

# Exploring the Normalization of Relations Between Armenia and Turkey

Written by Vahagn Avedian

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VAHAGN AVEDIAN, FEB 8 2022

Armenia and Turkey are undertaking a new attempt at normalizing their relations – one of the several attempts since Armenia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This recent attempt should be framed in the context of two main developments, namely the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the frosty relations between Ankara and Washington. In fact, the move was initially viewed as Ankara's attempt to appease Washington, especially in the wake of President Biden's recognition of the Armenian Genocide. While the process of normalization and opening of the borders should be promoted and is hailed internationally with the usual optimism, there is one issue which might topple the whole process if not dealt with in earnest, namely that of the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian Genocide is by some referred to as a strictly 'historic event' which needs to be left in the past, while Armenians and Turks need to look towards the future. This erroneous argument is usually utilized by foreign state representatives who would like to refrain from demands for an official recognition of the WWI events as genocide. The driving force behind this hesitance for wider international recognition is the long-run denial policy of the Turkish State, threatening with political and economic retaliation against any such move. This denial has morphed since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, evolving from the initial out-right denial of the events having ever occurred to the later, more sophisticated history revisionism, presenting "alternative facts" about what transpired during WWI.

The denial notwithstanding, the Armenian Genocide and its politics of memory have had a profound impact on both nations, their own development and narrative as well as their relations. From 1923 to 1991, there was virtually no need for Turkey to address the issue officially since the genocide did not have an official representation on the international arena. During that period, Ankara dismissed the demands of genocide recognition from the sizable Armenian diaspora, mainly consisting of direct descendants of the Armenian Genocide, as abstract and unofficial, instead referring to the absence of any such demand from the Soviet Republic of Armenia. This was a convenient strategy since, in practice, Soviet Armenia's international policy and relations were not handled by Yerevan but by Moscow, whose foreign policy had no place for the Armenian Genocide. However, this changed when Armenia regained its independence in 1991. Suddenly, the ghost of the past genocide became a crucial factor in the process of establishing normal relations between the two neighbors. It turned out to be anything but a simple process.

### **The Genesis of the 'Normalization of Relations without Preconditions' Policy**

The issue of the Armenian Genocide has been omnipresent in each previous attempt at normalizing the Turkish-Armenian relations. While Ankara was one of the first countries to recognize Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it still refused to establish diplomatic relations with Yerevan. The then ongoing Karabakh War with Azerbaijan and especially the Armenian successes in 1993 (e.g. the capture of the strategic town of Shushi) became the breaking point for Turkey to officially join Azerbaijan in imposing an embargo on Armenia. Not only have the borders between the two countries remained closed, but Turkey and Azerbaijan have also actively opted to exclude Armenia from any regional economic and infrastructure projects.

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The blockade has had a clear aim, namely to force Armenians to choose between 'prosperity without Karabakh or poverty with Karabakh'. The same has been true about Turkey's policy in regard to the genocide, asserting that Armenia's population would rather have open borders and trade with Turkey, while it is the diaspora Armenians who are pushing for the recognition. This divide-and-conquer policy together with the economic embargo to force Armenia into submission has been complemented by other means as well. One such measure by Turkey has been to deny passage through its airspace to planes bound for Armenia, a policy which has been implemented recurrently whenever it fitted the purpose.

The current talks in 2022, as the previous ones, carefully highlight the need to proceed the negotiation of normalization 'without preconditions', a policy initiated by Armenia's first president Levon Ter-Petrosyan's administration in the early 1990s. Ravaged by the 1988 earthquake and engaged in an ongoing war with Azerbaijan over the Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh, the Ter-Petrosyan administration was in dire need to revitalize its post-Soviet economy. Thus, establishing relations with its neighbors was considered as high priority for Yerevan. This was especially true in Turkey's case since it would not only help boosting the Armenian economy, but it would also weaken Baku's position in the ongoing Karabakh negotiations by partly breaking up the Turkish-Azerbaijani embargo.

Apart from the Karabakh Conflict, where Turkey has continuously supported Azerbaijan based on the '1 Nation, 2 States', model, it is the question of the Armenian Genocide which has been the single point of failure for normalization of relations. Turkey has since 1992 had two clear preconditions: 1) Armenia has to drop the strive for international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and 2) explicitly recognize the current borders between Armenia and Turkey. One could argue that Armenia has since its membership in the UN implicitly recognized the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of all member states, including Turkey's. However, it is obvious that Ankara's demand for an explicit recognition of the border should be viewed as Armenia's wavering of any possible future demand which might arise as a legal consequence from a hypothetical Turkish recognition of the genocide.

Nonetheless, in early 1990s, from a realpolitik point of view, the question of the Armenian Genocide had little place in Ter-Petrosyan administration. His tasks of steering the newly independent Armenia through the hardships of an ongoing Karabakh war and in the wake of a collapsed Soviet Union surely took precedence. Even though Ter-Petrosyan's party, the Armenian National Movement (ANM), had won the presidency on a platform including articles on the centrality of the genocide in Armenia's nationhood, once in power the administration clearly moved to conspicuously downplay the genocide for the sake of establishing relations with Turkey. The reality of the moment, Ter-Petrosyan argued, dictated that securing fuel, grain and ammunition were the main focus, not history.

It should be mentioned that Ter-Petrosyan himself and several of his closest collaborators and advisors, including his senior adviser Gerard Libaridian, were senior historians. This background demonstrably played a decisive role in shaping Armenia's early foreign policy, especially in regard to the reliance on foreign powers, but also on the genocide issue and relations with Turkey. The history of the genocide and the first republic (1918-1920) weighed in heavily when these historians turned politicians contemplated on the alternatives laid before them for the future. Looking at the historical records, they tried to interpret the past within the context of the present geopolitical hurdles. As such, they seemed to perceive the genocide purely from a historical point of view, almost disregarding the political connotations of the historical subject and, more importantly, its obvious inseparable duality. More significantly, the mistakes from the first republic era, especially the reliance on Western powers (which never came to the rescue when the Turkish Army under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal threatened Armenia's very existence), were warning beacons that something was not supposed to be repeated. The administration almost wanted to exorcise the demon of the Armenian Genocide from the body of the Armenian nation, but specifically from the process of the normalization of the relations with Turkey. This stance, however, harbored an inherent contradiction with the ANM leadership's claim that the issue was 'historical', as opposed to a political one, for it clearly dictated the terms of normalization, at least in Turkey's view. What the historians turned politicians seemed to miss was the immense impact that the politics of memory of the genocide have had on both Armenian and Turkish nations and their relations, which for the time being remained frozen.

## The Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission, 2000–2004

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The normalization got renewed impetus during President Robert Kocharian's administration with the establishment of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) in 2000. Although not engaged officially, Yerevan did support the commission. Endorsed and driven by the US State Department's initiative as a Track Two diplomacy project, the TARC was supposed to bridge the gap between the two nations on NGO and micro level before engaging on an official level. In a strategic move, the question of the 'g-word' was deliberately kept out of the agenda in order to devote the process to smaller, confidence-building activities.

However, almost two years into the process, when a Turkish member of the commission in November 2001 finally raised the question of tackling the delicate matter of the genocide, it almost killed the commission entirely. In his book *Unsilencing the Past*, David L. Phillips, the foreign affairs expert in the US Department of State and the person in charge of running TARC, recalls that the question was raised by Gunduz Aktan, a Turkish diplomat, who wanted to once and for all settle the issue of the genocide. Aktan proposed asking the *International Center for Transitional Justice* (ICTJ) to conduct an analysis on the applicability of the UN Genocide Convention to the WWI events in the Ottoman Empire. What Aktan had not quite realized by the time of proposing this was the potential danger of his own request: it would not only be limited to the *legal applicability* of the UN Convention on the events but also to the *definition* of genocide. Thus, without informing the rest of the commission, the Turkish members contacted ICTJ to change the premises of the analysis, and make sure that it would only address the *legal applicability* of the UN Genocide Convention on the events.

When ICTJ notified the TARC leadership about the request and the secret contact was revealed, the Armenian side announced that they were halting their participation until further notice. It took Phillips six months to bring both sides back to the negotiation table. Although TARC initiated some NGO contacts and similar Track Two activities, somewhat ironically, it is best remembered for the legal report it tasked ICTJ to compile, concluding that "the Events, viewed collectively, can thus be said to include all of the elements of the crime of genocide as defined in the Convention, and legal scholars as well as historians, politicians, journalists and other people would be justified in continuing to so describe them.". The process of TARC finally ebbed out in 2004 without achieving any substantial success in its main goal of normalization of relations.

## 'Football Diplomacy' and the '2009 Protocols'

The next attempt at reconciliation appeared in the form of the '2009 Protocols' and as a result of the famous 'Football Diplomacy', mediated by the Swiss government. The process was initiated soon after the week-long Georgia-Russia war in August 2008 which exposed Armenia's vulnerability of being overwhelmingly dependent on Georgia for its food and fuel supplies (70 percent of Armenia's export and import were traded through Georgian ports). The incumbent administration of President Serzh Sargsyan signed the infamous protocols under the continued pretense of "normalization without preconditions".

While Baku became highly dismayed with this process, the Sargsyan administration came under immense criticism for having opened up for history revisionism and giving Turkey the very precondition they had always demanded, namely questioning the reality of the genocide. Although there was no explicit mentioning of the 'g-word', one article stipulated the creation of a commission for "an impartial and scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations.". The article left little to the imagination about what 'historical records' and 'existing problems' it referred to. Sargsyan was forced to conduct a world tour to calm the Armenian diaspora to reassure them that the genocide was not being questioned.

In the end, the Sargsyan administration seemed to utilize a contingency plan to get out of the dilemma while emphasizing the centrality of the genocide. In accordance with the rules of the Constitution of Armenia in regard to establishing diplomatic relations with a foreign state, the Armenian administration conveyed the protocols to the Constitutional Court for examination. While the Court found the protocols as compliant with the Armenian Constitution, it also noted that the protocols did not "contradict the provisions of the Preamble to the RA Constitution and the requirements of Paragraph 11 of the Declaration of Independence of Armenia [the strive for international genocide recognition]". This single mentioning infuriated Ankara, who accused Yerevan for putting forth conditions for the normalization, claiming that the judgment of the Constitutional Court contained "contradictory elements to the

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letter and the spirit of the Protocols". The Turkish response only confirmed what the critics of the protocols had asserted in regard to the envisioned historical sub-commission being a venue for politically negotiating the historicity of the genocide. The Turkish Government never sent the protocols to its parliament for ratification and Armenia finally withdrew the protocol in 2015, the year marking the centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. The genocide had once more halted the normalization process.

## The Déjà vu of the 2022 Attempt on 'Relations Without Preconditions'

It is in the light of this background that one must view the current ongoing attempt at 'normalization without preconditions', this time under the auspices of Russia. Although some factors have certainly changed since the previous attempts at normalization, there are several familiar ones which cause worry for the repetition of the past: The Pashinyan administration is faced with public criticism in the wake of a post-war harsh reality in the middle of its promised overhaul of the oligarchic and corruption-burdened domestic system, while also dealing with the intrusion upon its borders by an Azerbaijan emboldened by the successes in the 2020 Karabakh War; the Karabakh Conflict is far from solved, but has only reached a new, temporary dormant phase, where the security of its native Armenian population is under imminent threat; Turkey under Recep Erdoğan has since long abandoned its previous policy of 'zero problems with neighbor', a policy launched in 2004 in the context of Ankara's wooing of the European Union and the looming start of Turkey's EU accession negotiations. Instead, Turkey has demonstrably intensified its regional expansionist policy, not only in the Caucasus but also as seen earlier in Syria, Iraq, North Africa (Libya) and the Mediterranean Sea.

Thus, viewing the prevailing situation collectively, one would say that little has changed in the equation since early 1990s and the introduction of 'relations without preconditions', a policy which has been both praised and criticized. While opponents interpret this as a weakness, and an appeasement of the Turkish denialist policy in regard to the central issue of the genocide, proponents have hailed it as a sound diplomatic strategy, which could defuse Turkey's potential malevolence by using the genocide as an excuse to deliberately isolate Armenia. That said, while Yerevan has been inclined to conduct such a policy, Turkey has certainly not shared this enthusiasm, which clearly reflects the power balance between the two neighbors.

As the recognition of the Armenian Genocide should not be a precondition for normalization of relations, there must not be any provisions which would open for politically negotiating the fact-based reality of the Armenian Genocide which the scholarly community has already established. Although normalization of relations should be promoted as a sound policy, it remains to be seen how the question of the genocide (along with the Karabakh Conflict) will fit into the 'relations without preconditions'.

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## About the author:

**Vahagn Avedian**, PhD, is a peace and conflict researcher with focus on democracy and human rights. His book, *Knowledge and Acknowledgment in the Politics of Memory of the Armenian Genocide* (Routledge, 2019) includes a discussion about the Karabakh conflict within the context of the Armenian Genocide and its impact and legacy on the region. His forthcoming book, entitled *The Theory of Collective Reconciliation: A Trinity of Recognition, Responsibility and Reparation* (Routledge) explores the process of reconciliation through its components and their mutual dependencies and impacts.