

AGOS INTERVIEWS LIBARIDIAN ABOUT TURKEY-ARMENIA RELATIONS

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✘ By Aris Nalci, [Agos](#), Istanbul, 1 March 2010

✘ Former advisor to President Levon Ter-Petrossian, (1991-1998) Prof. Jirair Libaridian answers Agos' questions about The Turkey-Armenia relations and protocols and preconditions.

Q. What do you think about the latest developments in the relations between Turkey and Armenia?

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Q. What do you think about the latest developments in the relations between Turkey and Armenia?

By latest developments I guess you mean the signing of the two protocols between the two countries last year and the political life of these protocols thus far.

The protocols have been criticized by many and from a variety of viewpoints; some of these criticisms are valid, others are not.

There is no doubt that these protocols represent a milestone in the tortured history of the two peoples and the two countries. Much has been written about the documents, as expected; some of what has been written has been jingoistic and, certainly limited in scope. I would like to answer your question by making two points which, I hope, can add to the discussion on the subject.

First, while the signing of the protocols signal the end of a long process, they also constitute the start of another phase in the relations between the two countries, a phase which promised to be as difficult and tortuous as the first. When you try to implement an agreement, what at first are written words on a piece of paper, you must bring words, concepts and goals into life, you have to give breath to sentences and paragraphs; you must invest meaning and intent to change certain realities and create new ones. Agreements, particularly of this magnitude, particularly of this import, require long term nurturing. So there was no question that implementation would be difficult; there was no question that the follow up would require at least as much attention and energy as the process of negotiating them.

The second point is that that difficulty was compounded by what one might call a degree of opportunism on the part of both countries. Let us agree that the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia and the opening of the border, which these protocols stipulate, constitute a momentous event beyond their historic significance and emotional dimension for all involved. Bringing these protocols to full life will change the strategic map of the region; and that region happens to be an important one for a number of important countries and interests in the world. Both Armenia and Turkey have realized this since the break up of the USSR and both have strived to bring this change about. I am not commenting on the effectiveness of methodologies used to achieve this result by the two countries or on the degree to which various leaders on both sides invested the issue with political capital. All I am saying is that there has not been an administration in Armenia or a

government in Turkey that has not wanted to reach the goal of changing the strategic status quo in the region. The problem has been that instead of focusing strictly on that mutually felt need to change the status quo, successive governments in Turkey have thought of the possibility of change as a favor to Armenia and to use this mutually beneficial outcome to extract benefits extraneous to the core issue of strategic considerations. In other words, Turkey has tried to use the opportunity to sign a protocol that would normalize relations between the two countries and open the borders to (1) pressure Armenia to make concessions on Nagorno Karabagh, and (2) to mitigate against the international campaign for the recognition of the 1915 Genocide. A third issue, the recognition of the current border between the two countries by Armenia, possibly the most difficult for the Armenian side, has not been opposed by any administration in Yerevan since independence.

Q. Where does opportunism come in?

The opportunism comes in when we consider the following: instead of retreating from preconditions for the signing of such a protocol or protocols, for reasons we do not yet fully know but may guess, the two countries decided to go ahead and sign these protocols by splitting the difference on the two issues of Karabagh and Genocide recognition.

That is, Armenia accepted the idea of a sub-commission that would look into the events of the past to find "the truth," thus raising the possibility that what we know as the truth may not be the truth; and Turkey agreed to eliminate any direct reference to Karabagh in the written text. Thus, if we were to borrow a modified scoring system from football, Turkey scored one and half points, and Armenia scored one point.

Turkey secured the recognition of the current borders, thus ending any hope some had that the state of Armenia would champion territorial demands from Turkey. Turkey also scored half a point when Armenia agreed that there would be a historical commission to find the truth about history. I consider this was only half a point since such a formulation regarding history allows for the theoretical possibility that a joint commission may determine that the events of 1915 constituted genocide. Successive Turkish governments had always maintained a policy of denial; and although the awkward formulation in the second protocol mandating the creation of a historical sub-commission favors the official Turkish point of view, nonetheless any interpretation of that language would recognize the theoretical possibility.

Armenia's success was in eliminating any direct reference to Nagorno Karabagh from the documents and thus ending the linkage between the two issues—bilateral relations and the Karabagh conflict. The de-linking of the two issues too has been a goal of successive administrations in Armenia.

This is where the opportunism I mentioned comes into play. The two countries went into these agreements by bringing into play issues that were extraneous to the strategic considerations, considerations that had led both capitals to seek a normalization of relations and opening of the

borders. The give and take, however, was not genuine.

Q. Can you explain?

The government of Armenia and its negotiators should have known that the absence of a direct reference to Karabagh in the documents does not signal a change of policy in Ankara. Ankara made that clear in so many ways. One can even "smell" Karabagh in the many principles related to non-interference in the affairs of other countries stressed in the protocols, even if one does not wish to consider the pronouncements by public officials from Ankara, before and after the signing of the documents.

While many Turkish diplomats and government officials have regretted the linkage they made in 1993 between the development of bilateral relations and the Karabagh issue, the policy has been difficult to get rid of.

And the Turkish government knew, or should have known, that any language in the protocols that questions the characterization of the events of the First World War in the Ottoman Empire as Genocide would constitute a time bomb for the Armenian side that would explode as soon as the document was made public.

Thus, instead of leaving aside issues extraneous to the larger question of strategic interests, the two countries used the protocols to settle issues of extraneous significance.

Q. Is this kind of political bargaining unusual for international agreements?

Now, this kind of diplomatic process and give and take is not uncommon in the history of international agreements. Countries deal and negotiate; they must take care of not only long term and strategic interests—if they are lucky enough to have leaderships that care about such issues—but also domestic considerations, especially if they have or claim any democratic credentials.

The point is that the government in Turkey is under tremendous pressure with respect to regional and international issues, as well as in its complicated battle within the republic. And the government of Armenia is suffering from the lack of political capital, not to speak of legitimacy, to defend effectively the concessions it made. Therefore neither could have signed the protocols without paying some tribute to issues that have been emotionally charged for their larger publics. And they have both been vulnerable on the domestic front, perhaps too vulnerable to carry on battles in support of larger strategic interests, devoid of extra baggage.

For strong governments with few battles on hand it is still possible to bring to life agreements that cater to political as well as strategic interests. For governments that do not fit that model it is extremely difficult to carry on such battles that constantly sap your energy as is the case in Armenia, where the government spends most of its time thinking of ways to sap the energy of an opposition that refuses to go away; while in Turkey the government is still seen by some as the opposition,

although it has been elected twice already.

I believe that is where we are as far as the relations between Armenia and Turkey are concerned. They had to put all the capital they had in the signing of the protocols; there is not much left for either to bring those words to life, especially in Armenia.

Q. Where do you think we stand regarding the Nagorno Karabagh conflict?

In principle we should be close to an agreement. I still believe the outline of an agreement was there last autumn. I have reason to believe that is why Turkey was able to sign protocols that did not mention the problem directly.

However, instead of giving such an agreement a push, the protocols and the way they have been handled might have had the reverse effect: we seem to be farther away from a solution than it seemed not too long ago. Not because there are no solutions; rather, because it has become more difficult for (1) the administration in Armenia to follow the protocols with an agreement on Karabagh that will inevitably involve serious concessions, and (2) the government in Turkey to follow through without serious progress in the resolution of the Karabagh conflict.

Unless the forces that compelled the two governments to acquiesce to the deal made in the protocols exert an even greater set of pressures on all parties concerned, a deal on Karabagh is less likely today.

Q. Do you think the pressure exerted on that issue by the Turkish government would work?

The pressure of the Turkish government will not work; it has not worked for 18 years and it is not likely to work now. In fact, it is a mistake for the government and policy makers in Turkey to think in terms of exerting pressure on Armenia to extract concession it cannot otherwise make. Turkey does not have that kind of moral weight or powers of suasion, at least not in Armenia. Turkey has managed to reinforce its worst critics in Armenia and in the Armenian world every time it has tried to use pressure tactics.

Turkey has had a hard time creating goodwill when it has taken positive steps toward Armenia and Armenians in the past. Thinking of relations with Armenia in traditional terms will only reinforce traditional responses.

Q. What are your thoughts on the latest comments made by the President of Armenia and the resolution of the Constitutional Court of Armenia?

I will not comment on the comments of the President of Armenia. These are all predictable and very much related to the conjunction of domestic and international politics.

As for the decision of the Constitutional Court on the constitutionality of the protocols, what is interesting is that the official text goes through great length to invoke not only the Constitution, but also the preamble of Armenia's constitution, the part that refers to the "Declaration of

Independence" (September 1991) which in turn refers to Article 11 of the "Declaration on Independence" (August 1990) that affirms the support of the republic for the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

The fact remains that the court, for whatever it is worth, concluded that the protocols conformed to the Constitution of Armenia; the more curious fact is that the Turkish government decided to raise such noise regarding the details through which the court went to reach that positive conclusion. The positions of the two parties only affirm what I have described above. Both parties are in very vulnerable positions. And they are trying to buy insurance policies. As we know from the debacle of the financial institutions this past year, sometimes companies will buy insurance policies against failure of their investments, while betting that failure will produce more profit through insurance payments for having made bad investments. The difference is that in the case of financial markets what is lost by and large is money; in the case of countries what may be lost are historic opportunities; every loss, every failure in the latter case, makes success more difficult.

For this analysis to be valid it is not necessary to argue that the parties planned it that way. It is necessary to imagine the possibility that the parties went through the motions, and did so to satisfy extraneous needs, and allowed for chips to fall where they may. Turkey got Armenia to appear as if it was questioning the Genocide; Armenia got Turkey to appear as if it was no longer thinking of Karabagh. That is the height of opportunism.

Big countries may afford such luxury. Small countries, not even medium size ones, can afford such games.

