

On the Prospects for Normalization in Turkish-Armenian Relations

written by Nurlan Huseynov Nurlan Hüseynov

On 3 April 1993, in a protest against the occupation of Azerbaijan's Kalbajar region by Armenia, Turkey closed its borders with the latter. However, in subsequent years political and economic needs have encouraged the establishment of good relations between these two neighboring countries, and the border issue has only been periodically discussed as a hot topic. Although throughout four consecutive governments since Armenian independence, the opening of borders and restoration of relations with Turkey were regularly discussed, disagreements and, in particular, the conflict in Karabakh halted attempts at normalization. Turkey connected the opening of borders with the Karabakh issue (that is, the withdrawal of the Armenia's troops from occupied Azerbaijani territories). Meanwhile, Armenia insisted, to no avail, that these issues be separate. Negotiations, therefore, did not produced results.

After Azerbaijan returned to its control the vast majority of its occupied territories as a result of the Second Karabakh War, which began in September 2020, one of the main hindrances to restoration of Turkish-Armenian relations was lifted, and new opportunities for the rapprochement between two countries have now emerged. Since the end of the war, officials from both countries have voiced their desire to normalize relations and open borders, yet uncertainty still continues. In this piece, I will discuss the prospects for opening borders and for the restoration of relations between Turkey and Armenia in light of the new realities established after the recent war. First, I will provide an overview of the past dialog attempts between Turkey and Armenia before the Second Karabakh War, and then I will analyze post-war relations.

Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Armenian independence after the fall of the USSR. Subsequently, despite the fact that it was never officially announced, borders between the two countries were sometimes [open](#) for humanitarian and political purposes. Yet with the occupation of Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan by Armenia in April 1993 during the First Karabakh War, Turkey closed its border with Armenia.

The closure of Armenia's borders with two of its neighbors—Azerbaijan and Turkey—hit the country's economy hard. The then-president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, presumed that relations with Turkey should be based on the principles of realpolitik.[\[11\]](#) He promoted the idea of restoration of relations with Turkey and [called](#) the country *Armenia's gate to the West*. He was [interested](#) in open borders with Turkey, in resuming trade and allowing Azerbaijani oil pipelines to cross through Armenia. In its turn, Turkey was also interested in establishing relations with Armenia. In 1992 Ter-Petrosyan visited Istanbul to participate in a Black Sea Economic Cooperation meeting. In 1995-1996 Ter-Petrosian held meetings with Turkish President Demirel in Copenhagen, New York and Moscow. In these meetings, Turkey argued that it could open its borders with Armenia only after the Karabakh issue was solved. At that time, discussion of the settlement of the Karabakh issue included the withdrawal of Armenia's troops from the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, and the granting of autonomy status to Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan. In this context, the condition for the settlement of the Karabakh issue put forward by Turkey included Azerbaijan's demand that Armenia should withdraw all troops from the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. However, President Ter-Petrosyan [supported](#) OSCE's plan envisaging phased settlement of the Karabakh conflict, which implied first returning the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and only afterwards defining the status of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. The point was moot in any event because Ter-Petrosyan was soon marginalized

in Armenian politics and then forced to resign. Therefore, the opportunity for rapprochement was not realized.

Still, attempts to restore relations continued during the presidency of the next Armenian president Robert Kocharyan. Unlike Ter-Petrosyan who was considering the possibility of compromise, Kocharyan had tougher views on the Karabakh conflict as well as on the issue of recognition of the Armenian genocide. Still, during his presidency there were failed attempts to resume mutual diplomatic and civil society relations and dialogue. In 1998 and then in 1999, Kocharyan met his Turkish counterpart in Yalta and Istanbul respectively, where he [rejected](#) the offer of a normalization of relations with Turkey in exchange for concessions on Karabakh. In 2001 the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee was established to promote dialogue between political circles and civil society of two countries. However, in 2004 Turkey and Armenia mutually put an end to the committee's activities. Then in 2005 prime minister Erdogan addressed a letter to president Kocharyan proposing the creation of a scholarly commission to research and investigate genocide claims. In his response, Kocharyan [rejected](#) the proposal, and no progress was made in promotion of dialogue initiative.

A normalization of relations was close to realization next during the administration of Armenian president Serj Sarkisyan. First, in 2008 a process called *Football Diplomacy* began. Turkish president Abdulla Gul was invited by Sarkisyan to attend a football match between the national teams of the two countries in the Armenian capital of Yerevan on 6 September 2008. During the visit, the presidents met and relations between two countries were discussed. Then in October 2009, Sarkisyan visited Turkey to attend together with Gul the football match in which Turkey hosted Armenia. On 10 October 2009, the two countries [signed](#) the so-called Zurich Accord mediated by the US. The agreement stipulated a restoration of relations, opening of borders, and the creation

of a special commission to investigate the possibly genocidal events of 1915.

In Azerbaijan, where attempts at a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement were watched with suspicion from the beginning, the signing of the Zurich Accord resulted in fierce protests and caused problems in relations with Turkey. The Azerbaijani side believed that the opening of Turkey's borders with Armenia before the settlement of the Karabakh conflict would strengthen Armenia's position on the issue, which would mean that Azerbaijan's attempt to force Armenia to peace by isolating it would fail. In its [statement](#) dated on 12 October 2009, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry called the signing of the accord a precedent which "directly contradicts the national interests of Azerbaijan and overshadows the spirit of brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey[, which are] built on deep historical roots." Adding fuel to the fire, president Ilham Aliyev said that Azerbaijan was considering other routes bypassing Turkey to transport Azerbaijani gas to Europe. Under Azerbaijani pressure, Turkey backtracked on the Zurich Accord and [reiterated](#) that its condition for the normalization of its relations with Armenia was Armenia's return of the occupied territories to Azerbaijan. Armenia, in its turn, returned to its traditional position of separating normalization of relations with Turkey from the Karabakh conflict. Neither side liked what the agreement said on the issue of genocide. In the end, the Zurich Accord [failed](#) because parliaments in both Armenia and Turkey did not ratify the agreement. After the failure of its parliament to ratify the protocols, Armenia [withdrew](#) from the Zurich Accord, and until recently no second attempt was made at rapprochement.

New prospects for the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia emerged after the Second Karabakh War in 2020. The liberation of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan last year created a new opportunity for the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. With the conclusion of the war, the Azerbaijani side stated

that the Karabakh conflict is over, and it is ready to open communications with Armenia. Thus, the satisfactory outcome of the post-war Karabakh issue on the Azerbaijani side and the opening of communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan will eliminate one of the obstacles in Turkish-Armenian relations and allow the two countries to normalize their relations. A trilateral agreement signed on 10 November 2020 ended hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. That agreement envisaged a restoration of all communication routes in the region as well as a 3+3 regional cooperation [platform](#) (Russia+Iran+Turkey, Azerbaijan+Armenia+Georgia), which was first [voiced](#) by Turkish president Erdogan in his joint press-conference with president Aliyev during his visit to Baku in December 2020 and then was officially proposed by Russia.[\[2\]](#) That 3+3 platform necessitates a normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations.

Recently, both Armenia and Turkey began voicing positive signals in the direction of normalization as well. On 25 August 2021, during his meetings with foreign envoys in his country, Erdogan [said](#) that after the war, new opportunities for peace have emerged in the region, and if Armenia weighs them positively, Turkey will take needed steps as well. A couple of days later on August 27th, Armenian prime minister Pashinyan [stated](#) that there are positive signals from Turkey, and “we will evaluate those signals and respond to them with a positive signal.” It should be particularly noted that the 2021-2026 government program unveiled by Pashinyan’s government in the post-war period [includes](#) a normalization of relations with Turkey.

However, despite the new post-war prospects for economic cooperation as well as positive messages from both sides, it is too early to say whether all problems in relations between two countries have been left behind. In order to open borders and restore their relations, these two countries should settle ongoing controversies. Before the war, Turkey voiced three

[pre-conditions](#) for opening its borders with Armenia: Armenia's retreat from its genocide allegations against Turkey, recognition of mutual borders[\[3\]](#) and settlement of the Karabakh issue. Although, after the Second Karabakh War, the condition regarding withdrawal from occupied territories has been resolved, the other two preconditions likely remain points of contention for Turkey.

Do those two preconditions remain and, if so, how do the two countries intend to solve them? In August, while responding to a question about Armenian-Turkish relations, Erdogan voiced his first condition for normalization. Erdogan said that "despite some existing disagreements, making efforts to develop good relations based on mutual confidence including mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity [would be](#) a responsible move." Although thirty years have passed since Armenia gained independence, due to the absence of diplomatic relations, Turkey and Armenia have not recognized each other's territorial integrity and mutual borders. With his statement, Erdogan underlined that in order to open borders with Armenia, the latter should officially recognize the current borders and the territorial integrity of Turkey (and Azerbaijan). Currently, the most acceptable and the least painful condition Armenia faces for opening its border with Turkey is recognition of borders with Turkey, and it seems that this problem can be settled between the two countries with relative ease.

Following that statement Erdogan articulated a second condition: "One-sided accusations should be replaced by a vision for the future as well as with realistic approaches. We can make efforts to gradually normalize our relations with Armenia if it chooses the right direction." With these [words](#), Erdogan probably hinted at Turkey's condition for Armenia to drop genocide claims. The question of Armenian genocide has always been a major source of tension between the two countries and has halted, at varying points, all rapprochement attempts. Today Armenian society, diasporas, and the country's

political opposition exert enormous pressure on the Armenian government, and none of these parties want to abandon their efforts to make Turkey recognize the Armenian genocide. Apart from this, in his speech in parliament on August 24th, Pashinyan too [said](#) that “the agenda for the international recognition of the Armenian genocide should serve to strengthen Armenia’s security guarantees, and this will be among the government’s priorities.” With this statement, he underlined that the current government does not intend to abandon genocide claims. As we see, current normalization attempts between the two countries is still hindered by differing opinions on the issue of genocide.

In his [statement](#) on 19 September 2021, Erdogan hinted at another expectation from Armenia i.e., the creation of a corridor between the landlocked exclave Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (NAR) and mainland Azerbaijan. This problem reignited tensions in the whole region apart from causing serious conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The controversy between these two countries regarding this problem stems from contradicting interpretations of Article 9 of the trilateral agreement signed on 10 November 2020. The [article](#) states that “the Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions.” After the signing of the trilateral declaration, Azerbaijan started calling for a transportation and communication corridor, which would pass through Armenia’s territory. The country terms this proposed corridor the *Zangezur corridor*. The Azerbaijani side bases its claims on the interpretations of the article’s term *unobstructed* and demands the opening of a corridor across southern Armenia to connect mainland Azerbaijan with NAR where free movement without border, passport and customs controls, as in the Lachin corridor, will be guaranteed. At the same time, Aliyev issued a decree on 7 July 2021 to create the

Eastern Zangezur Economic Zone in the territories of the 5 de-occupied regions. Armenia [agrees](#) to a railway and automobile road via its Sunik region and sees this road as a transit between mainland Azerbaijan and NAR; however, it [rejects](#) the idea of a control-free corridor. Because the corridor is supposed to connect Azerbaijan with Turkey via NAR as well as possibly serve as a transit connecting Turkey to Central Asia, it is also high on Ankara's agenda. For this reason, Turkey, in order to promote its own interests as well as to support Azerbaijan, insists on the opening of a corridor as a pre-condition for the normalization of its relations with Armenia.

Therefore, when Erdogan was asked to express his opinion on Pashinyan's rejection of the corridor, he [replied](#) that "it is of course controversial that, on the one hand, he says this, and on the other hand, he expresses his wishes to meet me. If he has a desire to meet Tayyip Erdogan, he should consider taking some steps[. ...] While we negotiate, they should take these steps to demonstrate positive attitude." With this response, Erdogan suggests that he sees the opening of the corridor as an unseparated part of a whole process leading towards normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia and the opening of borders between two countries. Turkey, like Azerbaijan, prioritizes a corridor as a matter of strategic importance, and insists on its opening as a pre-condition for the normalization of relations with Armenia. However, Armenia rejects this kind of corridor running through its territory because the country considers it a threat to its sovereignty and is anxious that it might completely lost control over that territory in the future. So we can assume that the corridor is now one of the main problems obstructing rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia.

The corridor is also an obstacle to the opening of communication and restoration of relations in the region in general, not just between Turkey and Armenia, after the war. The fact that Azerbaijan and Armenia are not agreed with each other on the question of the corridor drives post-war

political process towards confrontation, not cooperation. If Armenia continues to oppose the corridor, Azerbaijan in its turn will not be willing to provide Russia a passage to Armenia through its territories. In this case, the opening of communications and the delimitation and demarcation processes of Azerbaijani-Armenian borders will not happen either. This will leave the regional states in a situation of pro-longed confrontation and negatively affect normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. In fact, with its insistence on the corridor as a pre-condition for normalization, Turkey connects the issue of its relations with Armenia to the resolution of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the establishment of long-lasting peace. In this sense, the corridor demand has currently replaced Turkey's former demand for the de-occupation of Azerbaijani territories. So far, Armenia does not seem ready to accept this pre-condition, and this diminishes the prospects of rapprochement between the two countries.

Conversely, if Armenia agrees to the corridor, and its disputes with Azerbaijan over mutual borders are resolved, the opening of other communications between the two countries and in the overall region will be boosted. Azerbaijan insists that the opening of transport communications between the two countries is possible only after Armenia agrees to provide the corridor, a delimitation of borders and mutual recognition of territorial integrity. If the corridor and other regional communications are opened, then the urgency of opening borders between Armenia and Turkey will gain enormous importance. It is true that the corridor problem is not the only factor preventing the opening of Turkish-Armenian borders: there should be an agreement on another source of tension i.e., the dispute over genocide. However, the corridor and opening of other communications, by boosting cooperation, will also advance the need for cooperation between Armenia and Turkey. This, in its turn, could convince both sides to come to some kind of agreement on the issue of Armenian genocide. We can

conclude that the problem of utmost importance preventing rapprochement between two countries is the corridor issue and continuing tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Since the closure of borders between Turkey and Armenia in 1993, there have been multiple attempts to open borders and resume diplomatic relations. However, these attempts have not rendered any results due to Armenia's rejection of the pre-conditions of Turkey and vice versa. With the liberation of the majority of occupied Azerbaijani lands as a result of the Second Karabakh War, one of the major hindrances to normalization in Turkish-Armenian relations has been lifted. Still Turkey declares that two old and one new pre-condition still exist. These include the recognition of mutual borders, a demand that Armenia retreat from genocide claims and the opening of a corridor between Azerbaijan and NAR. At this stage, Armenia has not voiced any objection to the first of these conditions, i.e., to the mutual recognition of borders, so we should assume that these countries can easily achieve agreement on this issue. The other pre-condition of Turkey, i.e., the end to claims regarding recognition of the Armenian genocide, still invites indignation from Armenia. Currently though, the most important problem preventing the opening of borders is the dispute over a corridor through Armenia's territory. Therefore, even after the Second Karabakh War, the prospects for improvements in Turkish-Armenian relations remain dependent on the ongoing dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the overall stabilization of the situation in the region.

Notes and References

[1] Ter-Petrosian, Levon. *Armenia's Future, Relations with Turkey, and the Karabagh Conflict*. Edited by Arman Grigoryan. 1st ed. 2018 edition. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 24.

[\[2\]](#) So far Georgia refuses to participate in this format, citing Russia's occupation of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

[\[3\]](#) Before the adoption of Armenia's Constitution on 5 July 1995, in the interim official document, i.e. in the Act of Independence of Armenia, some eastern territories of the Turkish Republic were referred to as Western Armenia. There are no such phrases in the Constitution adopted in 1995; however, the Constitution in its preamble makes some references to the Act of Independence. At the same time Armenia's official Coat of Arms depicts Ağrı dağ/ Mount of Ararat, which is in Turkey's internationally recognized territory. Taking into account these facts as well as irredentist claims in some political circles in Armenia and in its powerful Armenian diaspora, Turkey insists on official recognition of the Kars treaty of 1921 by Armenia. Armenian officials have repeatedly reiterated that they accept the terms of this treaty and that they do not have territorial claims against Turkey. Despite this, due to the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries, mutual borders are not officially recognized.