

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of History

History, Department of

2009

Looming Dangers, Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds, Opening Borders: A Perilous Blueprint

Bedross Der Matossian

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, bdermatossian2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

Der Matossian, Bedross, "Looming Dangers, Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds, Opening Borders: A Perilous Blueprint" (2009).
Faculty Publications, Department of History. 185.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/185>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

COMMENT

LOOMING DANGERS

TURKEY AND ARMENIA: OPENING MINDS, OPENING BORDERS: A PERILOUS BLUEPRINT

On April 14, 2009, the International Crisis Group (ICG), a think tank that provides suggestions on conflict resolutions around the globe, issued a report entitled *Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds, Opening Borders* in which it made recommendations for Armenian-Turkish reconciliation and the establishment of bilateral relations between the Republics of Armenia and Turkey.¹ The report was published after the newly elected American President, Barack Obama, visited Turkey in early April 2009, and eight days before the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Turkey and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs issued a joint statement about a road-map to normalize relations between the two countries.

Surprisingly, it attempts to situate its recommendations at a time when Turkey and Armenia “are close to settling a dispute that has long roiled the Caucasus” and, despite past difficulties, claims that progressively “intense” official engagement, civil society, and international and public opinion change have transformed the nature of the relationship between these two countries (p. i). In essence, it posits that fresh endeavors brought the two countries to the verge of an historical agreement to open borders, establish diplomatic ties, and begin joint work on reconciliation.

Like similar efforts, this ICG report seems idealist, perhaps even superficial, and aims at portraying a very optimistic picture of current Armenian-Turkish relations. Furthermore, it tends to view minor developments with a magnifying glass, advancing vast generalizations to bypass crucial issues that remain as major obstacles towards a sincere Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. The report provides a solution to the century-old conflict in 34 pages and asserts that the bipolar views of history among Turks and Armenians are “converging, showing that the significant deep traumas can be healed” (p. i). One wonders what are the major indications of this significant convergence of the bipolar views of history, and how they might address core concerns?

The report first provides an executive summary and recommendations for improved Armenian-Turkish ties. From the very beginning, the tone is akin to a school headmaster who summons students who diked it out in the courtyard and, after rebuking them both, insists they end their animosities against

¹ Europe Report, No. 199, available in pdf format on the international Crisis Group website at <http://www.crisisgroup/home/index.cfm>. The direct URL for the report is <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6050&l=1>

each other by shaking hands. In its upfront recommendation section, the ICG advises both Turkey and Armenia to “agree, ratify, and implement a normalisation package including the opening of borders, establish . . . diplomatic relations and bilateral commissions, [and] continue to prepare public opinion for reconciliation” (p. ii). It further advocates Armenia to avoid using third country legislative assemblies to pass resolutions pertaining to the Armenian Genocide while warning Turkey not to hold Armenia accountable for these actions. As to the Nagorno-Karabagh Question, the report counsels Turkey not to use it as a precondition for any normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. Furthermore, it recommends both countries pursue broader research on matters pertaining to the “events of 1915” (p. ii), as it clearly indicates that both parties have to compromise historical views for the sake of normalization. Inasmuch as such a declaration is epochal, a major ethical question is raised regarding the extent to which the “victimized group” has to comprise on an historical reality, to satisfy political objectives of the “perpetrator group.” Even third parties to the conflict (the United States, Russia, and the European Union) are called upon to avoid damning legislation that might inflame public opinion on either side (in reality it is the Turkish side only) and back Turkey-Armenia reconciliation endeavors.

Because the short report is packed with key details, it may be useful to provide a brief description of its contents, to better inform readers of its goals. As it is divided into seven sections, the report briefly discusses the “history” of Armenian-Turkish relations in its introduction, marking the visit of Turkish President Abdullah Gül, on an invitation of his Armenian counterpart, as a stepping-stone towards normalization. The second section, entitled “The State of Negotiations,” claims that a “package deal” (p. 4) is on the table, comprised of the establishment of full diplomatic ties, and the opening of border crossings, as well as the creation of a new inter-governmental commission, including a sub-commission to address issues that may preoccupy the “historical commission” (p. 6). In the third section, “The Burdens of Conflicting Histories,” ICG authors posit how Armenia and Turkey view the “events of 1915” (p. 5), confessing in footnote 65 that the ICG does not opine as a specialist in Ottoman or Genocide studies, but strives to “collect the arguments of different people about the many narratives and debates, put them in contemporary political context and show where they influence Turkey-Armenia relations” (p. 8). Given this blatant admission, one is tempted to ask how can any attempt towards normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations take place without a proper assessment of history? Without exaggeration, this is something that the ICG report failed to achieve and, in fact, the report’s major deficiency lies in a serious lack of historical analyses. Parenthetically, it is noteworthy to underline that the report relies on a very limited number of documents to buttress its case, and which are critical to discuss serious concerns. One wonders whether genuine rapprochement between the two nations and countries is possible absent such transparency. Still, the report tends to portray a superficial picture of the nature of Armenian-Turkish relations without a sound understanding of power-asymmetry, dynamics of power, historical transformations,

regional and international politics and most importantly the complexity of the Armenian Diaspora and the many roles that members of the latter play and are likely to in the future.

Even worse, the ICG report presents the 1915 “events” from the Turkish and Armenian perspectives, as it attempts to illustrate the convergence that has been taking place among some Turkish intellectuals who now describe the Armenian Genocide as “Büyük Felaket,” supposedly the translation of the Armenian *Medz Yeghern* (*Mets Egheirn*), which is “frequently used by the Armenians to describe the 1915 events” (p. 9). Sources used in this section on the Armenian Genocide are extremely weak, with a single interview of one independent Armenian historian, to present the “Armenian side” (p. 10) of the question. Furthermore, the author(s) portray the Armenian government in Yerevan as the sole player in Armenian-Turkish relations and, by doing so, strip the Armenian Diaspora of any meaningful input on the matter. This is questionable at best and probably a source of future confrontations within Armenian communities that must be carefully assessed. Indeed, in its fourth section, entitled “External Influences,” the ICG adamantly disparages third countries for passing genocide resolutions, and suggests a more active role by the United States in particular to bring both parties to the negotiating table. Remarkably, such assertions neglect to underscore that the American Constitution guarantees certain rights to its citizens, including the privilege to lobby their government on issues of concern. Attempts to minimize or even bypass the role of the Armenian Diaspora in the United States may actually be a monumental error and should not be contemplated haphazardly.

With section five, the report dwells on “Public Opinion,” by making such grandiose statements that attitudes in both countries are ready for a new chapter in Armenian-Turkish relations. It declares that support in Armenia for a border opening—even without a Turkish recognition of the Armenian Genocide—has grown to “more than half of the population” (p. 22). The source for this gem is an online poll conducted by the A1+ organization, an opposition television channel in Yerevan. Likewise, the report explains how public opinion in Turkey is changing dramatically, best illustrated by the December 2008 apology campaign initiated by some 200 Turkish intellectuals, which was signed online by an estimated 29,500 individuals. However, the report conveniently neglects to cite that over 100,000 Turks signed a counter-apology campaign within Turkey, which provides an equally powerful window into Turkish thinking. In discussing public opinion in Armenia and the Diaspora, the report deliberately tries to create a rift between Armenians in the Republic and those living in the Diaspora, by arguing that genocide recognition “may not be as high a priority for those in Armenia as it is for the diaspora” (p. 26). It then perpetuates the myth that the Diaspora is nothing more than a monolithic body of hardliners dominated by the nationalist Dashnak party. Remarkably, it alleges that Diaspora Armenians began to pay more attention to the genocide only when they witnessed how German Nazis were prosecuted for war crimes after the Jewish Holocaust. Beyond ugly opportunistic motives, this assertion may remind readers of classic Turkish arguments, which are entirely rejected.

Most of the proof showing that a change has taken place in the Diaspora is based on massive anonymous citations that further render the ICG report questionable as an impartial document.

In its last section, "The Way Forward," the ICG attempts to shed light on future contacts by claiming that opening borders will benefit both countries and that increased choice in trade routes would also "reduce Armenia's dependence on Russia" (p. 28).

Beyond its overall limited and at times challenged historical and political evaluations of Armenian-Turkish interactions, this latest ICG report is a superficial portrayal of the nature of this complicated relationship. It creates a dichotomy between Armenian vs. Turkish sides, akin to a portrayal resembling a soccer match in which the ICG plays the role of referee, and which strips layers of critical concerns. As such, the report provides an "express solution" to the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation which is facile at best and deeply flawed at worst. It may be useful to compare similar efforts in different contexts to evaluate whether anything substantial was ever achieved by adopting such propositions. The road map anticipated by the Quartet (United States, European Union, Russia, and the United Nations) to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the best testaments of this type of approach. To date, the Quartet has failed to add any value to the peace process, which remains mired in lofty but hollow pronouncements. A genuine Armenian-Turkish rapprochement should obviously take place, but perhaps not on the pages of ICG reports, no matter how admirable the International Crisis Group's intentions may be. Rather, it may be preferable for the parties themselves, Armenia, Turkey, Armenian Diaspora communities, and civil societies in both countries, to engage in active dialogues. Such efforts may gradually overcome existing obstacles, avoid express but fragile solutions, and establish the foundations of solid and lasting reconciliation.

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY BEDROSS DER MATOSSIAN
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS