



ARMENIA-TURKEY POLICY AND MEDIA DISCUSSIONS

**July 11-13, 2011
Istanbul, Turkey**

CONFERENCE SUMMARY REPORT

The Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) convened a three-day conference devoted to Armenia-Turkey Policy and Media Discussions from July 11-13, 2011. The first two days of the event was held on the island of Heybeliada, near Istanbul, before moving to the Kültür University in Istanbul, hosted by the Global Political Trends Center (GPoT).

The event was part of the larger USAID-sponsored “Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement” project, which seeks to support Armenia-Turkey rapprochement by facilitating the engagement of Turkish and Armenian civil society groups, establishing and developing business partnerships and regional professional networks, and by enhancing a greater understanding between the Armenian and Turkish people, in pursuit of the broader goals of peace and economic integration. Within this context, the Global Political Trends Center (GPoT), the Yerevan Press Club (YPC) and the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) brought together over two dozen prominent Armenian and Turkish representatives from academia, think tanks, civil society and the media for a panel discussion divided into four key sessions:

- (1) Elections in Turkey, Protocols and New Global Realities;
- (2) Armenia-Turkey Relations: Prospective Confidence Building Measures;
- (3) Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the Light of the Latest Developments in the Middle East;
and
- (4) Media Research Results & Turkish Parliamentary Elections of 2011.

The conference opened with remarks by Mensur Akgün, the Director of the GPoT, Boris Navasardian, the President of Yerevan Press Club, and Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, the Country Director of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation. The hosts began by reviewing the agenda and the goals of the conference, including an imperative for improving, broadening and deepening understanding between the Turkish and Armenian sides.

The opening remarks were followed by the first panel, entitled “Elections in Turkey, Protocols and New Global Realities,” moderated by Sylvia Tiryaki, the Deputy Director of the GPoT. The sole presentation of the first panel was by Richard Giragosian, the Director of the Regional Studies Center (RSC), an independent think tank in Yerevan, who presented an assessment of the deeper trends in the Turkish-Armenian normalization process within the broader context of the recent parliamentary election in Turkey. Giragosian opened with an overview of the current state of Armenia-Turkey relations, which he defined as a “post-protocol stage of diplomatic engagement.” He noted that although Turkey’s June 2011 parliamentary election was over, the

Turkish government “has yet to demonstrate that it is ready or willing to return to diplomacy with Armenia,” explaining that Turkey’s reluctance to re-engage Armenia was driven by several factors, including more pressing priorities for Turkey, such as the new global realities of events in neighboring Syria, problems with Israel, complications over the Kurdish issue, and even more pressing, the internal “revolution” within Turkey itself, which he categorized as “a profound strategic reorientation, driven by a deep reassessment of the very tenets of its national identity and bolstered by a combination of internal reforms and external challenges.”

Giragosian went on to state that although one of the more visible driving forces behind this change has centered on the frustratingly complicated process of Turkish ascension to European Union (EU) membership, from a broader perspective, the scale and scope of internal democratic change within Turkey has played an even larger and more significant role in driving change within the country. Moreover, he contended, democratization for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has also addressed more fundamental questions, including redefining the very meaning of Turkish identity and the role of Islam within Turkish society. He added that the degree of internal change has also been matched by an equally dynamic reassessment of Turkey’s strategic orientation, bolstered by a policy goal to address a wide range of external challenges. “And just as Turkish identity is very much a product of its geography and history, its strategic significance is also rooted in both geopolitics and geography,” he noted.

He noted that as Armenia and Turkey sought to reach a groundbreaking agreement on normalizing relations, including a possible reopening of the long-closed Turkish-Armenian border and the establishment of diplomatic relations, the “course of Turkish-Armenian diplomacy has become both delicate and difficult, as the process has broken down since the historic visit to Armenia of the Turkish president” in 2008. “But the real challenge, and the real burden, now rests with the Turkish side,” he argued, adding that “it was Turkey that closed its border with Armenia in 1993 and withheld diplomatic relations in support of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict” and, most crucially, he said, Turkey “remains challenged by the need for discussion of historical issues.” At the same time, he noted, “the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations also represents a strategic opportunity that Turkey may be in danger of missing, especially given a recent flurry of diplomatic threats and political posturing aimed at reassuring the nationalist camps both within Turkey and in Azerbaijan. Thus, for Turkey, the issue of normalizing relations with Armenia also stands a key test of Turkey’s strategic future and as an indicator in the course of the Turkish bid for EU ascension. In addition, however, the opening of the closed Armenian-Turkish border could not only bring about a crucial breakthrough in fostering trade links and economic relations, but may also serve as an impetus to bolster broader stability and security throughout the conflict-prone South Caucasus,” Giragosian argued.

The second day of the conference opened with a panel session devoted to Armenia-Turkey relations, with a focus on prospective confidence-building measures between the two countries. The first presentation of the panel was by Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, a Senior Fellow at Yerevan State University’s Center for Civilization and Cultural Studies. Hovhannisyan began by presenting a set of possible prospective confidence building measures between Armenia and Turkey. He pointed to the need for measures that would be based more on the need for Turkey and Armenia to engage as equal partners, with equality as the basis for a mutual future relationship. He further cited the fact that “nationalistic approaches are in contradiction with pragmatic and mutually beneficiary approaches, which sometimes become real hindrances on the path of reconciliation process,” and criticized Turkish foreign policy for failures in its stated policy of “zero problems with neighbors,” which he said “did not bring any results because the Turkish government did not make any real steps towards the solution of real problems.”

Hovhannisyan explained that Armenia and Turkey face “a vivid problem and both parties should talk more about the problem because keeping problems in silence will give rise to many myths and mythologies impeding the rapprochement and reconciliation of both societies.” In this way, the “problem is not between the societies but the states themselves, and argued that it “would be somehow easy to approach two societies through openly talking on the problems, especially the Genocide issue.” But he noted the progress reached to date, stressing that “only ten years ago, it would be almost impossible to raise such questions in Turkey and in Armenia as well.” He then offered more illustrative proposals for confidence building measures, including a call for “activating civil society actors and the media by prompting them to write about the Armenian-Turkish relations based on an approach incorporating the points of view of both societies.” He then argued that “the publication of analyses and different articles on the Armenian-Turkish relationship will have its impact on decision makers (political actors) and eventually will bring to some solution of the issue, while at the same time, the publications of different articles and materials will assist that Armenian society will get more knowledge of contemporary Turkish people and society, while the Turkish people could obtain a deeper understanding of the Armenian issue and how Armenians think about the future relationship of Armenia and Turkey.”

Hovhannisyan closed by also recommending some practical steps of confidence building measures including the exchange of students and experts, as well as more second track diplomacy measures, which he defined as also “very important to improve the relationship of both countries.” For bridging two societies, he emphasized “the cultural component” and suggested the “reconstruction of the city of Ani as a real bridge between both sides such as what happened with the Holy Cross Church in Akhtamar.” The opening of the Akhtamar church “somehow changed the attitude of Armenians towards the Turkey and presence of thousands of Turks had a positive impact as well,” he said.

Finally, turning to the framework of Armenian-Turkey relationship, Hovhannisyan added that “it is impossible to avoid the third factor of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan,” but noted that “the improvement of mutual relationship should not depend on the relationship of third countries and or other indirect factors,” and that “the consideration of the Karabakh conflict in the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey becomes one of the impeding factors for Turkey on the way to (the) European Union.” Hovhannisyan then ended his presentation by offering ten steps towards the building of dialogue and deepening the relationship between the two societies: “dialogue, development (social justice, sustainable development), democracy (internal peace), human dignity, justice, forgiveness, consciousness of sin (responsibility), suppleness of life (conflicts for resources and power), family values, identity issues, education towards peace and confidence building.”

Following Hovhannisyan, Osman Kavala, the Head of the Board of Directors of the Anadolu Kültür Foundation, provided a unique and honest assessment of confidence-building measures based on his many years of experience in moving the process of Turkish-Armenian engagement forward. Kavala stressed that “genocide recognition in Turkey is not coming anytime soon” and warned that “Turkish society is not ready for recognizing the Armenian Genocide, but noted the need for discussion of the genocide issue,” which he said is “not very difficult.” During the discussion following the presentations, some new ideas and specific proposals emerged, including a call for “institutionalizing measures on both sides to facilitate more youth and student exchanges and for more joint research among experts and academics.” In addition, participants also recommended the creation of “formal structures” designed to promote “cooperation between the Turkish and Armenian ministries of culture, with a focus on also including experts from the Armenian Diaspora in a broader effort to conduct research and restoration of the rich Armenian cultural legacy in Turkey today.”

The second panel addressed “Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the Light of the Latest Developments in the Middle East,” with Associate Professor Ali Resul Usül of Bahçeşehir University and Professor Davit Hovhannisyán, the Director of the Center for Civilization and Cultural Studies at Yerevan State University, offering their analyses of Armenian-Turkish diplomacy against the larger backdrop of Turkish foreign policy aims and objectives.

With a shift in focus to Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, Professor Ali Resul Usül of Bahçeşehir University opened the second panel of the day with a detailed presentation of the basic characteristics of Turkish Foreign Policy during the AK Party period. He outlined several essential factors, including the “zero-problem relations with Turkey’s neighbors” policy, which he defined as “a revolutionary discourse change in Turkish foreign policy making.” A second factor was Turkey’s relations with the European Union that he noted “has been dramatically improved just after Turkey was accepted as candidate state, which created a sort of euro-enthusiasm in Turkey that forced Turkish decision makers to improve Turkey’s democracy and human rights records to comply with EU criteria,” although that “enthusiasm declines when the EU punished Turkey and suspended partially Turkey’s accession negotiation process in 2006.”

Professor Usül then went on to discuss Turkey-US relations in terms of having “entered a new era when the Turkish parliament did not allow US troops to join the war against Iraq” in 2003. A fourth factor was the set of “new opportunities of dialogue between Turkey and Armenia that was launched for the first time since 1993, which despite the recent stalemate, was a radical change in foreign policy. He then went on to present a fifth factor, the “Middle Easternization of Turkish Foreign policy,” whereby “the Middle East and North Africa has become more important for Turkish decision makers and Turkey has been a more active and effective actor in the region.” He noted, however, that “this does not mean that there exists an axis shift in Turkey’s traditional foreign policy, but demonstrates that a new AK party political elite in the government has started to see the Middle East/North Africa from a different angle: as a common “civilizational hub” for Muslim countries, including the Arab countries, Turkey and Iran.”

He concluded by stating that “the basic impact of recent political developments in the region on Turkish foreign policy has been on Turkey’s desire to provide an order in the region, as Turkey tried to mediate the crisis through increasing regional trade and transnational activities in the region and attempted to design a new Turkish peace in the region.” But he then warned that recent “movements in the region have demonstrated that Turkey’s aspiration of regional order has a vital problem: Turkey has tried to sustain this order together with existing authoritarian political regimes in the region” and that the “recent political developments in the Arab world has exerted some harmful impact on Turkey’s aspiration of designing a regional order in the Middle East and North Africa meaning that, in the long run, Turkey, with a modern and democratic culture and stable and successful economy and political life, will be one of the most important security and stability suppliers in the region.”

Following Professor Usül’s presentation, Professor Davit Hovhannisyán, the Director of the Center for Civilization and Cultural Studies at Yerevan State University, then traced the evolution of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, noting “the underlying trends and sometimes over-ambitious goals.” According to Hovhannisyán, Turkey’s policy goal of “zero problems was an important phase of foreign policy but that Turkey remained constrained by a perception that it was surrounded by enemies.” He also defined Turkish foreign policy as “neo-Ottoman” and closed with a sober warning that “Turkey was dangerously overly ambitious and far too over-confident in its moves in the Middle East, which also makes the Armenian issue much less important.”

After moving to the Kültür University in Istanbul, the fourth panel of the conference was devoted to a presentation of “Media Research Results and Turkish Parliamentary Elections of 2011.” Opening the session, Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, the Deputy Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), affiliated with the Armenian Ministry of Defense, started with an analysis contending that “both the Armenian and Turkish sides are willing to move forward, but more needs to be done by the Turkish side to make this happen.” He also called for a greater emphasis on “trying new measures, such as establishing cooperation between youth wings of political parties, and using Kurdish members of the Turkish parliament as mediators and facilitators in the dialogue process.” Following Ter-Matevosyan, Yavuz Baydar, a columnist for Today’s Zaman newspaper, highlighted the role of the Armenian issue within the more important domestic political context, adding that the football diplomacy between Turkey and Armenia demonstrated and confirmed the increasingly pragmatic nature of the AKP government, offering a degree of hope that the Armenian issue may return as an important political factor for Ankara.

The concluding session, focused on a presentation of “Media Research Results and Turkish Parliamentary Elections of 2011,” featured reports by Assistant Professor Gökçen Karanfil, from İzmir University of Economics’ Faculty of Communication, Sevda Alankuş, the Dean of the İzmir University’s Faculty of Communication, and Mikayel Zolyan, the Project Coordinator from the Yerevan Press Club.

Professor Karanfil began by noting that although Turkey and Armenia share “a long history of tension, when Armenia declared its independence in 1991 Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize it, but did not establish diplomatic relations.” Since then, however, and especially after the murder of Hrant Dink in 2007, he noted that a series of dialogues started between civil society institutions and governments which found its full expression in “football diplomacy” in 2008, leading to inter-governmental dialogue, with the signing of the protocols to open the border and establish diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey in 2009 being the highest point in this rapprochement process and that was accompanied by various civil society initiatives to increase dialogues between the various segments of populations in the two countries ranging from business partnership to joint student projects.”

His presentation was based on data collected from research conducted between October 2010 and May 2011 and sought “to map out the main patterns and trends of representation in the mainstream Turkish media of the Armenian-Turkish normalization process from 2008 and 2010 and to highlight the dynamics of media representations during the Armenian-Turkish normalization process.” Throughout the presentation, the findings of quantitative and qualitative surveys of the coverage of the seven selected periods between 2008 and 2010 in five selected outlets were outlined, revealing the nuances in opinions and views of the issue.

After assessing the coverage from the five media outlets surveyed and detailing the selection criteria, including the political orientation and circulation of each of the outlets, the presentation compared the selected outlets regarding “the sources, genre, frequency, subjects, stimulants, contexts, and third parties” and noted the generally positive nature of the coverage of Armenian-Turkish relations. He then went on to focus on the selected news reports and opinion pieces of the same sequences which have been analyzed via qualitative methods, pointing out cases of media bias, including the privileging among the actors and the use of emotionally challenged terms/stereotypes/hate speech. His overall conclusion “incorporated the findings of the quantitative research with those of the qualitative analysis from the report and identified the generally positive tendencies within the Turkish mainstream media that accompanied the improvement of the relations between Turkey and Armenia.”