AZERBAIJAN AND TURKEY PROTECT ARMENIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST INADVERTENTLY

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By **Harut Sassounian**, Publisher, The California Courier, 10 September 2009

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On April 22nd, when Armenia and Turkey made public a "Roadmap" to regulate their contentious relations and open their mutual border, Azerbaijan strongly objected, threatening to retaliate against Turkey by taking a number of steps, including cutting off oil supplies. Turkish leaders immediately stopped the implementation of the "Roadmap" in order to appease their "Junior brother," Azerbaijan. Turkish officials repeatedly announced that they would not open their country's border with Armenia, unless the Karabagh conflict was settled to the satisfaction of Azerbaijan. Prime Minister Erdogan felt obligated to fly to Baku in May to make the same pledge in his address to the Azeri Parliament.

But as international pressure mounted on both Armenia and Turkey to go forward with the frozen "Roadmap," Turkish leaders were careful not to alienate Azerbaijan once again. This time around, they fully briefed Pres. Aliyev during every step of their discussions with Armenia, repeatedly assuring Azerbaijan that its interests would be protected and that nothing would be agreed upon with Armenia, unless the Karabagh conflict was first settled. Just before the two Protocols were announced on August 31, Prime Minister Erdogan briefed Pres. Aliyev by telephone and a high-level Turkish delegation flew to Baku for follow-up talks.

A close reading of the lengthy text of the professionally crafted two Protocols and the appended Timetable indicates that the most critical detail – the date of their expected ratification – is left out! The documents spell out in great precision the terms of the agreements as well as the specific deadline for each of "the steps to be undertaken." For example, they state that as of August 31, Armenia and Turkey have six weeks to complete "internal political consultations" before the Protocols are submitted to their respective Parliaments for ratification. The documents also specify the exact timeline for the opening of the border and the formation of various committees.

However, all of these steps are contingent upon the crucial prerequisite of ratification of the Protocols by the two Parliaments, for which no date and no deadline is mandated. The joint announcement issued on August 31 by Armenia and Turkey, simply calls on both sides to "make their best efforts" for the "timely" ratification of the Protocols. The missing deadline is certainly not the result of an oversight!

After securing Armenian officials' agreement to Turkey's two preconditions – the formation of a "historical" committee and recognizing its territorial integrity – Ankara found a clever solution for its third precondition. It made the opening of the border with Armenia contingent upon the resolution of the Artsakh conflict, without including a direct reference to this requirement in the Protocols.

Since the ratification of the proposed agreement by the two Parliaments does not have a particular deadline, the Turkish government will probably apply its extensive diplomatic resources to pressure Armenia – via the OSCE Minsk Group of mediators on Artsakh, composed of France, Russia and the United States – into making concessions acceptable to Azerbaijan.

Turkey could therefore be expected to delay the ratification of the Protocols by its Parliament until Azerbaijan's conditions are met on Artsakh. In recent days, several Turkish commentators pointed out this gaping loophole in the Protocols, boasting that Turkey would not open its border until Armenia makes territorial concessions on Artsakh. Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu made that same pledge practically on a daily basis since the August 31 announcement. Interestingly, Pres. Aliyev has not said one critical word about this agreement which calls for the opening of the border with Armenia – something he vehemently opposes. The reason is that he is assured by Ankara that nothing of that sort would take place until Artsakh is delivered to him on a silver platter!

Armenia's President and Foreign Minister, on the other hand, have been repeatedly stating that they would not accept any linkage between the Artsakh negotiations and the opening of the Turkish border. In order to preserve their own credibility and safeguard the country's national interests, Armenia's leaders should not make even the smallest concession on Artsakh and not ratify these Protocols, until the Turkish Parliament ratifies them first. But, since Turkey refuses to ratify them without the settlement of the Artsakh conflict, the whole agreement would collapse and the international community would then hold Turkey solely responsible for its failure!