

Easing Mental Barriers in Turkey-Armenia Relations: The Role of Civil Society

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After decades of troublesome relations, a first-ever visit by a Turkish head of state to Armenia in 2008 – following his Armenian counterpart’s invitation to watch the World Cup qualifying football match between the national teams of their countries – was widely praised for its prospective contribution to the normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations. Although there had been earlier attempts for reconciliation during late 1990s and early 2000s¹, the nature of this visit was relatively unique in terms of “conveying diplomatic signals on a very public stage”². Sport is a symbol of both competition and cooperation. As Chehabi³ argues, “the multiplicity of meanings and symbols makes sport diplomacy one of the most ambiguous means of conducting diplomacy, which renders it particularly useful, as it can indicate that a country is strong and not to be trifled with, but that it is also flexible and amenable to negotiations”.

The timing of this landmark visit was also critical in terms of its potential positive influence on stability in the Caucasus region.⁴ Since it took place shortly after the escalation of conflict between Russia and Georgia, leaders of both Armenia and Turkey showed eagerness to resolve their longstanding problems and contribute to regional stability through fostering diplomatic ties and friendly relations.⁵ As Turkish President Abdullah Gül put it, “I believe that my visit has demolished a psychological barrier in the Caucasus. If this climate continues, everything will move forward and normalise”⁶. According to Öniş and Yılmaz, the so-called football diplomacy was a by-product of a new wave of multidimensional activism in Turkish foreign policy. And President Gül employed football diplomacy as a means of initiating active dialogue on problematic bilateral relations and promoting cooperation on regional issues.⁷ Indeed, there was further progress in 2009

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1 For a detailed assessment of waves of rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, see Philips, D. (2012) *Diplomatic History: Turkey-Armenia Protocols*, Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University.

2 Merkel, U. (2008) “The Politics of Sport Diplomacy and Reunification in Divided Korea: One Nation, Two Countries and Three Flags”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 43(3): 292

3 Chehabi, H.E. (2001) “Sport diplomacy between the United States and Iran”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12(1): 91

4 For a critical analysis of politics in the Caucasus region. See Mkrtchyan, T. and V. Petrosyan (2009) “Integration of Transcaucasia: Continued Failure and Hope”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 8(1): 59-77

5 Görgülü, A. (2008) *Turkey-Armenia Relations: A Vicious Circle*, Istanbul: TESEV Publications, p.41

6 “Turkey-Armenia relations boosted by president’s historic trip”, *The Telegraph*, 07 September, 2008.

7 Öniş, Z. and Ş. Yılmaz (2009) “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era”, *Turkish Studies*, 10(1): 18

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backed by international mediators when the two countries signed two protocols in Switzerland, which primarily aimed at establishing diplomatic relations and opening of their borders. Shortly after the signing of the protocols, the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan made a reciprocal visit to Turkey to watch the return leg of football match.

The increased use of sport in international affairs as a foreign policy tool intends to facilitate intercultural dialogue between ordinary people of estranged countries and break down long held negative perceptions.⁸ Accordingly, sports diplomacy not only targets improving state-to-state relations via official dialogue, but also entails a “whole range of international contacts that have implications for the overall relations between the nations concerned”⁹. In the case of Armenia and Turkey, football diplomacy has not, as of yet, led to any major improvements at state-level. Within the past four years, track one diplomatic efforts for reconciliation have been

unsatisfactory since the Armenian-Turkish border remains closed and no formal relations have been established. In fact, many consider both governments’ failure to ratify the protocols as a missed historic opportunity and a major setback in bilateral and regional relations.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it is motivating to note that in the often cited example of ping-pong diplomacy between China and the United States, it took eight years to forge official diplomatic ties after the US table tennis players went to China to play with their Chinese counterparts in 1971. Even though it would be unlikely to revive the protocols in their current form, as Philips argues¹¹, “they still provide a roadmap to the way forward”.

What this diplomatic opening managed, however, is highly visible at civil society level since there is a steady development and professionalization of experts who are willing to contribute to the normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations. Several NGOs in Turkey and their counterparts in Armenia have formed strong ties before 2008 and carried out joint projects. The official process triggered by football diplomacy has accelerated their collaboration and increased the number of dialogue channels among experts, journalists, academics, businessmen and students. This positive development embarks on a path towards improving people-to-people relations, a fundamental necessity for the normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations. In light of mutual mistrust on both sides fuelled by historical feuds, focusing on positive transformation of

8 There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on the politics of sports diplomacy. For the long-term effects of ‘ping-pong diplomacy’ on US-China relations, see Hong, Z. and Y. Sun (2000) “The Butterfly Effect and the Making of ‘Ping-Pong Diplomacy’”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 9(25): 429-448. For a critical analysis of sports diplomacy between the US and Iran, see Chehabi (2001); between South and North Korea, see Merkel (2008); on South Africa see Ndlovu, S.M. (2010) “Sports as cultural diplomacy: the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa’s foreign policy”, *Soccer & Society*, 11(1-2): 144-153.

9 Peppard, V. and J. Riordan (1993) *Playing Politics: Soviet Sports Diplomacy to 1992*, London: JAI Press, p.2

10 For a comprehensive assessment of the internal debates on the rapprochement process and reactions to the protocols, see Philips (2012); Görgülü, A., Iskandaryan A. and S. Minasyan (2010) “Turkey-Armenia Dialogue Series: Assessing the Rapprochement Process”, Working Paper, Istanbul: TESEV Publications.

11 Philips (2012):1

inter-societal relations could have far-reaching effects than what state-to-state relations could achieve in years in terms of establishing societal reconciliation. Thus, the football diplomacy between Armenia and Turkey could be regarded as a valuable step towards promoting and intensifying multi-track diplomacy since the latter could address the root causes of conflicts among societies and help to overcome decades of mutual demonization. This short analysis intends to provide a brief overview of a major civil society initiative undertaken by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and its partners towards normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations.¹² After a few remarks on Çukurova University's involvement in the TESEV project, the following analysis will focus on some of the main themes addressed during the meetings in Adana, Yerevan and Istanbul between 2011 and 2012.¹³ Participants' inputs are incorporated with the aim of reflecting varying views and perceptions on the effects of recent developments on Turkey-Armenia relations.

The international conference at Çukurova University was the third in a series of meetings in Anatolian cities¹⁴, with the overall aim of extending the scope of dialogue process between the two countries. Hosting this

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conference in Adana has a historical significance since the Adana province of the Ottoman Empire had a sizeable Armenian population until the early twentieth century. Although there is still a small Armenian community living in Adana and a larger community in the neighbouring city of Antakya, the only traces of Armenian cultural heritage in Adana are a few old houses in the Tepebağ district. Since competing narratives on a history of mutual atrocities in the region might have overshadowed the essence of discussing the current state of relations between Armenia and Turkey, at the initial process of planning the conference, there were a few concerns within the faculty as to whether the conference should be open to public or not. Nonetheless, the president of Çukurova University, Professor Alper Akınoğlu, in particular, provided his full support to host a public event; most of the early contacts with the local governmental bodies, civil society organisations, trade and business associations were encouraging. The conference gathered an audience of more than hundred people including the U.S. Consul, members of the chamber of commerce and municipal council, journalists, representatives of Armenian community of Vakıflı village, local Armenians, representatives from civil society organisations, businesspeople, academics and university students. The conference was particularly successful in terms of engaging young people into the discussion of current issues between the two countries and

¹² Since 2006, TESEV Foreign Policy Programme has been actively contributing to the societal reconciliation process through research activities and publications. The Programme has established a collaborative framework and held a number of conferences, workshops and roundtable discussions in various parts of Turkey and Armenia. For further details, see <http://www.tesev.org.tr/en/program/foreign-policy-program>

¹³ The meetings were conducted under the framework of TESEV's 'Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement' Project.

¹⁴ The conference was conducted under TESEV's 'Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement' Project in November 2011. The previous meetings took place in Kars and Izmir.

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highlighting the importance of cultural and economic exchanges in bilateral relations. While the conference has been highly informative and well received by the attendees, the written feedback collected from students afterwards provided us with meaningful and constructive insights. The most commonly mentioned issues were the lack of not knowing the 'other', being unaware of cultural similarities, and the older generations' resistance to change in contrast to the willingness of younger people to improve relations through communication and a mutual understanding of each other's point of view.

Overall, the discussions in Adana, Yerevan and Istanbul centred around two types of problems affecting the normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey: issues that can be resolved or eased by multi-track diplomacy and those that cannot be resolved in the absence of a genuine commitment to reconciliation at the state level. Whereas facilitating inter-cultural dialogue, bolstering economic cooperation and strengthening academic and research collaboration fall into the former category, border and territorial disputes, the genocide issue, relations with the Armenian Diaspora and the status quo in the Armenian-Azerbaijani-Turkish triangle¹⁵ belong to the latter. Accordingly, it was not surprising

that the meetings mostly contributed to the exchange of opinions concerning the former category. It was a notable input by Vahan Khachatryan, the former mayor of Yerevan, when he pointed out during the meeting in Adana that there are also two types of people in both countries: those who consider the resolution of these issues as indivisible and those who believe that normalisation of relations should not be dependent on any pre-conditions. As frequently addressed during the meetings, there have been increasing signs of polarisation in both societies in the post-protocols period, which could be considered as one of the major factors affecting the current stalemate in the bilateral relationship. According to Philips, "the protocols themselves clearly described the commitments of both parties. But they did not take into account their different hopes and expectations"¹⁶. Although neither Armenia nor Turkey declared pre-conditions for the ratification of protocols at the initial stage, both governments took a step back after negative reactions stirred in their countries.¹⁷ In the words of a participant at the Istanbul meeting:

There are two polarised viewpoints in Turkey: the promoters of anti-Armenian attitude who occasionally prevail as happened in the twentieth anniversary remembrance of the Hocalı massacre and the supporters of liberal democracy, who are looking forward to the resolution of disputes between Armenia and Turkey. But the key issue is seeking new path for transforming this pessimistic period into an optimistic one.

¹⁵ See, Cornell, S. E. (1998) "Turkey and the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: a delicate balance", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34(1): 51-72.

¹⁶ Philips (2012):60

¹⁷ Philips (2012): 60-62

Another participant underlined that shortly after the signing of the protocols Armenians became deeply resentful of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement that Turkey "cannot adopt a positive attitude towards Armenia unless it withdraws from occupied Azerbaijani territories"¹⁸. As a matter of fact, the Caucasus Barometer (CB) survey, presented at the meeting in Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC)¹⁹, reflects a sharp decline in positive public attitudes towards Turkey between 2009 and 2010. According to the survey findings, over 60 per cent of respondents approved doing business with Turks in 2009, whereas this number decreased to over 40 per cent in 2010. In 2010, 16 per cent of respondents declared full support to the Armenian government opening the border with Turkey with no pre-conditions and 31 per cent were not supportive at all.²⁰ Understanding public opinion trends in Armenia offered some useful insights when critically assessing the future of normalisation. Hearing the views of the political elite views were also important in terms of learning about political dynamics of the domestic arena.

During the Yerevan leg of the project, the delegation realized several meetings with their Armenian counterparts, politicians, academics and civil society experts. The meeting with Giro Manoyan, the Director of the International Secretariat of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)

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Dashnaksutyun, was particularly notable given that his political party left the coalition after the signing of protocols and organised a large-scale protest against their ratification in 2009, which at the time received large media coverage in Turkey. Although ARF's official website lists genocide recognition and some other issues as pre-conditions for the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia²¹, Giro Manoyan acknowledged in the meeting that the dynamics of Turkish-Armenian relations have changed and starting diplomatic relations should not have pre-conditions.

The interlinked issues of fostering intercultural dialogue and tackling perceptions of hostility were extensively discussed during the meetings in Armenia. According to the findings of the CB survey in 2010, 37 per cent of respondents believe that people from Turkey have a completely negative attitude towards the country of Armenia, whereas only 1 per cent believes it to be a completely positive attitude. When the respondents from Turkey were asked for reasons of opposing economic rapprochement with Armenia in a public opinion survey conducted by TESEV Foreign Policy Programme in 2011, 21 per cent declared that "Armenians are hostile to Turks". Indeed, a number of personal observations shared by participants during the meetings highlight the

18 "Turkey: Nagorno-Karabakh Settlement Critical to Yerevan-Ankara Deals", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 13, 2009, accessed 01 July 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey-NagornoKarabakh-Settlement-Critical-To-YerevanAnkara-Deals/1850493.html>

19 CRRRC surveys can be reached at <http://www.crrc.ge/oda/>

20 <http://www.crrc.ge/oda/?dataset=5&row=119>

21 The official website of Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) Dashnaksutyun, accessed 01 July 2012, <http://www.arfd.info/arfd-foreign-policy-strategy/>

Even though the opening of borders and establishment of diplomatic relations would be fundamental steps towards normalising Turkey-Armenia relations, it was agreed that redefining identities at the societal level was equally crucial.

enduring anti-Turk and anti-Armenian aspects in both societies. As raised by a few participants during the meetings, there is a general apprehension in both countries that a first visit to Armenia/Turkey or a first contact with an Armenian/Turk may not be as friendly as expected if one reveals his/her national identity. In that respect the meetings in Yerevan were particularly beneficial for participants from Turkey, who were involved in the TESEV project since 2010 and yet were visiting Armenia for the first time. Even though the opening of borders and establishment of diplomatic relations would be fundamental steps towards normalising Turkey-Armenia relations, it was agreed that redefining identities at the societal level was equally crucial. In the words of a scholar from Turkey, “the issue is not the borders. Our minds and hearts are closed to each other”. Although it would be unrealistic to assume a rapid transformation of attitudes, as one participant argued, increasing people-to-people contact is the key to achieve sustainable reconciliation. The debate on public attitudes and national identity raised an important question: how to reach out to the ordinary people of Armenia and Turkey. A critical remark by a participant emphasised this point, “while visits of experts and scholars to Armenia is valuable, the severe problem of micro-nationalism in Turkey and to a less extent in Armenia makes the interaction between the ordinary citizens of two countries much more important”. The need to expand economic and trade ties within this context

was frequently highlighted since it would not only increase cross-border exchange but also act as a catalyser in the normalisation of inter-societal relations. The discussions underlined that strengthening the economic component of relations would be particularly beneficial for the local communities of border provinces where the socio-economic conditions are relatively underdeveloped. Similarly, it was argued that strengthening academic and research ties, initiating student exchange programmes between the two countries would also play an important role in terms of mobilising younger people to actively take part in the normalisation of relations.

As mentioned earlier, the effects of football diplomacy have been particularly visible in terms of accelerating civil society dialogue between the two countries. The TESEV meetings, therefore, created a valuable platform for participants from various NGOs and research centres to share their ideas, knowledge and experience on on-going projects. A critical comment by a participant underlined the importance of publicising the outcomes of such collaborations. He argued that while dialogue channels between NGOs and experts are well developed, it would be essential to use social media channels if the aim is to strengthen public engagement. As a final remark, the meetings throughout various steps of the project highlighted the importance of year 2015 for bilateral relations since it could either revitalise Turkey-Armenia relations or cause a political clash between the parties concerned. Given the role of Armenian diaspora in the preparation for the centennial of 1915 events, several discussants highlighted that engaging in a constructive dialogue with the Armenian

diaspora is the key for sustainable reconciliation and the civil society organisations should actively be involved to facilitate this process.²²

²² A recent announcement by the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs may signal prospective dialogue with the Armenian diaspora: “Not only Turks but anyone (including Jews, Armenians, Arabs) who migrated from these lands constitute our diaspora”. See, ‘El Turco açılımı’, NTVMSNBC, July 07, 2012, accessed 08 July 2012, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25364645>



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TESEV FOREIGN POLICY PROGRAMME

The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing Turkey's most pressing social, cultural, political and economic issues. Based in Istanbul, TESEV was founded in 1994 to serve as a bridge between academic research and the policy-making process in Turkey by opening new channels for policy-oriented dialogue and research.

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