerbaijani relations; however, Ankara makes it clear that they are planning to coordinate all their efforts with Azerbaijan (Shangoyan 2022).

Another challenge to the process is the deep mistrust of the population of these two countries towards each

other, in combination with nationalist groups that are active both in Armenia and Turkey. As demonstrated by the International Republican Institute's 2021 Public Opinion Survey, Armenians still view Turkey as a key political (90% of respondents) economic (68%) and security (88%) threat to their country, surpassing even Azerbaijan in terms of all three factors. According to the same survey, more than 70% of respondents stressed that Armenia should start a dialogue on the normalisation of relations with Turkey by putting forward its own preconditions (i.e., recognition of the Armenian genocide; Turkey's nonhindrance in Nagorno-Karabakh peace efforts) (International Republican Institute 2021).

Ongoing military clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia and a fragile peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh region also pose a serious challenge to the normalisation attempts. In November 2021, heavy fighting took place on the Armenia–Azerbaijani border, resulting in casualties. A new threat of military escalation was also present in March 2022, when Russian and Armenian sides stated that Azerbaijani armed forces had entered a zone controlled by Russian peacekeepers and attacked a village known as Farukh (Chanadiri 2022). The intensification of incidents such as these may change Azerbaijan's position towards Turkey–Armenia normalisation attempts, which would be expressed by pressuring Ankara against the continuation of the process. Furthermore, such a development would also have a negative impact on Armenia's willingness to pursue the process of normalisation with the key ally of Azerbaijan.

Another significant regional actor that has both interests and influence over ongoing events is Russia. To date, Russia has expressed support for a Turkey–Armenian rapprochement. The first meeting between envoys representing the two states took place in Moscow in January 2022. Russia's support for the process so far has been determined by its interest in supervising the process and ensuring that the possible normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey respects Russia's interests in the region. However, it is not clear whether Russian leadership will provide long-term support for increased connectivity between the two countries since this would allow Yerevan to diversify its foreign policy and thus decrease its dependence on the Russian economy (Avdaliani 2021).

About the Author

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Apart from this factor, there is a certain probability that Moscow's calculations in terms of positioning with regard to a Turkey–Armenia rapprochement may change after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Turkey has been supplying Ukraine with armed drones that have proven effective against the Russian army, and the leadership of the country has been openly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022). Taking into consideration these new realities in the region, it cannot be excluded that Moscow might view the potential normalisation of Turkey–Armenian relations in a new light and perceive such normalisation as possibly damaging to its interests in South Caucasus.

Conclusion

Throughout the last months, promising statements have been made by representatives of Turkey and Armenia, and important steps have been taken in terms of a rapprochement, including the start of face-to-face diplomatic talks and the resumption of direct flights. This positive dynamic has been fostered by the new reality in the region following the second Karabakh War and changes in the position of Azerbaijan. Keeping this significant progress in mind, there is a reason to maintain cautious optimism, but it should be stressed that some potentially contesting issues are still on the table. Whether these issues will contribute to slowing down the process or blocking it altogether depends on the readiness of the Armenian and Turkish sides to reconcile them or put them aside for the time being. Apart from the problematic issues in bilateral relations outlined above, both countries face certain internal and external challenges. In regard to domestic politics, the general scepticism of the population and the criticism of radical nationalist groups need to be addressed. The positioning of key regional actors who have a strong influence on Turkey and Armenia—Azerbaijan and Russia, respectively—is also important. Particularly, a lot depends on whether the rapidly changing political and security environment that has emerged due to the fragile peace that has been established in Karabakh and the war in Ukraine will alter the calculations of these actors in terms of a Turkey–Armenian rapprochement.

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Postwar Karabakh: What Is the Resettlement Potential?

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Abstract

The aftermath of the 44-day Second Karabakh War resulted in the significant superiority and final victory of Azerbaijan, and the liberation of occupied territories revealed a nationwide plan for socioeconomic development. Currently, the rising actuality of the resettlement of internally displaced people (IDPs) in their freed homeland is the primary focus of both governmental and societal discourse. This article highlights the resettlement potential in Azerbaijan’s postwar territories. A survey unveils a high rate of repatriation intention among IDPs and substantial resettlement potential among non-IDPs.

Introduction

Towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first ethnic identity-based crises within the Union after World War II emerged in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Askerov, 2020). The conflict left approximately 1 million ref-

ugees and internally displaced people (IDP) related to Azerbaijan, while the country lost 20% of its internationally recognized territory as well. During the war, residents of the occupied settlements witnessed ethnic cleansing and the massive violation of human rights by the