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ARMENIA AND TURKEY: UNPACKING NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES AND  
POLITICAL CONJUNCTURES

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**Author**

Vahram Ter-Matevosyan

## Brief Summary

Dr. Ter-Matevosyan, the author of this article, provides a short analysis on how the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan has shaken the Armenian internal political landscape, security foundations and relations with neighboring and third-party countries. By examining the present relations between Armenia and Turkey, with the latter being a firm supporter of Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the recent attempts by the two sides to appoint diplomatic envoys in order to normalize bilateral relations and the Armenian government's handling of the fragile situation, the author addresses a number of crucial questions in regards to the potential future relations between all sides with the main focus being Armenia's future.

## About the author



**Dr. Ter-Matevosyan** is an ENC Academic Council Member. He is Associate Professor and Chair of Political Science and International Affairs Program at the American University of Armenia. He specializes in foreign and security policies of Turkey and the South Caucasus states. He has received his Dr. Philosophy Degree in history from the University of Bergen (Norway), Master's degree from Lund University (Sweden), Candidate of historical sciences degree from the Institute of Oriental Studies (Armenia). He was Visiting Professor at Duke University, NC (2016), Fulbright Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, CA (2009-2010) and

Visiting Doctoral Student at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA (2005). He has authored two monographs: *“Turkey, Kemalism, and the Soviet Union: Problems of Modernization, Ideology and Interpretation”*, New York & London. Palgrave Macmillan 2019; an award-winning monograph *“Islam in the Social and Political Life of Turkey, 1970-2001”*, Yerevan, Limush, 2008; and co-authored *“History of the Turkish Republic”*, Yerevan State University Press, 2019. His research articles have been published both in edited volumes published by Routledge, Springer and the following peer-reviewed journals: “Nations and Nationalism”, “Third World Quarterly”, “Europe-Asia Studies”, “Turkish Studies”, “Middle Eastern Studies”, “Digest of Middle East Studies”, “Insight Turkey”, “Eurasian Geography and Economics”, “Caucasus Survey”, “Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies”, “Iran and the Caucasus”, “Diaspora Studies”, etc.

## ARMENIA AND TURKEY: UNPACKING NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES AND POLITICAL CONJUNCTURES

The 2020 war has challenged the geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus. Various regional and transregional stakeholders started to talk about peace and the need to address deep-seated animosities. In the aftermath of the war, Azerbaijan has regained control of all its Soviet-time territories around the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast; moreover, it has occupied parts of Karabakh's territory, including the city of Shoushi and the Hadrut region. Still, a year and three months after the November 2020 ceasefire, a plethora of complex questions remain unanswered. The central question for many in Armenia is the status and security of Nagorno Karabakh, which Armenia's government—in the face of the defeat and actual inactivity of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-chair format—feels powerless to address. Azerbaijan vehemently opposes the idea of resuming negotiations on the status and right of the people of Nagorno Karabakh for self-determination, believing that the conflict has been resolved. In reality, though, uncertainty around Nagorno Karabakh has only deepened. With Azerbaijan expanding its military and economic presence around Nagorno Karabakh, no leader of Armenia has visited Stepanakert and Artsakh for over 15 months, something unprecedented for the last three decades. Instead, Armenia's government was busy with another undertaking and this time with Turkey. This short analytical piece aims to discuss certain aspects of the recent rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan. This article will help the reader understand the strategies that the parties are embarking on for another process of rapprochement and the chances for it to succeed this time, considering the previously failed cases of rapprochement in 1992-93 and 2007-09. It will also examine whether the parties, especially Armenia, have considered the lessons of the past.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vahram Ter-Matevosyan (2018) Six Lessons From the Failed Armenian-Turkish Rapprochement <https://evnreport.com/politics/six-lessons-from-the-failed-armenian-turkish-rapprochement/>

## Setting the context

The 311-km long border between Armenia and Turkey is the last closed frontier of Europe which has been sealed since 1991. In the wake of the 45-day war of 2020, Ankara, Yerevan, and Baku have made various statements about the normalization of relations, arguing that the status quo has changed; hence the border may be opened. In December 2020, while reintroducing his 2008 idea of the Caucasus Platform in Baku, Erdoğan made the following statement which again started with a vague conditionality attached: "If Armenia joins this process and takes positive steps... we will open our closed borders to Armenia."<sup>2</sup> Two months later, Armenia's foreign minister stated: "there is no longer any need to keep the border with Armenia closed"<sup>3</sup>, which followed with a statement from Azerbaijan's President claiming that Azerbaijan has "a positive attitude towards the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations... There will be no negative attitude from Azerbaijan [if Turkey decides to open the border and normalize the relations]."<sup>4</sup> Months after the 2020 war, the Armenian government program for 2021-2026 stated: "Opening an era of peaceful development for Armenia and the region... is the greatest mission of the Government."<sup>5</sup>

After months of zigzagging, in mid-December 2021, both Armenia and Turkey announced the appointment of special representatives who, with Russia's facilitation, will discuss the process of normalization of relations between the countries. On January 14, 2022, they had the initial 1,5-hour meeting in Moscow and agreed to hold more meetings in the future without mentioning any date or venue. Last week, they agreed to hold the next meeting in Vienna on February 24. The initial statements from Ankara and Yerevan did not help understand the essence of the negotiations and the issues discussed. Other than agreeing to continue "without any preconditions"<sup>6</sup>—a formulation which derived from Armenia's diplomatic glossary—the

<sup>2</sup> President Erdoğan holds a joint press conference with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan. (2020, December 10). Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/123145/president-erdogan-holds-joint-press-conference-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan>

<sup>3</sup> Ayvazian, A. (2021, February 10). RA FM Ara Ayvazian answers the questions of the NA Parliamentarians. [https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-conference/2021/02/10/ayvazian\\_na/10785](https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-conference/2021/02/10/ayvazian_na/10785)

<sup>4</sup> Ilham Aliyev held a press conference for local and foreign media representatives. (2021). President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. <https://en.president.az/articles/50738>

<sup>5</sup> The Program of the Government of the Republic of Armenia. August 18, 2021. <https://www.gov.am/files/docs/4586.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The meeting of Special Representatives of Armenia and Turkey took place

statements released on the same day did not contain anything useful. However, the statement from Moscow—discussed below—was rather wordy and offered some insights into the strategy of negotiations. Turkey's foreign minister's statements also shed some light on the agreed methodology. Armenian officials were not particularly outspoken, making it difficult to understand their negotiation strategies. The second part of this analysis will offer a framework which can help us understand the patterns and inherent problems in the process.

Contrary to the constructive interpretations that Armenia's government has recently advanced, the essence of Turkey's position on its relations with Armenia has not changed since 1991. For many decades, Turkey has ascertained the following condition: "in the absence of any improvement in the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, any progress to be achieved within the Turkish-Armenian normalization process alone would remain insufficient and would not be lasting and sustainable,"<sup>7</sup> implying that the pro-Azerbaijani resolution of the Karabakh conflict is the only precondition for the normalization. Armenia, meanwhile, has viewed the normalization of interstate relations with Turkey from the perspective of the logic established in the early 1990s: a/relations should be normalized without any preconditions; b/the Karabakh conflict, involving Azerbaijan and Armenia, should be decoupled from the Armenian-Turkish relations.<sup>8</sup>

For Turkey, the Karabakh issue was the most discussed and voiced precondition over the decades; however, it remains only one of the preconditions. The shadow of history looms large over the relations of the two nations. First and foremost, Turkey continues to view the normalization of relations with Armenia from the point of view of unsettled historical-political legacies, followed by Turkey's long-term interests in the Caucasus and geopolitical objectives. Hence, the Karabakh conflict lags behind several fundamental issues in the Armenian-Turkish and Armenia-Turkey relations that I have raised over the last 15 years and summarized in the recent academic article.<sup>9</sup>

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[https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-releases/2022/01/14/meeting\\_armenia\\_turkey/11267](https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-releases/2022/01/14/meeting_armenia_turkey/11267)

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey. (n.d.). Relations between Turkey and Armenia.

<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-armenia.en.mfa>

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. (n.d.). Bilateral relations. Turkey. Ministry of foreign affairs of Armenia. <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/tr>

<sup>9</sup> Vahram Ter-Matevosyan (2021) "Deadlocked in History and Geopolitics: Revisiting Armenia-Turkey Relations," *Digest of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, 155-169.

Over the last decades, using various platforms and opportunities, Ankara has raised several preconditions in front of Armenia, which included but were not limited to the following ones:

- the Republic of Armenia and Armenian Diaspora should halt the worldwide campaign to recognize the Genocide and renounce any claims over land and property compensations and reparations from Turkey;
- Armenia should agree on establishing a committee of historians which will examine the facts about the Armenian Genocide and “establish the truth”.
- Turkey periodically insists on Armenia to reacknowledge the existing border with Turkey, preferably according to the 1921 Kars treaty;
- Armenia should recognize Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and, thereby, close the Karabakh chapter;
- Turkey periodically entertains — sometimes through Azerbaijan<sup>10</sup> — the idea that Armenia should revise its Declaration of Independence adopted in 1990 (and Constitution of 1995), as the document indicates that the Armenian Genocide was committed in Western Armenia, which is the eastern regions of nowadays Turkey;
- Turkey occasionally demands closing down Armenia’s Metsamor Nuclear Power Station, located a few km from the Armenian-Turkish border.
- Turkey has recently started to reintroduce another precondition which it failed to achieve a century ago: establishing a corridor between the Nakhijevan Autonomous Republic, an exclave of Azerbaijan, and the mainland Azerbaijan through Armenia’s sovereign territory in the Syunik province in the south.

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<sup>10</sup> Aliyev demanded Armenia to adopt a new constitution [https://lenta.ru/news/2021/09/27/azer\\_arm/](https://lenta.ru/news/2021/09/27/azer_arm/)

In essence, Armenia and Turkey continue to speak in ‘different languages’ because the gap that has widened over the decades cannot be closed under the influence of suppositious claims about regional peace and stability. This gap will likely be felt during the negotiation process.

### **Negotiation objectives and strategies**

The pace and scope of negotiations will depend on a myriad of factors. In addition to the official positions and previously voiced (pre)conditions, the parties will continue to exercise a set of tactics and strategies to maximize their gains. This section will delineate several directions that the parties will most likely entertain during the process.

*The first observation* is about the role and place of Azerbaijan. Given the changes of the last decade, there are all the indications to claim that Turkey will continue to intimately tie the Nagorno Karabakh question and Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity issue with its negotiation agenda with Armenia. When preparing the 2009 Zurich protocols, Armenia and Turkey, as well as mediators and facilitators, placed far down on their scale of priorities the interests of Azerbaijan assuming the latter will inadvertently and by default benefit from the entire process. This time, the process between Armenia and Turkey will not be limited to the bilateral relations only. That technique worked in the past as it kept the negotiation agenda too busy and talking points too broad, hiding Turkey's pursued negotiation objectives. The fact that the Turkish leadership continues to refer to “consultations with Azerbaijan” in their public statement when talking about Armenia confirms that Turkey continues to prioritize Azerbaijan's interests in line with its strategic goals. It also attests that, unlike the 2007-09 process, now Turkey does not keep Azerbaijan in the shadow, as the latter claimed during the entire period of 'the football diplomacy.' Some voices in Yerevan, which hoped that in the initial stage, Armenia will be able to compartmentalize the Turkish and Azerbaijani interests by setting them apart, seem unrealistic for now. Azerbaijan and its interests will feature in the negotiations, and, at one point, it may even participate in the Armenian-Turkish bilateral negotiations - as several Turkish officials previously hinted. Turkey will advance Azerbaijan's interest as long as the circumstances allow. If the process stalls, the same Azerbaijani excuse could be used to exit the negotiations or defer the implementation of agreements. The Azerbaijani factor was exploited in the past and will be present in the current phase, too.

*The second strategy* is to continue the negotiations with Armenia without a presence of a third party. In 1992-93, Armenia and Turkey were in direct contact when preparing the draft of the first protocols to normalize the relations. Diplomats from both countries were traveling back and forth to conduct negotiations. Later, the meetings were conducted in different cities in the framework of international conferences or gatherings and mostly with the support of the U.S. government. In September 2008, Turkish President Gul visited Armenia to watch the soccer game between the two national teams. Armenian President Sarkisian reciprocated the visit in October 2009. However, when the process slowed down after 2010, the diplomats were meeting in other platforms away from each other's capitals, with a notable exception of December 2013 when FM Davutoglu visited Yerevan in the framework of the BSEC ministerial meeting and FM Nalbandyan visited Ankara to be present at Erdogan's inauguration ceremony in August 2014. In the second half of the 2000s, when 'the football diplomacy' was launched, Switzerland facilitated the process with the presence of the USA with the minimal involvement of Russia. In 2021, however, we saw Russia visibly increase its involvement in the process. However, based on the statements coming from Ankara, parties are keen to sideline Russia and conduct one-on-one negotiations. There are different motivations for doing so. One of them is Turkey's willingness to keep Russia at bay which has its interests in the Turkish-Armenian normalization process. Turkey understands that post-war Armenia looks fragile, and its government is desperate for a foreign policy breakthrough. Armenia's leadership is yearning for "an era of peaceful development," and Turkey does not need a third party to capitalize on it. Based on the Russian reactions, Moscow, at least rhetorically, is not against Armenia and Turkey continuing one-on-one negotiations. If successful, Russia will claim the credits for facilitating its launch and hosting the first meeting. Thus, the parties had a previous history of conducting negotiations without a third party.

*The third aspect* is reiterating a strategy that was introduced in 2009 when the Zurich protocols were initiated. Back then, parties agreed to bring together normalization—establishing diplomatic relations, exchanging diplomatic missions, opening borders—and reconciliation—implementing a dialogue of historical dimension, restoring mutual confidence, and scientific examination of the historical records. That strategy became one of the reasons for the failure of the problem as it carried the risk that the two parties were not capable of overcoming the inherent obstacles. It is

beyond any reasonable doubt that the normalization of state-to-state relations and the establishment of diplomatic relations between countries with a disputed past and a troubled present require an entirely different toolbox and set of policy initiatives than the process of reconciliation. Underestimation of this distinction had severe implications for the entire process. In the 1990s, when discussing the prospects of normalizing relations, the Armenian side made sure to disentangle the Armenian Genocide recognition process from bilateral relations. Armenian officials communicated to their Turkish counterparts that the Armenian Genocide is not a matter of contention nor questioning; hence, there is no point in making it a part of the normalization agenda.<sup>11</sup>

By the same token, when starting negotiations in the late 2000s, both parties had different and sometimes diametrically opposed expectations for the process. Significant asymmetry in the importance Armenia and Turkey ascribe to the process remains. For the Armenian side, it was crucial that Turkey would continue the negotiations without any preconditions. The Armenian side's short-term goal was to establish diplomatic relations with the hope of securing the opening of the border with Turkey and implicitly causing disruption in relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey and changing regional geopolitics by limiting the reliance on Georgia as a transit hub. As for the Turkish side, the pursued objectives were quite different, as Ankara never concealed the reasons for not establishing diplomatic relations and not opening the border. This short explanation alone is sufficient to understand that the two parties sought different objectives and pursued different strategies to attain their goals. For the Armenian side, the normalization of relations came first, while for Turkey, the reconciliation and addressing historical problems were more significant than a mere normalization of relations. Deriving from this observation, the next strategy for the parties should be the following formula: “*normalization now, reconciliation later.*” This is a tactical maneuver that will give the parties a space for flexibility. It will also not impugn the sincerity and frankness of purpose. The phenomena of mutual distrust and suspiciousness will stay there for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>11</sup> Libaridian, G. (1999). The challenge of statehood: Armenian political thinking since independence. Blue Crane Books.

Based on different statements coming from Ankara and Moscow, Ankara is pursuing the same objectives. The statement of the Russian MFA that Armenia and Turkey agreed to conduct negotiations “moving on with ‘small steps’ from easy to difficult one” confirms the analysis above<sup>12</sup>. The small steps entail easy-to-implement policies, which are primarily technical and procedural and do not require much effort other than a political will. Whereas the complex questions pertaining to history and geopolitics also involve the preconditions mentioned above.

These observations derive from studying the history of the previous efforts to normalize relations. The lessons from the past are rather obvious to ignore or neglect. The biggest lesson the parties should endorse is that time matters in these types of negotiations. The parties should also need the help of external players who would incentivize the parties and keep them in the process. Both the EU and Washington have a history helping the parties to find ways of rapprochement. These tools and strategies should be reconfigured and adjusted to the post-2020 regional realities. The power asymmetry between Armenia and Turkey and age-old antagonism, dehumanization, lack of confidence between them requires a constant presence and, perhaps, engagement from external players. The history of the past efforts confirms that. Lastly, the parties should agree to continue the process by merely exchanging protocols on establishing diplomatic relations leaving all other questions to the future if the parties have vested interest in the result and not in the process. Otherwise, if Armenian and Turkish special representatives, or diplomats, for that matter, concentrate on the reconciliation and history and do the job of historians, it will derail the normalization process. At the end of the day, normalization of relations takes place between the governments, while reconciliation, if it occurs at all, is reserved for the people and it may require years, decades and even centuries.

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<sup>12</sup> On the launch of the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey, Jan. 14, 2022, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1794418/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1794418/)

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