

Swiss Neutrality: Can it Break the Armenian-Turkish Deadlock?

[2009/04/13 | 17:06] [Feature Stories](#) [politics](#)

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Under both internal and external pressures, Turkey has been forced to return to its initial set of preconditions regarding the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. Twice during the previous week Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that there could be no forward movement in Armenian-Turkish relations given that the Karabakh conflict still remains unresolved.

Having a certain impact on this position of Ankara was the forceful internal reaction of the Turkish opposition on the foreign policy being carried out by the ruling party. Leaders of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) severely criticized the government for its reconciliation policy with Armenia. Public demonstrations took place in Kars, Gaziantep, Igdir and Amasya.

Perhaps the opposition's criticism wouldn't have had that important a significance if it hadn't been for the fact that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), for the first time since coming to power in 2002, received less votes overall in local Turkish elections that took place on March 29. These election results obligated the AKP to seriously review its domestic and foreign policy agenda.

However, it was the position of Baku that played the biggest role in all this. President Ilham Aliyev bowed out of participating in the "Civilizations Alliance" forum recently convened in Istanbul as a sign of protest over Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. President Aliyev took this step even after President Abdullah Gul of Turkey and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton telephoned him. In this matter the stance of Baku is of great importance for Ankara as well as for Washington.

On April 6, President Aliyev stated at the Azerbaijani National Security Council that if the Armenian-Turkish border was opened Azerbaijan might be forced to change its "regional politics". In Aliyev's words, Baku "notices a potential geo-political change in the region" and "is taking corresponding steps in response".

Ankara and the others easily grasped the message sent by Baku – that a change in "regional politics" signifies a reprioritization of its energy projects directed towards the West to a more Russian tilt. As President Aliyev noted in his address, Azerbaijan's petroleum and gas export policies will remain "flexible".

Contrary to Erdogan, President Gul took a more moderate approach when presenting Turkey's return to its former preconditions by placing importance on what a settlement of the Karabakh conflict would mean in terms of regional processes. President Gul, during an interview with The Financial Times, held out hope that the Karabakh conflict would be resolved and would lead to the creation of a new climate in the Caucasus, "because even though the region is relatively small, it could either become a barrier between East and West or a gateway".

The Turkish president however refrained from making any specific references to preconditions. When asked by a reporter if he was saying that any forward movement shouldn't be expected given that the Minsk Group hadn't made any real progress, President Gul diplomatically side-stepped the issue, "I can state that favorable mutual understanding and goodwill exists on both sides."

Nevertheless, it appears that the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border is being delayed. It will take some time for Ankara to consult with Baku on the matter and come to some arrangement. It is already on record that Turkish President Abdullah Gul will be travelling to Baku in the next few weeks. New timetables for the opening of the border are already appearing. An unnamed Turkish diplomat informed Today's Zaman that the border would be opened by October, when President Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia will visit Turkey to watch the football match of the two national squads.

In addition, according to some sources, the border will be opened gradually. At first it will be open for just one day per week. This will be followed by diplomatic contacts between the two sides who will then declare their intention to open embassies in Yerevan and Ankara. According to this plan, Armenia would then pull its troops out of the five regions surrounding the NKR proper.

At the same time the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet reports that Azerbaijan sent a delegation to Ankara last week to present Baku's pre-conditions regarding the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border. This set of conditions purportedly includes the demand that Armenia withdraws from the five regions surrounding Karabakh proper (Aghdam, Fizuli, Jebraïl, Zangelan and Ghubatli) and that it allow for the creation of a land corridor between Turkey and Azerbaijan in the southern portion of Lachin.



Presently, attempts are being made by Switzerland, most likely at the behest of the U.S., to play the role of third-party intermediary in the stalled Karabakh settlement talks. It is public knowledge that U.S. President Barack Obama met with the foreign minister of Armenia, Turkey and Switzerland while in Istanbul, as well as with Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Ertugrul Apakan, and discussed the issue of Armenian-Turkish relations with them. The official website of the White House features a photograph of the above-mentioned diplomats in which the Swiss foreign minister is referred to as a mediator. Later, according to a swissinfo news agency report, Switzerland's Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey verified her role as mediator in fostering relations between Armenia and Turkey.

The choice of Switzerland as mediator perhaps isn't accidental. As a neutral nation, Switzerland's mediation is acceptable by all sides. Due to its neutrality, Switzerland has been able to assume a mediating role in numerous conflict situations. In addition, Switzerland is the site for negotiations and meetings between parties in conflict. The secret talks between Armenia and Turkey are now known to have taken place in Switzerland.

On the other hand, such inclusion of new mediators in Armenian-Turkish relations diminishes Ankara's advantage vis-à-vis Yerevan as an initiator, especially if we take into account the fact that Turkey itself seeks to play the role of mediator in regional conflicts, including the Karabakh conflict.

It cannot be ruled out that Turkey, in order to win itself some time and to clarify its relations with Azerbaijan, will, for the time being, direct its focus on the Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform initiative. This will allow Turkey, on the one hand, to temporarily divert public attention away from the Armenian-Turkish border opening process, while at the same time allowing for contacts with the Armenian side to continue. It will also permit Ankara to include Azerbaijan into this set of contacts, by displaying to Baku its more transparent policy when it comes to relations with Armenia.

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