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LESSONS FROM THE TURKISH-ARMENIAN PROTOCOLS

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The Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process, formalized with the signing of two Protocols on October 10, 2009, does not seem to be going anywhere. The failure to materialize the promises of opening the border and establishing diplomatic relations has complex reasons and crucial implications. There are important lessons to be drawn from the mistakes in this process not only for the Western political leaders but most importantly for Turkish and Armenian foreign policy makers.

BACKGROUND: Miscommunication and misperception as well as the national identity-building mechanisms of each state have sustained mutual mistrust between Turkey and Armenia, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For more than 15 years, Turkey has conditioned the normalization process with Armenia to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the withdrawal of Armenian troops from occupied Azerbaijani territories. Armenia, on the other hand, has reiterated that it accepts no preconditions for establishing normal relations with Turkey. In September 2008, however, Turkish president Abdullah Gül accepted the invitation of Armenian president Sargsyan to attend the soccer match between their respective teams in Yerevan.

Western leaders and international organizations such as the International Crisis Group suggested that the Turkish-Armenian normalization process could be delinked from the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and negotiations with Azerbaijan. A year ago, President Barack Obama estimated that the Turkish-Armenian talks would ‘bear fruit very quickly very soon’. Yet the identity issues involved and the nature of the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan were overlooked. The first signal of the flawed assumptions feeding Western leaders’ over-optimism on this process was the continued rhetoric of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül linking a breakthrough to the resolution of ‘issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan’. However, the Turkish fear of alienating Azerbaijan seemed to have temporarily dissipated by April, 2009, when the parties, with Swiss mediation, agreed on a ‘road map’ agreement. The gas agreement signed by Russia’s Gazprom and Azerbaijan’s state-owned company Socor on June 29 2009 underscored Azerbaijan’s alienation from its “brother country” Turkey.

On January 12, 2010, the Constitutional Court of Armenia passed a ruling according to which the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations did not imply Armenian concessions on three issues: first, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue; second, Armenia’s efforts to obtain international recognition of the 1915 massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman empire as genocide; or that the protocols would imply automatic Armenian recognition of the de facto border within Turkey and Armenia. Within a week, overlooking that a constitutional review of international agreements is a requirement of Armenian law, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Armenia of “insincerity” and warned that the court ruling would have repercussions on the normalization process. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated

that ‘the Armenia-Turkey normalization process should continue, irrespective of any circumstances’.

However, by the end of March, it seemed unlikely that the protocols would deliver on their promises of opening the border and establishing diplomatic relations. The opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) in Turkey presented a motion in parliament stating that “there is no advantage in keeping the protocols in parliament but rather serious disadvantages.”. As the normalization process has stalled, alternative, more modest steps that would contribute to normalization are being proposed. Armenian president Sargsyan has proposed a ‘non-aggression pact’ to Azerbaijan and has suggested some part of the occupied territories in Nagorno Karabakh might be returned to Azerbaijani control. Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev has however insisted that a pact can be signed only after the return of all Karabakh territories and the withdrawal of Armenian forces stationed in the area. On March 25, during the non-official meeting of the foreign ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, foreign ministers Nalbandian of Armenia and Sergey Lavrov of Russia stressed that there is no alternative to a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Belatedly, the Armenian and Turkish sides seem to have recognized that a resolution to – or at least serious progress in – the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is crucial for the normalization process. Their approach has now shifted toward establishing social and cultural ties between each other’s communities to ease worries and help building mutual trust. On the Turkish side, these measures include the opening for worship of a reconstructed Armenian church in the city of Van and providing education for the children of Armenian guest workers that reside in the country without permit. In Armenia, a court rejected a lawsuit that was brought against the denial of the ‘genocide’.

IMPLICATIONS: The failed Zurich protocols have many significant implications for Turkey, Armenia as well as for the wider region (See Turkey Analyst, 15 March 2010). First, the international community, especially Western leaders and some international analysts and organizations, should realize that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is central to the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia. Pressuring and expecting Turkey to de-link these two questions means neglecting or ignoring the identity issues involved in the bilateral relations in the region. The public opinion in Turkey could not approve the signing of protocols without precondition because it has been shaped for more than 15 years by the rhetoric of ‘brotherhood with Azerbaijan’. The unrealistic expectations of the international community induced Turkish foreign policy to sign the protocols even though their position and rhetoric remained unchanged on the matter.

The fate of the “normalization” process suggests that a more serious undertaking by Western diplomacy to secure an agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is called for.

Meanwhile, the governments of Armenia and Turkey will have to recognize their respective responsibilities for the deadlock. Both sides neglected to prepare their public opinion prior to the signing of the protocols. Indeed, the fact that the political rhetoric on government level remained unchanged underlines that the signatories themselves have yet to face up to what a true normalization requires, even though their signing of the protocols does in part reflect a sincere desire to put past enmity behind. Ultimately however, Turkey and Armenia gave in to external pressures.

Turkey bears a relatively higher degree of responsibility for the failed normalization, in the eyes of the international community. A bigger, more developed country that has claims of exerting regional leadership and which aspires to be seen as a role-model with its 'zero problems with neighbors' policy, Turkey is measured against higher standards. However, Turkish leaders insisted in holding the Armenian government responsible for not controlling the Armenian Diaspora's genocide recognition campaign results. The decision to recall its ambassadors in Washington and Stockholm subsequent to the passage of the resolutions recognizing the mass killings and deportations of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 as genocide did not enhance Turkey's international standing. These acts temporarily blocked some of the important channels of communication with the U.S. Moreover, internally the nationalist rhetoric breeds mistrust in Turkish society towards Armenia and Armenians in general.

Armenian foreign policy makers also bear responsibility for neglecting to be more sensitive to the delicate nature of the relationship and commitment between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The non-aggression pact proposed in late March to Azerbaijan would be a move in the right direction. Still, acknowledging the importance of making progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue for the normalization of bilateral relations with Turkey is crucial. Laying the foundations of a more gradual and ultimately successful normalization process cannot dispense with grassroots relations, and the establishment of civil society relations that build and enhance mutual trust. And while Turkish and Armenian foreign policy makers work on their lessons and listen to each other and communicate properly with their own respective public, it is equally important that the international community resists the temptation to impose solutions that overlook regional realities.

CONCLUSIONS: There were signs prior to the signing of the Turkish-Armenian protocols in Zurich in 2009 that indicated that the move was rushed and that signatories were insufficiently prepared to face up to its implications. The main lesson both parties should draw from the failure of the normalization process is that they will have to be careful with how they communicate with the international community, bilaterally and with their respective home front. The current deadlock in the Turkish-Armenian relations does not amount to an ultimate failure of the normalization process. Rather, it has the potential to serve as a catalyst for a more productive reconciliation that would include initiatives at the grassroots, civil society level.

The failure of the attempt to normalize Turkish-Armenian relations is also an opportunity to rethink the assumptions that have guided the effort that produced the Zürich protocols. In this context, it is of particular importance that the U.S. and the EU get more seriously involved in securing an agreement on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh if they want some tangible progress in the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. Turkey and Armenia will have to start preparing their public opinion (which includes the Diaspora in the Armenian case) and prepare the ground through social initiatives. Neither Turkey nor Armenia can dispense with being adequately sensitive to the identity issues involved.

Ultimately, the perceptions and expectations of the two societies need to be addressed. The scope of the challenge should not be underestimated. In the case of Turkey, the relationship with Armenia inevitably re-awakens a past that is extremely difficult to face up to as it challenges the official state historiography, indeed the national identity that has been formed by the historical narrative of the Turkish republic.

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