

# *To link or not to link?*

*Turkey-Armenia normalization  
and the Karabakh Conflict*

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## **Abstract**

*Over two years after the signing of protocols on opening Turkish-Armenian diplomatic relations and land borders, the prospects for normalization in the absence of progress on the Karabakh conflict are dim. But there is also little sign of a breakthrough in the Karabakh conflict resolution process itself. Given these impasses, this article proposes an alternative way forward: an unconditional opening of Turkish-Armenian diplomatic relations followed by a redrafting of the Basic Principles. This redrafting would acknowledge linkage between the border opening and the withdrawal of Armenian forces from territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh. It would also reduce ambiguities in the Basic Principles that have stalled the peace process to date. The article first analyzes Turkish policy on the protocols, arguing that the Turkish government can at a minimum be blamed for sloppy diplomacy in 2009. It next justifies the need for a change in policy, explaining why arguments for dropping linkage are not fully compelling and why the Basic Principles have run aground. Finally, it proposes a redrafted set of Basic Principles, which includes the opening of the Turkish-Armenian land border and focuses on an interim solution to territorial withdrawal and IDP return, as well as on Nagorno-Karabakh's political status.*

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***Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan***

We will not sign a final deal with Armenia unless there is agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia on Nagorno Karabakh. (April 10, 2009)<sup>1</sup>

***U.S. Department of State Press Statement***

The United States welcomes the statement made by Armenia and Turkey on normalization of their bilateral relations. It has long been and remains the position of the United States that normalization should take place without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe. (April 22)<sup>2</sup>

***Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan***

Our borders were closed after the occupation of Nagorno Karabakh. We will not open borders as long as the occupation continues. Who says this? The prime minister of the Turkish Republic says this. Can there be any guarantee here apart from this? (May 13)<sup>3</sup>

***U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton***

I want to reiterate our very strong support for the normalization process that is going on between Armenia and Turkey, which we have long said should take place without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe. (September 28)<sup>4</sup>

To say there is no linkage between Turkish-Armenian normalization and the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is to depart from a longstanding reality of Turkish foreign policy. In 1993, Turkey sealed its land border – previously open to humanitarian shipments of wheat – after Armenian forces seized the large, mountainous Azerbaijani region of Kelbajar, sandwiched between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>5</sup> The Turk-

<sup>1</sup> "Turkish PM sets conditions to Armenia reconciliation: report;" *Agence France Presse*, April 10, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> "Turkey and Armenia: Normalization of Relations," Press Statement, Robert Wood, Acting Department Spokesman, Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, April 22, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/04/122065.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> *ANS TV (Baku)*, May 13, 2009, trans. available in *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*.

<sup>4</sup> "Remarks With Armenian Foreign Minister H.E. Edward Nalbandian After Their Meeting," Remarks, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State, September 28, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/09/129687.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Armenian forces captured a smaller amount of territory – the so-called "Lachin corridor" – outside Nagorno-Karabakh already in 1992, and additional territories later in the war. For a history of the Karabakh conflict, see Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*:

ish government said the border would remain closed until Armenian forces withdrew from Azerbaijani territory. This policy remained in place for sixteen years.<sup>6</sup>

In April 2009, after months of quiet preparation, Turkey appeared to reverse course, issuing a joint statement with Armenia that the two countries had “agreed on a comprehensive framework for the normalization of their bilateral relations.”<sup>7</sup> Because the protocols for establishing diplomatic relations and opening the land border which the two countries’ foreign ministers signed six months later made no mention of Karabakh, many assumed that Turkey had dropped its longstanding insistence that normalization was contingent on Armenia withdrawing its troops.<sup>8</sup>

It soon became clear, however, that conditionality had not been dropped. Instead of ratifying the protocols, Turkish parliamentarians from the ruling party and the opposition insisted that normalization would proceed only after progress was made on the Karabakh conflict, a position Turkish officials subsequently affirmed.

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*Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (NYU Press, 2003).

6 “Turk says Russia is Tangled in Caucasus War,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1993.

7 “Joint Statement of The Ministries of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Turkey, The Republic of Armenia and The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs,” April 22, 2009, available at [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-56\\_-22-april-2009\\_-press-release-regarding-the-turkish-armenian-relations.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-56_-22-april-2009_-press-release-regarding-the-turkish-armenian-relations.en.mfa).

8 The protocols are available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?93e41cc9-832f-4ec7-a629-a920bfdbb432>.

Over two years later, the prospects for Turkish-Armenian normalization in the absence of progress on the Karabakh conflict are dim. But there is also little sign of a breakthrough in the Karabakh conflict resolution process, spearheaded by the OSCE Minsk Group with the United States, Russia, and France as co-chairs.

Given these impasses, this article proposes an alternative way forward: an unconditional opening of Turkish-Armenian diplomatic relations followed by a redrafting of the Basic Principles in a way that acknowledges linkage, while reducing the ambiguities that have stalled the peace process to date.

I first analyze Turkish policy on the protocols, arguing that the Turkish government can at a minimum be blamed for sloppy diplomacy in 2009 – allowing Armenia and international mediators to persuade themselves that conditionality was negotiable while simultaneously gambling on a successful conclusion to the Karabakh peace process. I next justify the need for a change in policy, explaining why arguments for dropping linkage are not fully compelling and why the Basic Principles have run aground. Finally, I propose a redrafted set of Basic Principles, which includes the opening of the Turkish-Armenian land border and focuses on an interim solution to territorial withdrawal and IDP return, as well as on Nagorno-Karabakh’s political status.

## The Failed Diplomacy of the Turkish-Armenian Protocols

On October 10, 2009, under the eager gaze of the top diplomats of the United States, Russia, the European Union, and Switzerland, the Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers signed two protocols on normalization that contained no preconditions regarding the Karabakh conflict. Within a few weeks, however, it became clear that Turkey was not going to ratify the protocols.

What went wrong? Did the Turkish government intentionally mislead its Armenian counterpart and international mediators, who had been regularly insisting upon normalization “without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe”?<sup>9</sup>

Not if you judge by the public statements of Turkish officials. Throughout the process, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly linked a successful conclusion of the normalization process to progress on Karabakh (see, for example, the quotations at the top of this article). While Turkish Foreign Ministers Ali Babacan and, after him, Ahmet Davutoğlu were more circumspect in their public statements, observers interpreted their statements emphasizing the importance of achieving par-

allel solutions as an echo of the Prime Minister’s assertions.<sup>10</sup>

The sea change in Turkey’s Armenia policy in 2009 was thus to *open* negotiations – carry them, really, to their very end – without waiting for signs of progress on Karabakh. Turkey had not dropped conditionality; it had just sought to make it more respectable. The Turkish government appears to have believed that participating in negotiations would enable it to demonstrate a sincere desire to normalize relations, chart a clear vision for the future of Turkish-Armenian relations, and, possibly, ease the way for Armenia to adopt a more pliable position on the Karabakh conflict.

This, however, was not the way supporters of normalization understood the disconnect between Turkish officials’ public statements and their seemingly sincere pursuit of normalization. One reading was that Turkish officials may have been talking about Karabakh for domestic purposes or to reassure Azerbaijan, but they had still genuinely embarked on a new course and were committed to seeing it through to its end. Another was that the Turkish political elite was divided, but “doves” like President Abdul-

9 See the two U.S. Department of State statements that opened this article, as well as “President Serzh Sargsyan met in Prague with the President of Turkey, Abdullah Gul,” Office to the President of the Republic of Armenia, May 7, 2009, available at <http://www.president.am/events/news/eng/?pn=145&id=511>.

10 See, for example, Charles Recknagel and Andrew Tully, “Turkey Signals Opening to Armenia Must Include Nagorno-Karabakh Process,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 22, 2009, available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey\\_Signals\\_Opening\\_To\\_Armenia\\_Must\\_Include\\_NagornoKarabakh\\_Progress/1613844.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkey_Signals_Opening_To_Armenia_Must_Include_NagornoKarabakh_Progress/1613844.html) and “Turkey Still Committed to Preconditions in Armenia Talks,” Asbarez, July 29, 2009, available at <http://asbarez.com/68790/turkey-%e2%80%98still-committed-%e2%80%99to-armenia-talks-with-preconditions/>.

lah Gul supported normalization and would ultimately be victorious.<sup>11</sup> Yet another was that the government was under pressure from Azerbaijan, suspicious of Turkey's efforts and seeking to derail the process, but that Baku's over-the-top efforts to influence Turkish decision-making were destined to fail. The Turkish government's decision to let Davutoğlu sign the protocols in a high-profile international venue unavoidably strengthened the view that the government was serious about normalization without preconditions.

But in the end, the government did not try that hard, if at all, to secure parliamentary approval of the protocols. This neglect led many to conclude that the Turkish government had been misleading Armenia and international supporters of normalization all along.<sup>12</sup>

Insincerity, however, is not the only possible explanation for the failure of the protocols. One might say that the Turkish government was guilty rath-

er of sloppy diplomacy. It expected Armenia and international mediators to treat its representatives' informal public statements with the same significance as their formal negotiating stance. It also failed to directly counter Armenian and U.S. government assertions that normalization was to be achieved without preconditions. Most astonishingly, Turkish officials do not appear to have warned the Armenian government or international mediators that the protocols, if signed, would almost certainly not be ratified.

At the same time, the Turkish government appears to have been playing a risky game – betting that the latest stage of the Karabakh conflict resolution process, specifically agreement on a set of so-called “Basic Principles” for settling the Karabakh conflict, could be brought to a successful close before the Turkish parliament was to ratify the protocols. In this way, Turkey would be able to square the circle of its Armenia policy — conditionality would be satisfied informally without it having been made an explicit part of the process.

While there were some grounds to believe progress on the Basic Principles might be possible, agreement was still a highly uncertain prospect. Certainly, the chance of success was hardly so great as to make a prominent endeavor like the normalization process dependent upon it. But it was either this or halt the “feel-good” di-

*11 Gul avoided making explicit statements linking the two processes and did not attempt to debunk the notion put forward by Armenian president Serzh Sarkisian in May 2009 that the two had agreed to “move forward with normalization without preconditions and within a reasonable time frame” (fn. 9).*

*12 In particular, the suspicion was that the Turkish government had agreed to declare the formal start of the normalization process only to avoid a vote in the U.S. Congress on recognizing the Armenian genocide. Many believed it was no coincidence that the Turkish-Armenian statement was issued just two days before the annual April 24 commemoration of the genocide. For an expression of such suspicion prior to the signing of the protocols, see the U.S. Congressional letter reprinted in “Over 80 House Members Slam Turkey’s Reversal on Proposed ‘Roadmap’,” Press Release, Armenian National Committee of America, July 30, 2009, available at [http://www.anca.org/press\\_releases/press\\_releases.php?prid=1745](http://www.anca.org/press_releases/press_releases.php?prid=1745).*

plomacy of the protocols, an outcome that no stakeholder wanted.

In the end, the diplomatic consensus to ignore Turkey's consistent – if informal – linkage between normalization and conflict resolution alienated Turkey from Azerbaijan; lent Armenia an unwarranted optimism that change was in the air; made Turkish policymakers look inconsistent, duplicitous, or uncertain; reinforced the fragmentation of U.S. policy across the region; and, in the end, had fatal consequences for the Turkey-Armenia protocols.

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### **What Now?**

More than two years later, the short-term prospects for full Turkish-Armenian normalization are dim. Given Turkey's emphatic restatement of linkage, there is little chance that the protocols will be ratified in the absence of progress on the Karabakh conflict. The best supporters of normalization might hope for is the implementation of smaller steps

to regain confidence and trust incrementally. Thomas de Waal, for example, has proposed an appealing list of measures that include increased Turkish connections to the Armenian diaspora (primarily via tourism); direct Turkish Airline flights to Yerevan; restricted border crossings; and electricity sales.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, it seems prudent to renew a push for at least the unconditional establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia. In retrospect, the absence of such relations seems to have been more a casualty of Turkey's early decision to close its borders than the reasoned intervention of an external actor seeking leverage. Practically, Armenia loses little from the absence of diplomatic relations and has little to gain from their establishment. Instead, relations would simply be a mechanism for formal communication between the two countries, and for the provision of basic consular functions.

As for opening the border unconditionally, there are at least four arguments in favor, but these are not fully compelling – as Turkey's refusal to do so has demonstrated. First, Turkey has new economic and foreign policy priorities that will benefit from the border opening. But economic interests and Turkey's aspirations to become a regional “center of gravity”

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13 See Thomas de Waal, “Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap,” Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2010, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/10/05/armenia-and-turkey-bridging-gap/22p>.



are equally well served by keeping the interests of Azerbaijan, an energy rich, co-religious, co-ethnic neighbor, close to heart.

Second, the border closure has failed as a mechanism of conflict resolution. But even so, Turkey may still

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*But economic interests and Turkey's aspirations to become a regional "center of gravity" are equally well served by keeping the interests of Azerbaijan, an energy rich, co-religious, co-ethnic neighbor, close to heart.*

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wish to implement it as a purely punitive measure, until Armenia decides for other reasons to withdraw from Azerbaijani territory.

Third, opening the border could facilitate conflict resolution. Armenia's sense of security will increase, which could lead it to impute a lesser sense of risk in its dealings with Azerbaijan. But increased security on its western front might also provide Armenia with a "strategic depth" that will allow it not to compromise on its eastern front.

Finally, maintaining the status quo is untenable, as it risks the prospect of renewed war.<sup>14</sup> The logic of accidental

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<sup>14</sup> To these justifications might be added others that help to explain U.S. support for dropping conditionality. While we might hypothesize that these include a) responsiveness to domestic lobbying and b) a possible opportunity to shift the balance of influence in the Caucasus away from Russia and toward the West, there have been only two publicly articulated

war, Azerbaijan's loss of faith in negotiations, the ambiguity of Russian treaty obligations to Armenia in the event of war, and the allure of trying to retake at least some territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh all increase the odds of an eventual renewal of conflict. Full Turkish-Armenian normalization could provide Turkey with a stake in deterring Azerbaijan from launching military action, thereby decreasing the odds of war. On the other hand, it might increase Azerbaijani desperation to the point that Baku concludes war is its best option.

So while there are good arguments for opening the border without making progress on the Karabakh conflict, none are so compelling to push Turkey toward full normalization. Another way forward, then, is to acknowledge the linkage between the border opening and the Karabakh conflict in a redrafting of the Basic Principles.

### **Redrafting the Basic Principles**

The aim of the Basic Principles is not to settle the Karabakh conflict by finalizing Nagorno-Karabakh's po-

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*justifications: one that refuses to grapple with the problem of linkage at all (i.e., stating that normalization is "inherently valuable," "would benefit the people of both countries today," and is "an important and a good thing in its own right") while another vaguely alludes to positive knock-on effects (normalization is "a step towards genuine reconciliation in the region," a "contribut[or] to further trust and peace and stability, not just for Turkey and Armenia but elsewhere as well," "the true path to peace and stability and reconciliation in the region," and something that "holds out the prospect of positive transformative change in the region."). All phrases belong to Assistant Secretary of State Phillip H. Gordon, March 3, 2011; March 17, 2010, November 12, 2009 (<http://www.state.gov>).*

litical status. It is much too early for that. Instead, the aim is to achieve a feasible *interim* solution that will increase security for all parties; redress at least some of the consequences of conflict; catalyze transboundary activity; and ultimately transform the conflict environment in a way that can facilitate the parties' eventual entry into the final, more difficult, stages of a political settlement.

While the current Basic Principles embody these goals, they have proven unworkable.<sup>15</sup> The main problem lies with what originally might have seemed their greatest strength: a “constructive ambiguity” that creates the appearance of agreement by papering over critical differences between Azerbaijan and Armenia.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the Basic Principles call for “return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control” and the establishment of “a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh,” but Azerbaijan and Armenia have been unable to agree on the timing of the return of territories (whether or not to allow Armenia to hold some territories as “insurance” pending a final settlement) and the size of the corridor (a road? a region? two regions?). While

the Basic Principles call for “the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence,” they fail to address the timing and sequence of that return. Most importantly, while the Basic Principles call for a “future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh though a legally binding expression of will,” this principle has run aground on the details of its referendum-sounding measure (who will vote? when?). In essence, Armenia seeks guarantees that the population of Nagorno-Karabakh will be able to vote for independence sometime in the future, while Azerbaijan seeks to push such a measure back indefinitely, maybe forever.<sup>17</sup> Other principles – an “interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance” and “international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation” are less disputed, even if the details have yet to be fleshed out.

Rather than continuing to search for the magic formula that will secure agreement on the Basic Principles as they stand, it may be time to contemplate their redrafting – both to accept a linkage with the opening of the Turkish-

15 The last publicly available statement of the Basic Principles is the “Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries,” Press Release, Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe, July 10, 2009, available at <http://www.osce.org/item/51152>.

16 On the “constructive ambiguity” of the Basic Principles, see Thomas de Waal, “The Karabakh trap: Dangers and dilemmas of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict,” *Conciliation Resources* (2009), p. 10.

17 In a June 30, 2009 interview with Russian state television, President Aliyev said, “This [determination of final status] could happen in one year, maybe in ten years, or in 100 years, or this could never happen. Time will tell.” Azertag, July 6, 2009, available in Russian at <http://www.azertag.com/ru/newsarchive?mod=1&date=2009-7-6&id=252&partition=1>. The quotation is cited in translation in “Nagorno-Karabagh: Getting to a Breakthrough,” *Europe Briefing*, No. 53, International Crisis Group (October 2009), p. 7.



Armenian border and to reduce unbridgeable ambiguities. Such principles should not pretend to be complete. They should not seek to resolve the Karabakh conflict in its entirety, and they should not strive to give Azerbaijan or Armenia all that they have sought in the negotiations to date.

One set of Basic Principles that fits this bill is the following:

- the opening of the Turkish-Armenian land border;
- return of all territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control, except Lachin and Kelbajar;
- interim Armenian control over Lachin and Kelbajar;
- an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence, with the modalities of return to Lachin, Kelbajar, and Nagorno-Karabakh to be determined at a later time;
- international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.

Such a redraft would be of benefit to both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azerbaijan would retain Turkey's commitment to make the opening of the border contingent on the withdrawal of Armenian forces. It would receive much of its territory outside

Nagorno-Karabakh, enabling the return of IDPs. Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia would be allowed to assert their right of return. Finally, the agreement would not effect any change in international interpretations of Azerbaijan's *de jure* territorial integrity.

Armenia would also gain from such an agreement. It would receive the expected benefits of a border opening with Turkey. It would continue to retain control (on an interim basis) of the two territories it deems most strategic for the defense of Nagorno-Karabakh. The latter would receive an internationally-mandated codification of its rights of self-government ("interim status") for the foreseeable future. Armenian refugees/IDPs from Azerbaijan would be able to assert their right of return, while the return of Azerbaijani IDPs would be managed in phases. Nagorno-Karabakh would be provided with international security guarantees to prevent Azerbaijan from deploying military force against it.

It will not be easy to reach agreement on a redrafted set of Basic Principles. The Armenian government has long insisted that any linkage between the border opening and the Karabakh conflict is a non-starter. It has also long been unwilling to give up territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh without a clear guarantee that the breakaway autonomous region will eventually have the opportunity to

opt for formal independence. For its part, the Azerbaijani government will not want to risk signaling any kind of formal consent to the continued occupation of Lachin and Kelbajar or the drawing of distinctions among groups of IDPs. Finally, though securing agreement on the principles of “interim status” and “international security guarantees” might be possible, hammering out their details in a mutually acceptable fashion will be challenging.

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The above analysis suggests one way to weave the two processes together with an eye toward gradual – and, in the case of Karabakh, open-ended – resolution. Other models, for instance alternating incremental steps on each track, might also be worth considering. Such approaches will surely encounter many challenges, as have the approaches before them. And any formal conflict resolution process requires on-the-ground efforts to prepare populations for peace that neither the Azerbaijani nor Armenian government has to date been willing (or able) to make. But only by making a genuine effort to constructively link Turkey-Armenia relations and the Karabakh conflict can the possibility of such a link be determined.

## Conclusion

After raising such high hopes, the Turkey-Armenian normalization process of 2009 failed to come to fruition or spur a breakthrough in the Karabakh conflict resolution process. With neither the protocols nor the Basic Principles offering a promising way forward along separate tracks, it is worthwhile to consider how the two processes might be constructively linked. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that neither track can offer a “grand” solution.