

# TURKEY AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: THE IMPERATIVE FOR RE-ENGAGEMENT

For Turkey, the priority for re-engagement is in the neighboring South Caucasus, but as a strategy of engagement that is not based on appeasing Russia or on simply pleasing the West.

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**A**ny current assessment of Turkish foreign policy will present a bleak portrait, defined by challenges and driven by crises. Faced with a daunting set of threats, Turkey's primary crisis is dominated by developments in neighboring Syria, which includes a contest of competing interests with rival Iran and a test of Turkey's restored relationship with Russia. Against that backdrop, a set of secondary, yet significant longer term challenges include a difficult relationship with the West, marked by tension with Germany and frustration with the European Union (EU), that are only exacerbated by a confusing confrontation with an unpredictable United States and strains within the NATO alliance. In addition, Turkey also faces a degree of domestic polarization in the post-coup period and is burdened with an uncertain economic future.

### A Potential Turning Point

Yet despite these perils, there is still an element of promise in Turkish foreign policy, with both a new opportunity and a new opening for a more robust and strident period of Turkish engagement. With a recent example of such a necessity for Turkish engagement demonstrated in the recent Qatar diplomatic crisis, whereby Turkish support bolstered the Qatari efforts to resist pressure from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). And more broadly, Turkey's successful restoration of ties with Russia and "normalization" of relations with Israel did much to contribute to a renewed and more self-confident foreign policy perspective. If followed through, this period may mark a new turning point in Turkish foreign policy, away from a crisis-driven and conflict-defined set of policy re-

sponses to a more proactive policy premised on strategic engagement.

For Turkey, the priority for re-engagement is in the neighboring South Caucasus, but as a strategy of engagement that is not based on appeasing the Russia or on simply pleasing the West. Rather, such a policy investment must be rooted in a recalculation of Turkey's position and posture. Its position, as both an outlet and an outlier, and its posture, as an alternative and an ally, offers a crucial counterweight to Russia over the long term, and stands as a critical conduit for Iran in the short term.

Moreover, given the dynamic new landscape of the region, which was significantly changed in the wake of the



April 2016 “four day war” over Nagorno-Karabakh, there is a fresh opportunity to leverage the synergy of a shifting region at risk. And both Turkey and Armenia have entered a new “post-Protocols” period, with a chance to focus on the limited implementation of two elements of the 2009 Armenia-Turkey protocols, ranging from a reopening of border crossing points and the establishment of diplomatic relations. With an Armenian policy of “no preconditions,” there is an opening and opportunity for official state-level re-engagement, bolstered by several factors. First, for the Turkish side, any return to “normalization” of relations with Armenia is a prudent move to correct a failed policy, and if handled delicately, with inherent benefits and diplomatic dividends far outweighing any loss.

Second, a more self-confident Azerbaijan, boosted by its successful seizure of lost territory in the 2016 fighting, may be more open to such a development, especially as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is no longer a static “frozen” conflict but rather has become much more of a kinetic issue. And third, recent efforts to “sustain the momentum” of Armenian-Turkish engagement through civil society cooperation, people-to-people contacts and exchanges, and attempts at “track two” diplomacy, have only increased in the wake of the suspension of state-to-state talks.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of “normalization” is most important in terms of re-opening Turkey’s closed border with Armenia, for two reasons. First, it would be an avenue to galvanizing economic activity in the impoverished eastern regions of the country, which could play a key role in the economic stabilization of the already restive Kurdish-populated eastern regions and thus meet a significant national security imperative of countering the root causes of Kurdish terrorism and separatism with economic opportunity.<sup>2</sup>

And second, the closed border is more than simply a closed border between Turkey and Armenia, as its possible re-opening would also mean forging new trade opportunities as it is also a border between Turkey and the Eurasian

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Economic Union (EEU), which Armenia joined well after the earlier round of “normalization.”

Likewise, an open border with Turkey would offer Armenia not only a way to overcome its regional isolation, but also a bridge to larger markets crucial for economic growth and development. In addition, the commercial and economic activity resulting from opening the Armenian-Turkish border would foster subsequent trade ties between the two countries that, in turn, would lead to more formal cooperation in the key areas of customs and border security. And with such a deepening of bilateral trade ties and cross-border cooperation, the establishment of diplomatic relations would undoubtedly follow. In this way, 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.

## Conclusion

Yet it remains unclear whether the calibration of political will necessary for such a renewed attempt at Turkey’s re-engagement of Armenia will be sufficient. And with the power and pressure of Azerbaijan’s position, as a spoiler by virtue of its veto over Turkish policy options, it may be premature. Yet the constellation of interests are realigning, with both Russia’s potential yet prudent role in support of normalization and a shifting regional landscape over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, suggesting that the time for a new opening is looming near. And certainly, the key to any durable and lasting Turkish policy shift to a more strident strategic engagement of the South Caucasus will depend on fulfilling the promise of normalizing relations with Armenia.

## Endnotes

- 1 Cengiz Aktar and Richard Giragosian, “Turkey-Armenia Relations,” *European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, EP/EXPO/B/AFET/IFWC/2009-01/Lot1/49*, October, 2015, [www.iris-france.org/docs/kfm\\_docs/docs/observatoire-pol-etrangere-europe/1-expo-afetnt-2013-433710en.pdf](http://www.iris-france.org/docs/kfm_docs/docs/observatoire-pol-etrangere-europe/1-expo-afetnt-2013-433710en.pdf).
- 2 Richard Giragosian, “Redefining Turkey’s strategic orientation,” *Turkish Daily News*, June 24, 2008, [www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=107998](http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=107998).

