

Is The Karabakh Peace Process In Jeopardy?



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by Liz Fuller

Just one week ago, it seemed as though Armenia and Azerbaijan were closer than they had been for years to resolving the Karabakh conflict.

The two countries' presidents, Serzh Sarkisian and Ilham Aliyev, met one-on-one for more than an hour on May 7 on the sidelines of the EU's European Partnership summit in Prague. While neither president made any official statement after those talks, the co-chairmen of the OSCE Minsk Group that has been mediating peace talks since 1992 were upbeat, speaking of an imminent "breakthrough."

But within days, a senior member of the Azerbaijani presidential administration told RFE/RL that the co-chairs were seeking to deceive world public opinion by claiming progress had been made during the Prague talks. Were those remarks intended to reassure the Azerbaijani public? Or is the peace process now deadlocked?

The Minsk Group co-chairs' assessment of the Prague meeting gave the impression that the momentum generated by meetings between Aliyev and Sarkisian with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow in November, and again in January in Switzerland, was sustained.

In Moscow, the three presidents signed a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to resolving the Karabakh conflict without recourse to military force, and within the framework of the OSCE-mediated talks. Following the January talks, U.S. Minsk Group co-Chairman Matthew Bryza said that the two presidents made progress on "several key elements" of a draft peace deal, but he did not specify what they were.

Disparate Views

The Minsk Group assessment of last week's Prague talks was even more upbeat. Bryza told RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service on May 7 that the two presidents continued to narrow the differences between their respective positions with regard to the so-called Basic Principles. Those principles were drafted by the Minsk Group and have been on the table since the summer of 2006.

"Presidents Aliyev and Sarkisian were able...to reduce their differences on our Basic Principles and generally agree on the basic ideas that they came here to discuss," Bryza said.

He added that the Minsk Group would continue to work with the two countries' foreign ministers "to finalize the details of these key remaining concepts within the Basic Principles."

But on May 11, Novruz Mammedov, who heads the international relations department within the Azerbaijani presidential administration, contacted RFE/RL's Baku bureau and offered to give an interview on the Karabakh peace process. During that interview, Mammedov said the Minsk Group co-chairs' claims of progress in the peace talks and of a narrowing of outstanding differences were untrue. He said those claims reflected bias toward Armenia, which Azerbaijan consistently says was the "aggressor" in the Karabakh conflict.

Mammedov implied that the co-chairs wanted to delay a solution of the conflict indefinitely in order to enhance their own importance. He suggested that Bryza might deliberately have been feeding false information to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and to President Barack Obama in the hope of gaining a promotion. He further accused Armenia of adopting an "unconstructive approach" during the Prague meeting.

"In the last meeting [of the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents in Prague], Armenia's position was very unconstructive," Mammedov said. "They did not want to take a single step toward resolution of the conflict and once again made their claims on Azerbaijan's territory."

Niggling Details

Mammedov's disavowal of the Minsk Group's claims of progress in Prague was all the more surprising and unexpected because it contradicts a recent assessment of the peace process by Aliyev himself. On April 17, three weeks before his meeting with Sarkisian in Prague, Aliyev traveled to Moscow, where he discussed the Karabakh issue with Russian President Medvedev. Aliyev told journalists after those talks that "certain progress has been made in the negotiation process," although many contentious issues still need to be resolved.

RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service [talked to Bryza](#) on May 14 in an attempt to clarify the situation. Bryza said that Mammedov was not present at the Prague talks and therefore could not give a firsthand assessment. Bryza said that the co-chairs "catalyzed a very lively round of discussions" in the course of which the two presidents did indeed "make significant progress."

"We've got a series of between 10 and 20 Basic Principles in our Madrid document and a handful of those still need to be worked out conceptually," Bryza said. "The presidents did in fact work through the concepts of that handful of Basic Principles that had not been agreed. What they didn't do was agree on the details, and that's the focus of our negotiations right now."

Bryza said that the French Minsk Group co-chairman, Ambassador Bernard Fassier, is currently in Yerevan, and will travel from there to Azerbaijan, to present to the two presidents ideas that the co-chairs drafted after the Prague talks and which flesh out the details of the concepts on which broad agreement was reached in Prague.

Bryza rejected the suggestion that the peace process is in jeopardy. He pointed out that "at the request of the presidents, we agreed to accelerate our efforts," not to slow them down. Bryza also rejected the Mammedov's charge that the co-chairs are biased toward Armenia.

"To say that we as mediators favor one side or the other is simply ridiculous," Bryza said. "We cannot be mediators if we favor one side or the other."

Whose Interests?

There are several possible explanations for the apparent U-turn on Baku's part. Mammedov's statement may have been intended primarily to reassure Azerbaijani public opinion that President Aliyev is not about to make unpalatable concessions. The fact that he chose RFE/RL, rather than a state-controlled media outlet, as the medium for conveying that message, appears to substantiate that hypothesis.

Alternatively, the Armenian negotiating position may indeed have hardened in response to pressure from the Nagorno-Karabakh leadership. Bryza indirectly hinted at this, telling RFE/RL that had Mammedov "been in the room, he would have seen how actively we were encouraging the Armenian side to move forward." (He added hastily: "And of course, we encouraged the Azerbaijani side as well.")

Over the past two weeks, two prominent military officials from Karabakh, former armed forces commander Samvel Babayan and Defense Minister General Moses Hakobian, have both warned against concessions to Azerbaijan. In particular, they argue that Armenian forces should not withdraw from seven districts of Azerbaijan they currently occupy before a firm agreement is reached on the region's future status. The Basic Principles envisage a gradual Armenian withdrawal from six of those seven districts, to be followed at some future stage by a referendum on Nagorno-Karabakh's future status.

Hakobian told journalists in Stepanakert on May 11 that "all the territories that we had liberated required human victims, and every person here has memories related to them.... It will be difficult to cede those territories to anyone." Hakobian also reaffirmed that President Sarkisian must not sign any formal agreement resolving the Karabakh conflict that is detrimental to the interests of the population of Karabakh. "It is impossible to implement any decision not accepted by the Nagorno-Karabakh people," Hakobian warned.

A third possible explanation is that Azerbaijan is simply playing for time, and that President Aliyev's apparent willingness in recent months to reach a peace agreement was simply a ploy. In light of the huge sums Azerbaijan allocates annually for the military, some observers believe it intends within the next few years to launch a new offensive to bring Karabakh back under the control of the central government by force.

Looking Ahead

The two sides have come very close to reaching agreement twice before. Under a draft agreement reached in November 1998, Nagorno-Karabakh would have received de facto independence within a loose confederation with Azerbaijan. The provisions of the second agreement, discussed in Key West, Florida in April 2001, were never made public, but are widely believed to have included granting Azerbaijan use of a land corridor across southern Armenia to link Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan. In both cases, Baku later reneged on the tentative agreement reached.

Former Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian represented Armenia at the Minsk Group-mediated talks for over 10 years, from 1997 to April 2008. He told RFE/RL's Armenian Service that the conflict sides have reached three separate agreements -- once on the so-called Common State; the second time during the talks in Key West; and most recently as a result of talks that began in Prague five years ago.

"Since 1998, three major proposals have emerged as a result of the work of the parties themselves. They were the Common State, Key West, and the Prague process," Oskanian said. "The parties worked on these, engaged in give and take, leading eventually to a document. In the first two cases, Azerbaijan clearly backtracked."

He said he hopes "history will not repeat itself" this time, and that "Azerbaijan will not back down from this last set of principles, particularly the issue of self-determination of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh."

Oskanian also deplored Mammedov's comments to RFE/RL, which he said could potentially derail the "delicate" negotiation process.

"Anything said by officials affects the [negotiation] process. The process is affected not just by what the parties say, but even more so by what the [Minsk Group] co-chairs say," Oskanian said. "This is an extremely delicate process. Everyone has to be careful what they say, particularly since nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. So when you reveal part of the agreement and you say you don't know what's going to happen with the other element, this will naturally raise concerns in one or the other country."

Was it was indeed Mammedov's intention to create a pretext for Azerbaijan to backtrack on all or some of the principles agreed on in Prague? That may only become clear when Aliyev and Sarkisian meet again next month in St. Petersburg.

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Turkey Says Agrees Framework For Ties With Armenia



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ISTANBUL (Reuters) -- Turkey and Armenia have agreed on a framework to normalize relations in a step that is the first of its kind since Turkey closed its border to Armenia in 1993.

The statement came ahead of the April 24 commemoration of mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks in 1915. The two countries are engaged in high-level talks to restore ties.

"The two parties have achieved tangible progress and mutual understanding in this process and they have agreed on a comprehensive framework for the normalization of their bilateral relations," said a statement issued by the foreign ministries of both countries.

Switzerland has been acting as a mediator between Turkey and Armenia.

The agreement is sure to upset Turkey's traditional ally Azerbaijan, putting at risk gas deals Ankara and the European Union are trying to seal with the major natural-gas producer to boost exports to Europe.

The statement did not say how they would tackle a bitter dispute over Ottoman-era killings of ethnic Armenians nor if Ankara and Yerevan had reached an agreement to open the border.

The statement comes a day before Armenia commemorates the anniversary of the 1915 killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, which it claims amounted to genocide.

Turkey strongly denies Armenian charges, and says many were killed on both sides.

"We don't want to make any more further comment than what is said in the statement. We will continue

with our policy of silent diplomacy. The time has not come yet to make announcements on specifics nor on timelines," said a Foreign Ministry source.

U.S. President Barack Obama, during a visit to Turkey earlier this month, called on Turkey and Armenia to make progress on the negotiations.

The United States welcomed the statement and urged Ankara and Yerevan to normalize ties "within a reasonable time frame."

"We urge Armenia and Turkey to proceed according to the agreed framework and roadmap," acting State Department spokesman Robert Wood said in a statement. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in support of Azerbaijan, which was fighting Armenian-backed separatists in the breakaway, mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A breakthrough between Turkey and Armenia could help to shore up stability in the volatile, oil-rich Caucasus.

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Turkey Signals Opening To Armenia Must Include Nagorno-Karabakh Progress



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by Charles Recknagel, Andrew F. Tully

Commentaries in both the Turkish and Armenian press for weeks have predicted that the border between the two countries could soon be opened.

But the optimism has been based more on diplomatic gestures than public statements from either government.

There was the "football diplomacy" of Turkish President Abdullah Gul's attendance at a World Cup qualifier match in Yerevan in September. That visit suggested an atmosphere of goodwill was being created which -- like the "ping pong" diplomacy between Washington and Beijing in the 1970s -- could lead to normal relations.

There also have been meetings between the Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers.

More recently, there was the additional impetus of U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Turkey early this month. Obama said in Ankara on April 6 that Washington strongly supports the full normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

But if all this has suggested fast movement, Ankara now appears increasingly to be offering public signs that a slowdown may be coming.

Speaking in Prague on April 21, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan affirmed that Turkey and Armenia are moving forward with contacts. But he also stressed Turkey's interest in solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

"As of now, we are at a quite advanced stage in this process," Babacan said. "Also, in the South Caucasus there are other problems, like the situation that we now see in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or the Nagorno-Karabakh issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan."

'Comprehensive Solution'

It was over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that Turkey broke off relations with Armenia in 1993. Ankara and Baku are close allies, and Turkish officials often speak of Turkey and Azerbaijan as "one nation, two countries."

As speculation has mounted of a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, Baku is reported to have become increasingly worried that a deal could bypass the thorny Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

But speaking in the Czech capital, Babacan underlined that Ankara is not only maintaining its engagement with Armenia but it is also working to resolve problems that Armenia has with what he called "other countries," including Azerbaijan.

He noted Turkish officials are in close contact with U.S., Russian, and French mediators leading the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. And he said he envisions a "real possibility" for the signing of an Armenian-Azerbaijani peace agreement this year.

Babacan made similar statements last week at a meeting of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization in Yerevan.

Turkey's "Hurriyet Daily News" reported him saying at the time to Turkish reporters that "we want a comprehensive solution and full normalization." He added that the road to a solution must run parallel with talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The Turkish newspaper "Today's Zaman" reported on April 21 that Turkey's talks with Armenia would be on the agenda of next week's meeting of Turkey's powerful National Security Council, comprising top state officials and army generals.

The newspaper added that Turkish President Gul would visit Baku shortly after the meeting to "inform the Azerbaijani administration about the decisions Turkey has made regarding normalization with Armenia."

All this could signal weeks or months of difficult diplomacy ahead.

Role For Washington?

Armenian leaders say Ankara did not raise the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh during months of conciliatory meetings with the Armenian government.

Yerevan previously has ruled out direct Turkish involvement in the international efforts to end the dispute over the predominantly Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan.

Where, then, might a breakthrough be made?

Babacan may -- or may not -- have provided a hint as he spoke in Prague about Ankara's interest in working with Washington, its NATO partner, to alleviate trouble in Caucasus hot spots.

"We have initiated the Caucasus Stable Tent Cooperation Platform involving five countries, namely the Russian Federation, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan -- and actually yesterday we had the third deputy minister-level meeting of the platform," Babacan said. "So this is a comprehensive approach that we have which targets stability and peace in our region."

Washington is anxious to bolster friendly states in the Caucasus following the Russia-Georgia war in August. It has appeared to endorse Ankara's policy of becoming more active in the region while Moscow seems determined to reassert its influence over the former Soviet republics.

That could mean increasing pressure from Washington on all three states -- Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan -- to find ways to cooperate in the suddenly more volatile Caucasus.

If so, it may mean the stakes are now too high to let the possibility of a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement pass without trying to include progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well.

RFE/RL's Armenian and Azerbaijani services contributed to this report

Are Predictions That Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement Doomed Overstated?



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The publication in the Turkish daily "Hurriyet" in late March of a report that Armenia and Turkey had reached the final stage of drafting a protocol on the conditions and time frame for establishing formal diplomatic relations and opening their common border gave rise to widespread euphoria and unrealistic expectations that such a deal could be finalized within weeks.

That euphoria was swiftly tempered by skepticism when Azerbaijan, which has historically regarded Turkey as its closest ally, reacted with anger and outrage. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev reportedly even **threatened to suspend** natural-gas exports via Turkey.

The vehemence of the negative response in the Azerbaijani media, in conjunction with comments by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has led to a perception that Ankara has bowed to pressure from Baku and hardened its position, and that the anticipated rapprochement may therefore be frozen indefinitely.

That negative response also reflects a departure from Baku's earlier position. On December 5, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said that the possibility of Turkey opening its border with Armenia prior to a formal solution of the Karabakh conflict was not on the agenda during his talks several days earlier with his Turkish counterpart Ali Babacan, as doing so "is the sovereign right of those two states."

Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian **acknowledged** on April 10 that the ongoing talks might indeed fail if Ankara sets new preconditions for establishing formal diplomatic ties.

But a careful examination of successive Turkish statements shows major inconsistencies. Erdogan's repeated insistence that Ankara will not open its border with Armenia until a settlement of the Karabakh conflict is reached posits a linkage between the two processes. That is at odds with Turkish Foreign Minister Babacan's statement in Yerevan on April 15. Babacan told reporters following a session of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation that "We don't say, 'Let's first solve one problem and solve the other later,'" implicitly denying any such linkage.

That discrepancy raises the question: are Erdogan's pronouncements intended primarily for domestic consumption and to reassure Azerbaijan, while Babacan's reflect Ankara's ongoing commitment to normalizing relations?

Turkish President Abdullah Gul has not made any comment on Armenian-Turkish relations since the publication of the original "Hurriyet" article almost a month ago. But the newspaper "Today's Zaman" reported on April 21 that Gul will visit Baku after an April 28 session of Turkey's National Security Council that is scheduled to discuss the normalization of relations with Armenia. The same paper on April 9 quoted an unnamed Turkish government official as saying that the Armenian-Turkish border will remain closed at least until October-November. He said Ankara will use that time to allay Azerbaijan's concerns.

But a six-month interval would also serve as an opportunity to achieve tangible progress in resolving the Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijani President Aliyev hinted in Moscow on April 17 that Azerbaijan is prepared "in principle" to sign in the near future an interim document on resolving the Karabakh conflict. He did not say whether he meant the Madrid Principles drafted by the OSCE Minsk Group that have served as the basis for negotiations since late 2007.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijani political commentator Ilgar Mammadov has suggested that the true reason for Baku's anger at Turkey is not geopolitical but economic, and derives from the ongoing dispute with Turkey over the price Turkey is prepared to pay for Azerbaijani gas to be exported via the planned Nabucco pipeline. Turkey reportedly wants to buy that gas for \$150 per thousand cubic meters and sell it for \$400. President Aliyev **said** in Moscow on April 17 that disagreement is delaying the second phase of exploitation of Azerbaijan's huge Shah Deniz gas field.

Mammadov's hypothesis ties in with the March 27 signing of a statement of intent between Azerbaijan and Gazprom under which Azerbaijan could begin selling gas to Russia in early 2010. That statement of intent has been widely interpreted as an indication that Azerbaijan, for whatever reason, would prefer to conclude a binding agreement now to export gas via Russia, rather than wait and see whether and when construction work on Nabucco finally gets under way. Aliyev noted on April 17 that the existing gas pipeline linking Azerbaijan and Russia has a current minimum capacity of 5 billion cubic meters.

Some Russian commentators have inferred from Aliyev's talks in Moscow that Azerbaijan and Russia may have struck a deal under which Azerbaijan sells gas to Gazprom in return for Moscow's services in brokering a solution to the Karabakh conflict. But that interpretation ignores the fact that Russia and Azerbaijan alike have a vested interest both in resolving the Karabakh conflict and in reaching a mutually beneficial agreement on gas exports. And the talks that yielded that statement of intent began last July, before any substantive progress in Turkish-Armenian relations, and before the Russian-Georgian war.

Aliyev was reportedly exceedingly angry with his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili for

precipitating the August war with Russia that posed a brief but very real threat to the export via Georgia of Azerbaijani oil and gas. Indeed, it is conceivable that Azerbaijan may no longer consider Saakashvili a responsible and reliable partner, or Georgia a viable long-term export route for Caspian hydrocarbons. Thus when Aliyev raised in early April the possibility that Azerbaijan might suspend export of its gas via Turkey, he may well have been adducing the anticipated opening of the Armenian-Turkish border as the rationale for a decision taken earlier and for totally different reasons that it would be injudicious to spell out publicly.

The current shifts in the geopolitical landscape show to what extent the approaches and priorities of individual states have become more complex and multifaceted in the wake of the August war in Georgia. But underlying those shifts is the conviction shared by Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and the United States that further conflict in the South Caucasus must be avoided at all costs.

Further gradual progress on resolving the Karabakh conflict and establishing normal relations between Armenia and Turkey would contribute to strengthening regional stability. And as former Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian **pointed out** at a press conference in Yerevan on April 17, the current situation also offers an opportunity for Georgia to embark on a strategic partnership with Armenia that would benefit both countries.

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