

Analysis

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Summary: Efforts toward normalization between Turkey and Armenia in April 2009 have brought to light ongoing tensions in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. Though united by language and ethnicity, the potential for the realization of “one nation, two states” has brought forth resentments between the two countries. This brief addresses factors that contribute to questions including: What substantiates the Turkey-Azerbaijan relationship? And what is the rationale of this bond?

Though limited social bonds connect the two societies, they have hardly built up meaningful links since Azerbaijan’s independence and the knowledge of each other lacks depth. Turkey’s constantly changing government in the post-Soviet period made the country a confusing partner to deal with. The recent questioning in Azerbaijan of Turkey’s central standing reaches beyond the feeling that Turkey has betrayed Azerbaijan in its dealings with Armenia.

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Turkey and Azerbaijan: Passion, Principle, or Pragmatism?

by Nigar Göksel*

ISTANBUL — Normalization efforts between Turkey and Armenia in the lead up to April 2009 placed Turkish-Azerbaijani relations in the spotlight. Suddenly, resentment toward Turkey was echoing from every corner of Azerbaijan. And in Turkey, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev was accused of hijacking Turkey’s Caucasus policy and striking a blow to its regional interests. It was pointed out that Turks and Azerbaijanis do not have a shared history and had never lived in a joint state. Liberals argued that ethnicity should not be a defining pillar of Turkish identity or affinity. Hard questions that would once have been politically incorrect were raised in the Turkish mainstream debate, such as: What substantiates the Turkey-Azerbaijan relationship? And what is the rationale of this bond? The traditional rhetoric of “one nation, two states” appeared to be coming apart at the seams.

Political divisions and identity battles within Turkey itself also became more pronounced. Nationalists slammed the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government for betraying Azerbaijan under the influence of “the Armenian lobby within.” The government yielded, reshuffling words and reassuring Azerbaijan that progress in the resolution of

the Karabakh conflict remained central. However, the questions that had been raised about the basis of common ground between Turkey and Azerbaijan remain open.

One nation?

Even though Turkey is hundreds of kilometers away, Azeri-occupied lands are commonly referred to as “Turkish.” As one villager, living in the southern tip of Armenia, noted “I am taking my animals to Turkish lands.” Turkey and Azerbaijan are seen as the same nation. In another instance, an Azerbaijani said solemnly: “We are being punished for the Ottoman wrongs. Armenians took revenge for 1915 by hostility toward us, because they couldn’t take on Turkey.” The concept of “Greater Armenia” includes not only land within Azerbaijan but also land in Turkey—and thus can be framed a “common threat.” Today, the Armenian lobby groups in Washington, DC focus both on Karabakh and on the recognition of the 1915 events as “genocide,” thus creating grounds for Turks and Azerbaijanis to work together in counter-lobby efforts. The perception of Turkey and Azerbaijan as “one nation” by Armenians has contributed to making this a more concrete reality.

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The most commonly cited uniting factors between the two societies are language and ethnicity. Language matters for practical reasons. Azerbaijanis watch Turkish TV channels, enjoy Turkish pop songs, and travel relatively comfortably in Turkey without a language barrier. An Azerbaijani police officer comes to a Turkish hospital to overcome his substance abuse problem; an Azerbaijani young diplomat says that when he travels to Berlin it seems too different to be inspiring, but when he travels to Istanbul, he imagines “in 10 years, Baku could be like this.” Azerbaijani young professionals excel in Antalya as they can speak fluently with Russian tourists. This May, like last year, Azerbaijan and Turkey awarded the maximum 12 points to each other through public voting and jury in the Eurovision song contest. The excitement over Azerbaijan’s success was unmistakable in the smoky cafes and gay bars of Istanbul where the voting process was watched live. Whether sociologically, historically, economically, geographically substantiated or not, one can witness a bond between the two nations. But, there are limits to this social “connection.”

The two societies, estranged for decades during the Soviet era, have hardly built up meaningful links since Azerbaijan’s independence and the knowledge of each other lacks depth. News coverage of Azerbaijan’s internal dynamics in mainstream Turkish press is extremely limited.

There is very little work done involving Azerbaijan in the NGO community of Turkey. To the extent that there are projects they are mostly recent initiatives involving the entire Black Sea region, driven by Western donors, and partly due to Turkey’s geographically central position (including convenient flights, logistics, and visa requirements). An exception to this is the more ideological groups, either nationalist or religious, that have been interested on their own behalf, since the early 1990s.

Experts on Azerbaijan are hard to come by in academia or the think tank world. Though this is changing, it still trails behind the increased emphasis of Turkey’s eastern neighbors in Turkish foreign policy orientation. This is in contrast to the steep rise of joint projects between Armenian and Turkish activists and academics since 2000.

Turkey’s NGO community has become much more vibrant and institutionalized in the past decade, and has much potential to contribute to the rather weak Azerbaijani civil society. Turkish actors’ links to Europe and advocacy skills are a capacity that can be leveraged as soft power. Those who care about the bilateral relationship should take this potential into consideration. Working together on concrete issues affecting the lives of real people can help build more solid links and appreciation of the respective challenges faced. This will also help build a mutual understanding between the social actors who need to be engaged for more public influence.

The place of Armenia in each nation’s identity and political culture is very different. Azerbaijanis have the fresh pain of war and of being uprooted and displaced. It is an issue with practical and immediate consequences. In Turkey, the debate on relations with Armenians plays into the ongoing internal battle—to face the past wrongs committed to Ottoman Armenians, to challenge what it means to be a Turk, and to overcome ethnic conceptions of identity.

Big brother politics

With the Soviet collapse, five Turkic nations became independent. Turkey postured to fill the vacuum. Mostly, it backfired. Eager for independence, these nations did not want to be patronized and Turkey was ill-prepared in terms of understanding power dynamics and social affinities in these countries. Moreover, domestic political and economic problems consumed Ankara throughout the 1990s. Turkey was a confusing partner to deal with. The coalition governments in Turkey changed on a yearly basis, each with a different vision for the region. A Turkish nationalist party representative would travel to the region with a pan-Turkic agenda while a member of parliament from an Islamic party would advocate religious unity. By the end of the decade, the Turkish military was being viewed as the most reliable and predictable counterpart in Turkey. It did not take long for Russia to re-consolidate its position, leaving Turkey a limited sphere of influence.

But there were also successes. As a counterbalance to Russia and Iran, Turkey’s presence in the region was largely supported by the United States. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline was a major accomplishment in this sense. Turkey’s overt



intent to become an energy hub has since become a significant interest in strong relations with Azerbaijan. However in Central Asia most of the momentum fizzled. This is the backdrop against which a Turkish NGO leader said last week, in explaining why Turkey should not allow relations with Azerbaijan to spiral downwards, “Azerbaijan is the last one left, Central Asia has been long lost. If Azerbaijan slips away too, it will be the final and complete blow to the Turkic solidarity rhetoric sounded so boldly by Turkey in the early 1990s.”

It is important to recognize that the recent questioning in Azerbaijan of Turkey’s central standing reaches beyond the feeling that Turkey has betrayed Azerbaijan in its dealings with Armenia. Many politicians, diplomats, and analysts have also been taken aback by other shifts in Turkey’s foreign policy in areas such as energy and Black Sea politics. Turkey is expected to use its pivotal position to counterbalance Russia in the region—to at least protect the existing equilibrium rather than tilting the balance further in favor of Moscow.

However Turkey has moved on to a new paradigm in foreign policy, with more case-basis pragmatism and new ambitions towards being a stand-alone regional power. Lessons have been learned after Turkey blatantly confronted Russia’s interests in the region and, as a result, lost more ground. Moreover, there is skepticism in the Turkish diplomatic corps about the long term prospects of Western leverage in the region. Continuing emotional rhetoric of absolute unity of purpose between Turkey and Azerbaijan has masked the gradual divergences that have been growing.

Disappointment was the most pronounced feeling one could pick up on the streets of Baku soon after the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war. “Azerbaijan is not strong enough but we thought Turkey had the clout to speak out louder about the strangling nature of Russia’s policies in the region,” one said. Months later another young Azeri said, “Who is Turkey courting and why? It is so hard to understand. When [Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan took a strong stance on Gaza and stormed out of the panel with President Peres in Davos, was this passion and principle or was it pragmatism—and which of these apply to us?”

Two changing countries

If the card of shared religion is to be invoked as a uniting factor, again, one enters a gray area. Most leading Turkish religious initiatives in Azerbaijan are not necessarily received positively by Azerbaijani authorities. In the town of Sheki in northern Azerbaijan the only Turkish presence is a school founded by the Gulen movement. The locals are divided in their opinion about this establishment. On the other hand, the staunch secularist circles of Turkey have not left a positive impression in Azerbaijan either. Apparently addressing university students in Baku, a Turkish education minister underlined the threat of girls wearing headscarves in university. This actually triggered a rebellious reaction and the next day there were many more young women wearing the headscarf in class. “You are exporting your problems to us, not solutions” was one diplomat’s take on this incident. Whether this is an accurate depiction of reality or not, the articulation of Turkey’s influence is telling.

Though there have been successful examples of collaboration in the sphere of business, many business endeavors have been based on crony relationships and have brought the worst business practices of both countries to the fore, also damaging reputations.

Azerbaijani opposition sympathizers from time to time express grievance that Turkey disregards the real interests of the people by not advocating human rights issues or supporting opposition movements in Azerbaijan. In fact, in the 1990s when Turkey did meddle in Azerbaijani domestic politics (in some cases, with fascist tactics), it was in support of Turkic nationalists that did not have the capacity to survive the domestic and regional challenges faced at the time.

Azerbaijan has also made questionable choices of people in Turkey with whom they nurture close relations. For example, among the ultranationalists who are now in dire straits as Turkey cracks down on shady gang-like structures, there are a disproportionate number of advocates of Azerbaijan. Turkey’s domestic power balances have been changing dramatically since the turn of the century. The choices of arguments to make and individuals to liaise with in Turkey in the 1990s are no longer optimal in Turkey’s current setting. A new approach in line with new realities is called for.



Few Azerbaijani's grasp the role the Armenian issue in Turkey plays in Turkey's ongoing social and political transformation. And few Turks are aware of how unpredictable Turkey has come across over the years when viewed from Baku or how Turkey's various policy moves affect Baku's sovereignty. This is why, faced with the prospect of normalization between Turkey and Armenia in April 2009, negative rhetoric towards each other could be so rapidly sparked in both countries' public debate. The rhetoric of the two countries being indivisible has prevented an acknowledgment that mutual understanding has to be worked on, and has set the stage for mutually unreasonable expectations. Recent tensions should be a wake-up call to various layers of both countries' policy communities.

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