

# "SOCCER DIPLOMACY" LETS OLD FOES KICK ASIDE DECADES OF ANIMOSITY

*Posted on October 15, 2009 by Keghart*

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✘ By Suzan Fraser, [The Toronto Star](#), 15 October 2009

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Turkey won the match 2-0. After the first goal in the 16th minute, Sarkisian shook Gul's hand to congratulate him.

The pair smiled to applause in the tightly policed stadium, in a scene unthinkable before the two countries launched a peace process seen as bolstering Turkey's European Union membership ambitions.

White doves were released from the stands.

"We are not writing history. We are making history," Gul said in talks between the two delegations before the match.

"Remember two years ago and just think how far we have come since then ... what is important is to bring peace and stability to the whole region," Gul told reporters at a later reception.

"Both sides have achieved a lot and this is the evidence," Sarkisian said.

The game, televised live in both countries, began after Turkish fans booed and whistled as an announcer read out the Armenian lineup, and cheered the Turkish players.

The announcer urged fans to show "traditional Turkish hospitality" to the visiting team and not to jeer or whistle during the playing of the Armenian national anthem. His appeal was mostly ignored. Police in riot gear stood outside the stadium. A bus taking Armenian journalists to the stadium was pelted with stones by Turkish fans, but there were no injuries or broken windows.

Before the game, Gul and Sarkisian congratulated each other for taking bold steps toward a reconciliation that could have wider benefits for the Caucasus region, said two Turkish diplomats who were at the meeting.

The diplomats said Sarkisian explained his difficulties in trying to persuade some Armenian groups to support a deal with Turkey, but said supporters would outnumber opponents over time. He stressed his recent meetings with the powerful Armenian Diaspora were a briefing process, and he was not "seeking permission" from them to reconcile with Turkey, the Turkish officials said.

Big obstacles to a full rapprochement remain. Armenians accuse the Turks of genocide in 1915. Turkey strongly denies this, acknowledging thousands of Armenians were killed but saying this happened in fierce fighting in which many Ottoman Turks also died.

The countries have agreed to set up a commission to study the issue, though they are unlikely to give much ground on their positions.

"Today's game was a good chance to see what has been done over this past year and what will be done for the fast ratification of the protocols," Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian told reporters at the reception.

"It will open closed doors that had divided our two peoples."

Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey of Switzerland, along with the foreign ministers of Turkey and Armenia, also attended the soccer match.

All three participated in last weekend's signing in Switzerland of the agreement, which needs to be approved by the parliaments of both countries.

Both teams have already been knocked out of the World Cup qualifying competition, so neither can deliver a killer blow to the other's athletic hopes. Turkey won the first game against Armenia 2-0 in Yerevan in September 2008.

