WHO WILL BLINK FIRST ... ARMENIA OR TURKEY?

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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 3 September 2009

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In a previous joint statement released on April 22, Armenian and Turkish officials stated that they had agreed to a "roadmap" which was to normalize their relations "within a reasonable timeframe." At the time, the two sides had indicated their agreement in principle by "initialing" the two protocols, the text of which was not published until August 31. This lengthy delay was due to Turkey backing down from the "roadmap" under pressure from Azerbaijan. Pres. Aliyev had insisted that Turkey keep its border with Armenia closed until the Karabagh (Artsakh) conflict is resolved.

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During the ensuing months, in the absence of any progress in Armenian-Turkish relations, there was widespread speculation on whether Pres. Serzh Sargsyan would agree to travel to Turkey on October 14, to attend the World Cup qualifying soccer match between the national teams of the two countries. The Armenian President attempted to pressure Turkey to keep its end of the bargain in the declared "roadmap," by announcing that he would go to Turkey only if the border were open, or on the threshold of being opened.
The American government was also pressuring Turkey to move forward with the envisaged agreement with Armenia. In recent days, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton telephoned both Pres. Sargsyan and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, to help overcome any remaining stumbling blocks. Since Pres. Obama had broken his campaign promise by not using the term "Armenian Genocide" in his April 24 statement, under the pretext that doing so would undermine the on-going "delicate" negotiations between Armenia and Turkey, the United States sought some progress in these two countries' relations, as a face saving measure for the American President.

As a result, Armenia and Turkey disclosed for the first time on August 31 the actual text of the two

protocols and announced that they "have agreed to start their internal political consultations" on the "Protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations" and the "Protocol on the development of relations." These consultations are to be completed within six weeks, after which the two states will sign and submit these Protocols to their respective Parliaments for ratification.

The first Protocol commits the two sides to open their common border and to establish diplomatic relations. It also requires Armenia and Turkey to recognize "the existing border between the two countries as defined by the relevant treaties of international law." This is an important requirement for Ankara as it seeks to put an end to Armenian claims to "historic Armenian lands," now part of the territory of the Republic of Turkey. On the other hand, many Armenians would reject this provision, as they want to leave the door open for future claims on the usurped territories, including Mount Ararat.

The second Protocol contains the most controversial element of both documents. It states that Armenia and Turkey "agree to implement a dialogue on the historical dimension with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations, including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations." An "intergovernmental bilateral commission" would first be established, comprised of several sub-commissions, one of which would deal with "historical" issues. A "Timetable" attached to the second Protocol further specifies that Armenian, Turkish as well as Swiss and other international experts shall take part" in the deliberations of "the sub-commission on the historical dimension."

These two Protocols are bound to raise serious concerns and could cause major political turmoil within Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia.

Pres. Aliyev would most probably once again go on a rampage against Turkey, as he did during the announcement of the first "roadmap" on April 22. Given Azerbaijan's valuable energy resources and their transit through Turkey, Ankara's leaders can ill-afford to ignore Aliyev's temper tantrums!

There could also be turmoil within Turkey as both the political opposition and elements of the "deep state" may organize massive demonstrations and denounce Pres. Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan for being unpatriotic and favoring relations with Armenia over "brotherly" Azerbaijan. Such accusations could chip away just enough votes from the ruling majority in the Turkish Parliament to reject the ratification of the Protocols.

Ratification is also not a foregone conclusion in Armenia. For more than a year, many Armenians both in Armenia and the Diaspora have vigorously complained to the government about the wisdom of negotiating such an agreement. They objected to the plan to establish a sub-commission on "historical" issues, which by its very nature would cast doubt on the veracity of the Armenian Genocide. In addition, many Armenians do not accept "the existing border" with Turkey, in order not to preclude future Armenian territorial claims. The apprehension created by this document could lead to large demonstrations both inside and outside of Armenia and cause serious political

dissension, jeopardizing Armenia's stability and security.

Given the pressure brought to bear on the Armenian government by Russia, the United States, and Europe, it will not be easy for Yerevan to back down from going forward with this agreement. Nevertheless, all is not lost. It is wholly possible that as a result of a sharp confrontation between Azerbaijan and Turkey on this issue, compounded by domestic opposition to the Gul/Erdogan regime, the Turkish government may quietly urge its parliamentary majority not to ratify these Protocols. To maintain the heat on Turkey and force it to blink first, Armenia should not sign any agreement with Azerbaijan over Artsakh for the time being. It is also possible that the outcry by Armenians worldwide against these Protocols would convince the Armenian government not to go through with this agreement and urge its majority in Parliament to vote against it.

Unfortunately, the repeated warnings to the Armenian authorities by this writer and others at the start of these negotiations went unheeded. It would have been much easier back then to make appropriate policy adjustments and take corrective measures. Should Armenia back down from this agreement first, it may bring upon itself the wrath of the major powers. Nevertheless, at this critical juncture, the Armenian government's preeminent concern should be safeguarding the country's national interest rather than earning brownie points from foreign powers!