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## Turkish-Armenian Relations: Will Football Diplomacy Work?

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The Georgian-Russian crisis, the political and economic alienation of Armenia in the Caucasus, Turkey's new project to establish the Caucasus Stability Platform, and the Turkish and Armenian administrations' willingness to normalize relations have created a suitable atmosphere in which to put an end to the problems between Turkey and Armenia. Turkish President Abdullah Gul accepted the invitation of his counterpart, Armenian President Serge Sarkisian, to watch the World Cup-qualifying football match between Turkey and Armenia in Yerevan. This visit was considered an important symbolic move. It will be a matter of time to see whether this 'football diplomacy' will pave the way for the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

In a historic gesture, Armenian President Serge Sarkisian recently invited Turkish President Abdullah Gul to watch the World Cup qualifying football match between the national teams of the two countries. This invitation came amid hopes for a breakthrough in relations between Turkey and Armenia. And President Gul did in fact go to Armenia to watch the football match as a goodwill gesture on 6 September 2008. Diplomatic history suggests that détente and the development of relations between countries may come through sports events. The most famous form is known 'ping-pong diplomacy' which paved the way for a détente between the U.S. and China during the Cold War era, following China's invitation of the U.S. table tennis team to Beijing for a series of exhibition matches in 1971.

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Although Sarkisian’s invitation was extended to Gul before the recent conflict in Georgia, the move was nonetheless regarded as an important step toward normalizing relations in its aftermath. It would be an exaggeration to regard the football match as a historical turning point. However, it will certainly have a symbolic influence on attempts to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey. Interestingly, it is a little known fact that Armenian football teams have for some time organized their preparation camps in Antalya. They have not encountered any difficulties. The football match and Turkey’s Caucasian initiative have brought Turkish-Armenian relations to the political agenda of the two countries and created renewed hope for the normalization of relations both within Turkey and Armenia and in international circles.

Turkish-Armenian relations are shaped by the wider framework of Turkey’s Caucasian policy and the binding impact of the Armenian Diaspora. Armenia is a

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landlocked mountainous country in Southern Caucasus, with a population of 3.3 million and an area of roughly 30.000 square kilometers. It is bordered on the north and south east by Georgia and Iran, and on the east and west by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Ankara’s relations

with Yerevan have struggled with the same problem of normalization since its recognition of Armenia. Turkey seems more active in seeking a solution for the problems between the two countries while Armenia has historically pursued a consistently uncooperative attitude in this problematic relationship. Turkey recognized Armenia earlier than many states, and invited Armenia to join the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization as a founding member in 1993 despite the fact that Armenia has no shore on the Black Sea. Turkey provided energy to Armenia when it faced serious energy shortages in the 1990s. Turkey also donated one hundred thousand tons of wheat to Armenia during those years, despite the negative image of Armenia in Turkey. Yerevan-Istanbul flights are operational despite the closure of the land borders. Turkey also tolerates thousands of illegal Armenian workers in Turkey. Moreover, Turkish authorities have renovated several Armenian cultural and artistic artifacts in different places in Turkey.

In contrast, Armenia constantly voices allegations of genocide in every possible international forum and aims to corner Turkey with genocide blame in international circles. The Armenian parliament referred to Turkey’s eastern provinces as “western Armenia” in its declaration of independence dated 23 August 1990. This declaration also calls international society to recognize



Armenia's genocide allegations. The Yerevan administration does not recognize the Gumru and Kars Agreements that established the Turkish-Armenian border in 1920 and 1921 respectively.

One major factor preventing the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia is Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan. Armenia occupies one fifth of Azerbaijani territory and ignores the UN Security Council decisions against the occupation. Ankara has close ties to Baku, and benefits from energy cooperation deals; Azerbaijan thus closely follows developments in relations between Armenia and Turkey. Azerbaijan is Turkey's major partner in the region and will continue to be the most important country for Turkey to take into consideration. For its part, the Armenian state considers Turkey and Azerbaijan as serious threats to its national security and territorial integrity. The Armenian administration therefore pursues a balancing policy through the maintenance of close relations with Russia and Iran. Russian soldiers provide security for Armenian borders, and Russia has military bases in Armenia. Russia is a strategic partner and protector against potential Azerbaijani and Turkish aggression in the eyes of the Armenian administration. Armenia's balancing policy has remained a major tenet of its foreign policy in the post-independence period.

A fear of encirclement lurks in the background of Armenia's domestic politics and foreign policy. The immediate effect of this fear is an inward-oriented domestic policy and an insecure foreign policy line. Armenia has problems with all of its

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neighbors except Iran. Energy supply lines and new transportation networks have excluded Armenia while generating considerable amounts of foreign income

for Azerbaijan as an energy-rich country and for Georgia and Turkey as the hosts of pipelines extending to world markets. Armenia's difficulties with Georgia stem from the former's close ties to Russia; its clashes with Azerbaijan stem from the occupation and the Karabakh question; and its relations with Turkey are uneasy due to territorial demands and genocide allegations. In addition to this tense regional situation, Armenia also feels the effects of an instable domestic political environment, economic difficulties, and a rising level of unemployment. Armenian foreign trade is overwhelmingly dependent on Georgian ports; the recent bombing of Georgia's Poti Port by Russia during the August crisis will worsen the economic situation. Armenia thus feels an urgent need to reconsider its regional relations; Armenia's economic and political alienation in the region creates an impetus to normalize its relations with Turkey.

The Russian-Georgian crisis will likely have a devastating impact on the already deteriorating Armenian economy. It will also complicate Armenia's problems with regional countries. From an international perspective, the geopolitical necessity of



normalizing Turkish-Armenian relations is to loosen the Russian-Armenian-Iran axis, and even, if possible, to pull Armenia from this axis altogether. Although improving Turkish-Armenian relations would be certain to decrease Russian influence in Armenia, the region-wide dialogue among countries for regional stability and security need not aggravate Russia and Iran. Turkey's fresh approach of including both Azerbaijan and Armenia in regional peace efforts may end the Cold War style binary oppositions in the region. And the Armenian administration recognizes the need to put an end to the inimical patterns that create cycles of violence in the region.

Although Turkey and Armenia do not have diplomatic relations, behind-the-scene diplomacy continues between both sides. Groups within the two states approve or oppose to these secret talks. Turkey's response to Iran's mediation offer, i.e. that "we already talk to Armenia," uncovered the hidden diplomacy. In the wake of the Georgia-Russia crisis, moreover, Ankara streamlined a multilateral diplomatic

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initiative, declaring that it wants Armenia to join the new project: the Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform. Turkey's attitude shows that Ankara has an inclusionary approach toward Armenia in the regional context. To date, the Armenian

administration has responded positively to the offer, and has indicated that it considers it a constructive attempt.

However, there is not much change in the Armenian attitude overall. The only tangible change is the mild tone of President Sarkisian, which contrasts with the inflexible and harsh attitude of former President Petrosyan, and Sarkisian's expression of goodwill in regard to several issues. Time will tell whether this rhetorical change will bring to bear any positive influence on the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. Turkey pursues a multi-dimensional foreign policy toward the Caucasian region and endeavors to utilize any opportunities that arise to include Armenia in regional cooperation projects. It is doubtful, however, whether such an approach alone will solve the direct problems between Turkey and Armenia. Armenian and Turkish publics harbor mixed feelings toward President Gul's visit to Armenia and toward normalization of relations in general. The Armenian opposition favors normalization, while the Armenian Tasnaksutyun Party opposes any rapprochement. The latter party has strong economic and political links with the Armenian Diaspora and acts as a strong anti-Turkish group in Armenia. In Turkey, the major opposition parties, i.e. the Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Action Party, both criticized President Gul's visit to Armenia. Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan backed



President Gul's visit, considering it a constructive step toward normalization of relations. The Azerbaijani government refrains from commenting on Turkish-Armenian relations, although some weak voices express hope that Turkey's developing relations with Armenia may serve as a prelude for freeing Azeri territories under occupation. At the same time, there is strong criticism among the Azerbaijani opposition against any progress in Turkish-Armenian relations.

Turkey's moves for normalizing relations were faced with the Armenian responses calling for "talks without any precondition" and "opening borders." While the Armenian administration opposed any precondition, it also called upon Turkey not to emphasize the occupied territories, to forget about the Karabakh issue and to accept the genocide allegations. However, it is the Armenian side that desperately needs the border to open. Now that Armenia has recognized this urgent need and adopted a milder attitude, there may be chance to build trust, in particular through economic and societal relations. There will be substantial benefits on both sides of the long-sealed border in the event of normalization.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The recent Russia-Georgia crisis has shown regional countries the importance of peace and stability. The regional status quo should change, and the new regional order should be based on a novel rhetoric and practice of economic interdependence, political cooperation, regional stability and prosperity. Turkish-Armenian rapprochement would be a necessary step toward this new regional order. The following points may help to expedite the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

1. The Armenian Diaspora and Armenia should be treated differently. There is more room to maneuver with Armenia, while the Diaspora is focused on genocide allegations. Moreover, Armenian interests differ from the Diaspora's priorities and Armenia needs to normalize relations with Turkey to prosper economically. Careful diplomacy is needed in order to limit the Diaspora's influence on the bilateral relations. It will be wise to postpone resolution of the genocide issue so that other immediate problems impeding a rapprochement can be addressed. There is an absolute need to put history and emotions aside for some time, especially at a time when *Realpolitik* forces the two countries to cooperate in the interest of regional peace and security.
2. Turkey's policy toward Armenia is to a large extent based on countering the genocide allegations and isolating Yerevan in the regional context. This defensive line should be replaced with a proactive one that confidently states what Turkey expects Armenia to do for normalization. The first demand may be Armenia's recognition of Turkey's territorial integrity borders, which will prepare the ground for opening the border.



3. Russia and Iran are key countries with an interest in Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Their indirect support could serve to accelerate the normalization process. Turkey's ability to follow an inclusive approach may prevent any concern in Tehran and Moscow regarding normalization. Turkey and Armenia need to be on the same side to secure the ground for peace and stability in the Caucasus. Turkish policymakers should therefore pursue a multidimensional approach to persuade Iran and Russia that a rapprochement will not threaten Iranian and Russian interests. Rather, both stand to reap the benefits of regional peace and stability.
4. The normalization of relations with Armenia would strengthen Turkey's regional profile in the Caucasus, and could open the way for new mediator and facilitator positions for Turkey in several Caucasian conflicts and problems. The Minsk initiative and UN-based attempts did not produce any result in the quest to solve the Karabakh question. Such attempts are not likely to solve other problems either. There is thus a need for initiatives from within the region. Turkey's Caucasian initiative would be a likely starter.
5. Turkey should strengthen its inclusionary approach toward Armenia in the regional context. This change of attitude would force Armenia to drop its preconditions for normalizing relations, while strengthening Turkey's policy of zero-problems with its neighbors.
6. Turkey's moves toward normalization will generate support from the European Union, the U.S. and the international community. This support should also be used to facilitate a change in Armenia to respect Turkish borders. The U.S. and European administrations need to re-evaluate the Diaspora's policies, which have the effect of disengaging Armenia from geopolitical reality in its region, through utilization of American and European sources. Such a policy of isolationism only strengthens Russian influence in the region. This situation may not be exactly what the U.S. and European administrations envision to see in the aftermath of the Georgian crisis.
7. Turkey should spend more energy on establishing a joint commission of historians to undertake an objective and scientific study of the genocide allegations. The Armenian Diaspora and the Tasnaksutyun Party oppose this idea on the ground that it would amount to questioning the authenticity of genocide allegations. However, it may be easier to persuade the Armenian administration for the utility of such an initiative.
8. Ankara needs to make sure that it pays attention to Azerbaijani concerns while developing relations with Armenia. The only way to wield any influence on Armenia is to keep a dialogue channel open. It would be unfair to urge Turkey to close the doors to Armenia, while Azerbaijani leaders are



pursuing diplomatic activity with the Armenian government. Turkish policymakers should continue to underline the need for Armenia to put an end to its occupation of Azerbaijani territories in the interest of regional peace and stability.

9. There is an urgent need for a region-wide initiative for civil society dialogue. Inter-governmental measures may fail without strong support for peace and dialogue from the societal level. Turkish-Armenian civil society dialogue should be encouraged and supported. Even a touristic visit to Yerevan may show that the genocide issue is not central to the lives of Armenians. The years-long gap between the two neighbors may be bridged through civil society activities.

