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TURKEY AND THE RUSSIAN BASE IN GYUMRI

Ömer Engin LÜTEM

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A couple of days ago Armenias Minister of Defense Seyran Ohanyan stated that Armenia hosts Russian troops on its territory because of a security threat emanating from Turkey, that Turkey would at least indirectly intervene in case of a renewed Armenian-Azerbaijani war for Karabagh, but that the Russian-Armenian military alliance would prevent such an intervention.

This statement is important because it was the first time in many years that an Armenian minister indicated that the Russian base in Gyumri is meant to prevent an intervention that may come from Turkey. In general, Russian and Armenian officials have chosen to remain silent as to purpose of the military base. During the extension of the military bases presence up until 2044, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov had expressed during an interview in September 2010 that the bases primary purpose was to protect the Russian Federations interests, that these interests entailed the protection of the stability of the South Caucasia and Caspian region. Also, during a visit to Azerbaijan that month, Prime Minister Medvedev had indicated that the time extension of the base did not constitute a threat to the security of Azerbaijan.

It is clear that the statements of the Russian statesmen and the Armenian Ministry of Defense are completely contradicting of each other. It could be presumed that Russia, which is in good relations with Turkey and which seeks to improve these relations even more, is not pleased with Ohanyans words and that it has possibly made its displeasure known to Ohanyan.

Why has the Armenian Minister of Defense felt the need to express such a statement?

In this regard, it has to be considered first of all that a small-scale of war is being carried out between Armenia and Azerbaijan by means of snipers. These border clashes, in which Armenia is unable gain dominance and which the Minsk Group is unable to stop, create a sense of uneasiness in Armenia. Furthermore, it brings to mind a possible intervention from Turkey due to the strategic partnership between Turkey and Armenia. There is a baseless notion in Armenia that Azerbaijan can be coped with on the military front. However, it is not possible to express the same thing for Turkey. Armenian Minister of Defense has sought to eliminate worries on this issue by expressing that the Russian base will prevent Turkeys possible intervention.

It can be seen that besides what may be referred to as military reasons, there are also reasons which are political in their character.

There is a widespread notion in both Armenias and the Diasporas public that in 2015, Turkey - with the assistance of some countries - will recognize the Armenian genocide allegations and will subsequently pay compensation, and even that the process of giving land to Armenia will start. While it is obvious that the activities planned for 1915 and onward will create a discomfort in Turkey to some extent; it seems that it will not be possible for such activities to lead to the recognition of claims of genocide or result in further consequences. President Sarkisyan must be in the same view since he has stated about a year ago that it is not appropriate to compare 2015 to a tsunami; that, on the other hand, 2015 is a point that must definitely be reached, but it is not a watershed moment where a race ends and victory is gained; and emphasized that 2015 is not a target, but a process. However, as intense expectations persist in the Armenian public, it seems possible that a campaign of criticism towards the Armenian government will be launched in future in the case that the expectations are not met. For this reason, experiencing tensions with Turkey in addition to Azerbaijan in sensitive issues such as security may serve to block such criticisms.

On the other hand, the success of the initiatives and actions of Armenia regarding 2015 partly depend on the some other countries support. During Mr. Prime Ministers last visit to Germany, it was revealed that some countries are preparing to make such a support: for instance Germany has allocated a budget for such an endeavor. There will be no need for other countries to help Armenia if positive developments are observed in Turkey-Armenia relations. Conversely, tensions between the two countries will be enough of a reason to support the small and poor Armenia. Hence, it can be seen that Armenia is following a

policy of controlled tension with Turkey. It makes one think that this is the real reason why President Sarkisyan and other Armenian officials constantly make remarks against Turkey and reject Turkeys constructive suggestions, since the establishment of normal relations between the two countries will contribute to the settlement of the Karabakh conflict.

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