

## **Reconciliation Initiatives: Emerging Patterns in Turkey**

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In the last ten years, steps aimed at reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia have exponentially increased. Armenians and Turks have been meeting each other regularly and visiting each other's country more and more frequently every year. Over the course of the 2000s the Turkish drive for reconciliation with Armenians has been a result of the interplay, or synergy, of three main components: general democratization, driven by an intellectual elite and aided by Turkey's EU accession process; bilateral civil society projects -funded almost entirely by Western sources; and diplomatic initiatives between the two countries.

Donor-funded reconciliation projects between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have fostered more informed media coverage about "the other," forged links between businessmen, youth, artists, and academics, and helped to create a community of stakeholders in the reconciliation process. However, a significant gap exists between those involved in bilateral initiatives and the wider public at large. This reality also has policy implications, by limiting the maneuvering space of decision makers, and shaping political expedience patterns. This paper seeks to provide a perspective from the Turkish side about both what has been achieved and the weak links of the civilian component of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement over the past decade.

### **I. Democratization in Turkey and the beginnings of a new debate**

Over the past decade, strides in Turkey's democratization have empowered critical thinking within segments of society, increased the freedom to explore and express new opinions on history, and have helped to connect with Armenian counterparts. In turn, more and more Turkish historians and writers have challenged the official "1915 narrative."

In 2000, Professor Halil Berktaş of Sabancı University gave a full-page interview to the daily newspaper “Radikal,” placing responsibility for the death of 600,000 Armenians on the top echelon of the Turkish nationalist movement leading the Ottoman government at the time (“Young Turks”).<sup>1</sup> This interview was emblematic of a new development in Turkey- a debate of the Armenian question: whereas previously challenging historical taboos on this issue had previously been limited to relatively more marginal circles of society (i.e. reaching and influencing a narrow audience)<sup>2</sup> it was now on the verge of becoming mainstream.

Since the turn of the century, Turkish books uncovering different facets of the Armenian question, such as Fethiye Cetin’s *Anneannem* (My Grandmother) in 2004, Elif Safak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul* in 2009, for some examples, were not only published, but became bestsellers. The 2005 publication *90. Yılında Ermeni Trajedisi- 1915’te Ne Oldu* (The Armenian Tragedy in its 90<sup>th</sup> year - What happened in 1915?), edited by *Hurriyet* columnist Sefa Kaplan, provided a wide range of views on the issue. Ece Temelkuran’s *Ağrı’nın Derinliği* (The Depth of Ararat) in 2008 was another example of the diversification and mainstreaming of Turks challenging taboos on this topic.

In September 2005, a conference on the fate of Ottoman Armenians was held at Bilgi University, entitled “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy.” Many panelists referred to the 1915 tragedy as a “genocide” and “the world kept turning,” to borrow a phrase from the headlines of the daily “Radikal” newspaper at the time.<sup>3</sup>

Another groundbreaking event was the apology campaign of December 2008, in which a number of signatures were collected protesting against the “insensitivity showed to and

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<sup>1</sup> Nese Duzel, “Ermenileri özel örgüt öldürdü”, (A special organization killed the Armenians), *Radikal*, 9 October 2000.

<sup>2</sup> ESI Report, Noah’s Dove Returns- Armenia, Turkey, and the Debate on Genocide, 21 April 2009, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

<sup>3</sup> *Radikal*, 25 September 2005 [www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=165051](http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=165051) For additional views on this event from the same newspaper: [www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=165025](http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=165025)

the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915.”<sup>4</sup>

The widening of debate was aided by certain policy improvements as well. On 30 April 2008, amendments to Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code were adopted by the Turkish parliament.<sup>5</sup> Although there is still leeway for judges to prosecute statements “that offend the Turkish nation,” the amendments expanded the scope of the freedom of expression, reducing the maximum sentence and requiring the minister of justice’s consent for the launching of a criminal case regarding the charge of insulting the nation.” The leader of the ultra-nationalist Grand Union of Jurists Association, Kemal Kerincsiz, who had been in the forefront of initiating court cases against such prominent names as authors Elif Safak, Orhan Pamuk, and others, was imprisoned in January 2008 as part of an investigation against a secret ultra-nationalist network within Turkey.

Another positive policy-related development was a change to the Foundation Law, lifting some obstacles particularly relevant for the property rights of Armenian minority-owned (as well as other) foundations – and opening the way for the restoration of unused Armenian churches in Anatolia.

The relative mainstreaming of a more open debate about Turkey’s joint history with Armenians has not only pushed Ankara to adjust policies and practices,<sup>6</sup> but has also added nuance to the perception of a monolithic Turkish nation among Armenians. The outpouring of sadness and solidarity among Turks following the murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007, for example, stimulated the breaking of traditional stereotypes among Armenians.

Armenian television coverage at the time broadcast footage from the mourning during the funeral procession, and the subsequent debate reflected in the written media was

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<sup>4</sup> [www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10566612.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10566612.asp)

<sup>5</sup> Novelist Orhan Pamuk and “Agos” newspaper editor Hrant Dink have also been prosecuted under Article 301.

<sup>6</sup> Including the replacement of the hardline president of the Turkish Historical Society in August 2008.

emblematic of both changing and unchanging perceptions – and evidence of a new, more pluralist discourse within Armenia regarding Turkey and Turks.

While the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) youth group held a protest with banners alleging that “The genocide is continuing” and “Turkey, your hands are bloody!”, the daily newspaper affiliated with the ARF, “Yerkir,” explained that “European civil society should be alert and conclude from this murder that there was never and there is no democracy and freedom of speech in Turkey.”<sup>7</sup>

Levon Melik-Shahnazaryan, an Armenian political scientist, noting that while some were claiming Turkey was becoming more democratic and tolerant, argued that it was only “window dressing,” contending that “today we see the same phenomenon which was in the past: flowers and banner for the outside world and internal readiness to kill in reality. A nation’s mentality is quite conservative, and does not change with time.”<sup>8</sup>

Others argued in a different vein, however. For example, “Haykakan Zhamanak” newspaper columnist Anna Hakobyan, known for her critical views on Turkey, wrote:

“The scene on TV was really impressive. The waves of hundreds of thousands of people accompanying Hrant Dink’s coffin were impressive; the applause that was audible from time to time was impressive; “We are all Armenians, we are all Hrant Dink”, “Stop Article 301”, “Shoulder to shoulder against fascism” posters and similar sounding calls were impressive.”<sup>9</sup>

## **II. The evolving scene of NGO projects**

Throughout the course of the 1990s, there was relatively little contact between Turkish and Armenian NGOs, and press coverage during that period reflected little information

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<sup>7</sup> Yerkir Newspaper, 22 January 2007, [yerkir.am/archive/](http://yerkir.am/archive/)

<sup>8</sup> XXI Century Nothing Changed in Turkey, 27 January 2007, [www.panarmenian.net/eng/world/news/20791/](http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/world/news/20791/)

<sup>9</sup> Anna Hakobyan, 'Everything is heading to reconciliation', “Haykakan Zhamanak,” January 24, 2007

and much emotion in covering issues relating to Armenia.. There were various reasons for this situation.

First, the two countries were separated by the USSR border since the 1920s – and much of the coverage of Armenians and the Armenian issue was negatively affected by the terrorism conducted against Turkish diplomats by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Atrocities committed during the Nagorno Karabagh war also inflamed Turkish public opinion.<sup>10</sup> Armenian pursuit of genocide recognition in parliaments around the world was perceived as an act of hostility against Turkey. Using the Anti-Terror Law as well as the Turkish Penal Code, court cases were repeatedly launched against intellectuals challenging Turkish state policies and rhetoric. Legislation, under which Turkish NGO's functioned, was also restrictive. In short, the climate in the 1990s was largely negative in Turkey, and not conducive to the already weak civil society organizations to make overtures to Armenian counterparts (of which there were, of course, few at the time).

In the 1990s, the bulk of bilateral civil society engagement involved Turkish and Armenian academics meeting in various European cities to present historical analyses and discussion.<sup>11</sup> Most Armenian participants were from among the Armenian diaspora, while Turkish participants were usually left-leaning liberals who found themselves at odds with the Turkish state on numerous human rights issues since the 1970s and 80s. Reactions to such gatherings and the publications produced in their aftermath were highly negative in the Turkish press, and occasionally penalized by the state in the form of the banning of books and the initiation of court cases.

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<sup>10</sup> Depicted in detail from the press coverage presented in the MA thesis of Yakup Hurç entitled, “The Karabagh Policy of Turkey.” Department of History Institute of Social Science University of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Exceptions include the advocacy of an open border by the Turkish Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC) since 1997 and such personal initiatives as the trip to Armenia by Gurbuz Capan, then Esenyurt mayor. Details can be found in the chapter by Tigran Mkrtchyan titled “The Role of NGOs in Turkey-Armenia Rapprochement” publication forthcoming in Mustafa Aydın(ed), *Traditional Security Threats and Regional Cooperation in the Southern Caucasus*, IOS Press, 2011. (Volume 77 in the book series: NATO Science for Peace and Security Series - E: Human and Societal Dynamics.)

By 2000, an era more conducive to Turkish and Armenian NGO collaboration had dawned. The Karabagh-related anger within Turkey lost some of its vigor, NGOs were stronger, Turkey had been admitted as a candidate for EU membership, Ankara was reaching out to neighbors with which its relations had been problematic- such as Syria, Greece and Russia- and the country was undergoing a dramatic course of legislative reform.

Bilateral NGO projects began on a more systematic basis in 2001 with financing from the US State Department, managed by the American University's Center for Global Peace in Washington, DC. The first wave of approximately 13 projects lasted until early 2005. Of these, the one with the highest profile was the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC).

At the time of the start of these projects, the issue was novel not only for the NGOs who got involved, but for the public and media representatives in both countries as well. Negative reactions from nationalist groups and parties of both countries erupted, but with lessening fervor and impact as the interaction become more common.

An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the projects managed under the supervision of the American University's Center for Global Peace was prepared with the support of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) in 2006, released in the form of a book by the Yerevan-based International Center for Human Development (ICHD).<sup>12</sup> The book pointed out that many of the projects seemed to have had little impact beyond increasing familiarity between a narrow circle of people from both countries towards "the other," fond memories of socialization, and providing temporary livelihood to the NGOs involved. In 2005, David Phillips – who was the facilitator of TARC and was also leading the planning phase of the bilateral NGO projects –also authored a book, primarily

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<sup>12</sup> Track 2 Diplomacy, Armenian-Turkish Track 2 projects: Assessment of Best Practices, Yerevan, 2006. [www.ichd.org/files/pdf/T2D\\_Book.pdf](http://www.ichd.org/files/pdf/T2D_Book.pdf)

relating the experiences of TARC entitled, *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation*.<sup>13</sup>

From 2006-7 onwards, a new phase can be identified in Turkish-Armenian reconciliation efforts among civil society. A diverse group of donors with experience working in the Caucasus region started to support Turkish-Armenian rapprochement projects. The range of actors from both Armenia and Turkey involved in the bilateral work expanded. The increased traffic and coverage “normalized” interaction between musicians, businessmen, youth, think tanks, media, and opinion makers. This process was aided by high-level contacts between the Turkish and Armenian authorities, which “legitimized” the notion of interaction between the two peoples. In this sense, the visit of President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan for the World Cup qualifying football match in September 2008 was most noteworthy. The changing paradigms in Turkey’s domestic scene, described in the previous section of this article, also positively effected bilateral NGO collaboration.

Funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), dispersed through the implementation of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (which has an office in Armenia, although not in Turkey), provided grants for Turkish-Armenian reconciliation projects since 2006. Grants from, among others, the Swiss, German, British, Norwegian, and British diplomatic corps, German foundations (such as the Friedrich Naumann and Friedrich Ebert Stiftungs), and the Open Society Institute (OSI) have helped to diversify sources of funding and widen the scope of stakeholders.<sup>14</sup>

Although NGO activities are still on the rise in terms of frequency and the range of actors involved, a plateau may be discerned in terms of the relative added value (the marginal returns) of projects. A circle of activists and intellectuals on both sides are accustomed to traveling to the other country and working with colleagues from the other country, as well as having enjoyable times together. The newspapers and TVs cover a wider range of

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<sup>13</sup> David L. Phillips, *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation*. Berghahn Books: New York, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> A manual of bilateral projects and actors in this field can be accessed at: [www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=477](http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=477)

views. There is already a ‘normalcy’ in meeting and hearing each other. But what next? On the questions that the bilateral stalemate boils down to, and in terms of expectations and priorities of the two societies, is there, or should there necessarily be, fundamental change to celebrate yet?

### **III. The impact of civil society initiatives on Turkish policymaking**

Despite the boom in bilateral NGO collaboration and changes in the debates reflected in the media, progress on the diplomatic front has stalled, for now. And while initiatives by liberal historians and intellectuals in Turkey have certainly expanded the space for debate and broken down taboos in Turkey, questions abound about the pace and process of this reality transforming official narratives and/or views of the wider public. These disjoints have raised questions about the impact and value of the civilian reconciliation efforts.

#### Official normalization of relations

From the Turkish perspective, there are roughly three obstacles to Turkey-Armenia official reconciliation: disagreement on how to discuss and come to terms with history, territorial demands voiced by some Armenian circles, combined with the lack of formal recognition of the joint border by Armenia, and finally, the lack of progress in the resolution of the Karabagh conflict. Detailed accounts of these three problems have been related by representatives of both sides over the years, thus this article will not attempt to elaborate. Suffice to say that to the extent that there is unwillingness and/or concern in Turkey about moving forward in normalizing relations with Armenia, it is these three issues that are commonly evoked. It is also these three issues that the two bilateral protocols (which were signed but not ratified) meant to address.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, one way to assess the impact of NGO projects and civilian initiatives on the policies of Ankara is to gauge how much these projects affect the political calculus of Ankara.

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<sup>15</sup> Goksel, Nigar, “The Rubik’s Cube of Turkey-Armenia Relations, May 2010, [www.ucm.es/info/unisci/revistas/UNISCI%20DP%2023%20-%20NUMERO%20ENTERO.pdf](http://www.ucm.es/info/unisci/revistas/UNISCI%20DP%2023%20-%20NUMERO%20ENTERO.pdf)

To affect the political calculus in Ankara the single most determinant variable is Turkish public opinion. And to design NGO projects that would have an impact on the Turkish society at large, an important starting point would be to have a comprehensive public opinion poll geared at understanding what the fears and concerns among different constituencies in Turkey are regarding reconciliation with Armenia. For example, is there concern about the implications of the word ‘genocide’ among Turks living in provinces where Armenians used to also live because of concerns of territorial implications? Do acts of the organized Armenian diaspora that are perceived to be hostile negatively affect the image of Armenians among the Turkish society? Do Turks whose ancestors were ethnically cleansed from neighboring regions (such as the Balkans and the Caucasus) have more or less empathy when it comes to the plight of Armenians in Anatolia? How important is it for ordinary Turks for the plight of Azerbaijanis who were purged from their homes around Karabagh to be remedied? Without knowing the answer of such questions, it is difficult to design outreach for overcoming obstacles within the Turkish society to reconciliation. Designing NGO projects with a view to fostering reconciliation is like a shot in the dark in the absence of a comprehensive opinion poll geared at learning what the main considerations of different constituencies in Turkey are on this topic.

Although there is interplay among them, reconciliation of the two nations and normalization of state relations (i.e. establishment of diplomatic relations and opening of the border) can be taken up as two separate tracks. Each of the two tracks is driven by separate dynamics, though they impact each other along the way. While normalization of the state relations will boil down to the relatively straightforward act of establishing diplomatic relations and opening the border (which Turkey currently hinges on progress in the resolution of the Karabagh conflict), reconciliation between the peoples is a long term complex process that can proceed regardless of the developments in the diplomatic scene.

## Reconciliation of the people

Reconciliation means different things for different people in the context of Turkey-Armenia relations. For many, it boils down to more Turks knowing about the plight of Armenians in Anatolia under the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire. This form of reconciliation is ongoing, mostly as a factor of Turkey's democratization, expanded freedom of speech, and the spread of information and ideas. In many ways dialogue with Armenians aids in developing understanding within Turkey of the two nations' joint history. Oral history work is perhaps the most effective in this sense, as it puts forth the human dimension in a debate that is too often focused on cold arguments about numbers of victims or reasoning of policies.

In discussing history, the starting point of the two sides is often so disparate though that encounters can be tense and uncomfortable for both sides. To avoid negative exchanges, dialogue is too often limited to counterparts who already think alike. This can be counterproductive in the setting of realistic expectations on both sides.

In Turkey, generating interest in reconciliation - beyond a relatively small circle of activists and intellectuals - has proven challenging. Various reasons for this can be listed as follows:

- Reconciliation with Armenia, be it diplomatic normalization or unsettled history, is but one of many problems Turkey faces, and not the most pressing one. (For example solutions to the Kurdish problem or the Cyprus deadlock would have more immediate and far-reaching effects on Turkey's domestic and international politics). Therefore interest in Armenia-Turkey reconciliation efforts is less in Turkey compared to in Armenia, and the coverage in national media is more sporadic.
- NGO projects have arguably not been designed with a focus on effecting Turkish public opinion. In almost all donor-supported projects the main partner (writing and implementing the proposals) is Yerevan-based NGOs, while

selection and oversight is carried out by the respective donors' Yerevan or Tbilisi offices. This may contribute to a weaker factoring in of realities in Turkey. In addition, the lack of comprehensive public opinion surveys in Turkey to illuminate the nature of the Armenia-related perceptions hinders a more information-based design of efforts. Furthermore, the size of population of Turkey makes it harder for any civil society initiative to reach a critical mass. And finally, the Turkish partners in bilateral projects are not always sufficiently 'in touch' with the larger public.

- The necessity to use English as a joint language in most projects limits the grassroots dimension of the dialogue. Use of Turkish and more outreach on TV - through which it is possible to reach a much wider segment of society, can help build a stronger understanding in Turkey of the Armenian perspectives.

- The Turkish government representatives' positions throughout 2010 have been shaped largely by the consideration of nationalist votes. This stems from the nature of the political constellation in Turkey: there is strong competition for the relatively large nationalist vote, yet little competition for the vote of the liberal, progressive segments of society.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, rather than providing leadership and trying to sway public opinion, the government 'follows' public opinion on this issue. (this is also related to the above point, that other problems on Turkey's agenda consume the political capital of the Turkish government).

Sustaining interest in reconciliation and momentum among mainstream Turkish civil society representatives and intellectuals is important in the near future - to influence a wider segment of the Turkish society, and to provide the Turkish government with incentive to proceed in challenging age-old official narratives. And there are steps that can be taken from Ankara that can in turn stimulate critical thinking— such as fostering the objective study of history, shedding the defensive approach to Armenian cultural heritage in Anatolia, and lifting impediments to 'insulting the Turkish nation' or 'countering the Turkish national interests.'

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<sup>16</sup> This reality might be changing now with the new leader of the main opposition party, CHP

The protocols proved not to be a magic wand that could merge or make invisible the mutually exclusive demands and sensitivities of the two societies. It is more likely that reconciliation will be a gradual process – driven by democratization in Turkey and Armenia, the incremental building of trust, the slow process of learning more about history with all its complexities, development of tolerance and even respect of differences. History textbooks and teaching will also be important to this end. These social processes, by calling into question identity constructions and challenging official narratives, can also open the way for reconciliation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Though bound to be aggravatingly slow, such a dialectic process may indeed be the most solid scenario.

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