

# BOOK REVIEW

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kamer Kasım**

Abant İzzet Baysal University,  
İİBF, Lecturer at the Department of International Relations

## UNSILENCING THE PAST: TRACK TWO DIPLOMACY AND TURKISH ARMENIAN RELATIONS

*David Phillips*

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This book, written by David L. Phillips, the organizer of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), mainly includes the studies of this Commission from its establishment until its end, the debates within itself and the comments of the author about its achievements. It is not an academic study, but rather a study on the experiences of the organizer of an unofficial diplomatic initiative. The book was composed of 14 chapters. Besides the main subject, the book also includes the author's comments on similar diplomatic events and the effects of other international events such as the Iraqi war.

After a prologue and introduction written by the 1986 Nobel Prize Winner, Elie Wiesel, the first chapter, entitled 'Lessons from the Eastern Mediterranean', follows which is composed of the author's other diplomatic experiences. The comments on the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission start from the second chapter of the book. The second chapter, which is entitled 'First Contact', and the third chapter are about the meetings until the formal operation of TARC, the events that affect these meetings and the information on the members of the Commission. In the second chapter, the author writes about his contact with the President of Turkish Historical Society and the lessons that he derives from the failure of the initiative. According to the author in order to be successful in unofficial diplomatic initiatives, it is necessary to control the decision-making processes from the outset, to organize meetings in neutral locations, and to establish an institutional understanding in order to overcome the differences.

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From the fourth chapter onwards, the works of TARC and its meetings are examined. After the Vienna meeting in June 2000, the Commission became operational with another meeting in Geneva on July 9, 2001. 6 Turkish and 4 Armenian members were present in the meeting. The Turkish side included Retired Ambassador Gündüz Aktan, Former Foreign Minister İlder Türkmen, Retired Ambassador Özdem Sanberk, Former President of Boğaziçi University Prof. Dr. Üstün Ergüder, Retired General Sadi Ergüvenç and Psychiatrist Vamık Volkan; whereas, the Armenian side included the President of American-Armenian Assembly Van Krikorian, Former Foreign Minister Alexander Arzoumanian, Retired Ambassador David Hovhannasian and one of Boris Yeltsin's advisor, Andranik Migranian. In the book the author also writes his comments about these members of the Commission. He does not hesitate to sharply criticize these people; even his comments on the relations between the Turkish members were reacted and falsified by these members of the Commission. Another significant aspect of the book is that it includes the details of some meetings, which are declared by the author as secret. If these meetings were really secret, or if there were too personal details, the ethical aspects of these comments are questionable. The initiative started in July 2005, ended unofficially in 2003 and officially in 2004. The presentation of the details on secret meetings as early as 2005 may have a constraining effect on those who would like to participate similar initiatives in the future.

The author argues that this initiative was a historical step and that it provided a ground for contact with other civil society organizations of from both sides. About the Commission, which aroused more interest in Armenia, David Philips writes that some Armenians supported the initiative secretly, although they seemed to criticize it publicly. He also argues that although the Armenian government was initially supportive of the initiative, after the first meeting, it changed its position. Particularly, it is stressed that Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanyan distanced himself from the initiative after mass criticisms. As emphasized in many places in the book, Armenian claims of genocide formed an insurmountable barrier between the Turkish and Armenian sides. At this point, Van Krikorian's explanations about the 'genocide' as a part of Armenian identity building process and his acceptance of the genocide as 'a fact' rather than something that should be examined by the commission are significant. Because, if one argues that his views are true and part of his identity, then it is not meaningful to gather two sides to make an academic or legal research. The author does not put his stance clearly on the unquestioning character on Armenian allegations. Although he refers to some views used to support the Armenian claims, such as the Memoirs of American Ambassador in the Ottoman Empire, Henry M.

Morgenthau, he does not mention the Turkish counter-arguments. Although in some parts of the book the reasons of the closure of the Turkish-Armenian border or the conditions of the Turkish side for the reopening of the border are clearly mentioned, in other places, Karabagh problem is presented as the sole reason of this attitude of Turkey. While he writes about the terrorist attacks on the Turkish diplomats starting from 1973, he does not refer to the Nemesis list and those who were killed within this framework. An interesting detail is the explanations of Andranik Migranian, one of the Commission members, in order to vindicate the ASALA terror.

In the book, significant international developments in the course of TARC as well as their implications on the working of the Commission are examined. Within this framework, it is emphasized that the events of September 11 directed the attention of the US to other areas. Although not expressed openly, it is implied that two sides saw the Commission as a tool for realizing their own aims. The differences between these basic aims are also covered. For example, the author argues that Van Krikorian supported the initiative because of tactical reasons. Accordingly, Van Krikorian thought that some friendship and alliances could be established with those who could accept Armenian allegations and who are in favor of development of Turco-Armenian relations; and TARC would be a tool to realize this aim. Accordingly Krikorian said that there can be no real reconciliation with the Turks until they recognize the Armenian genocide and added that the problem was how to manage it better. The author also argues that the efforts of the Commission were evaluated positively in Turkey and the Turkish side expected that this initiative may contribute to the prevention of marginalization of the extremist Armenians. The author stresses that Turkish positive reaction to the workings of the TARC was due to Turkish collaboration with the press and the right signals given by them. David Phillips explained the expectations of the Turkish side from the Commission with a quotation from Özdem Sanberk: "*The basic purpose of our Commission is to prevent the initiatives against Turkey, which came to the agendas of US Congress and the parliaments of Western states. It is important for us to prevent further discussion of genocide allegations in the US Congress. As long as we continue the process of dialogue, this issue will not come to the agenda of the US Congress*". In the book, it is argued that the initiative also contributes to the prevention of several resolutions of European Parliament and some European countries regarding the recognition of the so-called Armenian genocide.

While the author argues that the initiative was heavily criticized by some Armenians, such as Tashnaks, he also puts forward that Tashnaks use the issue of

‘genocide’ to obtain political and economic power. It is also stressed that if there is reconciliation between two sides, then the rationale of existence of the Tashnaks will come to an end.

The author also argues that TARC turned out to be a catalyzer of other civil society initiatives between the Turks and the Armenians. His comments on the success of the Commission are somehow exaggerated. He said that he had organized the visit of Yerevan by Mehmet Ali Birand and his meeting with President Kocarian.

Another significant issue in the book is that the TARC did not aim to question the existence of genocide or to act as an unofficial mediator in the solution of the Karabagh problem; rather it tried to find out practical cooperation mechanisms. However, it was dissolved when the discussions regarding the genocide claims resurfaced. David Philips argues that TARC had aimed to develop Turkish-Armenian relations as well as to provide the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border. With reference to Üstün Ergüder, he says that the lifting of visa restrictions to Armenian citizens as well as changing attitude of Turkey towards the membership of Armenia to the World Trade Organization was a result of the efforts of TARC.

TARC decided to ask a legal opinion from a civil society organization, ICTJ (International Center For Transnational Justice) about the applicability of UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide to the events that had taken place in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In its working paper, which had been declared in February 2003, ICTJ declared that the Convention could not be applied to the events prior to its ratification; thus Armenians could not demand the application of the Convention. However, ICTJ pursued a supportive attitude to the Armenian claims without having scientific study and research on that matter. In the book, Gündüz Aktan’s explanations regarding the insufficiency of ICTJ on the Armenian question, takes place. David Philips also mentions Gündüz Aktan’s criticisms towards himself about the declaration of opinions of TARC members without their consent.

Andranik Migranian, an Armenian member of TARC, informed the press about the legal opinion of TARC, and the author criticizes this attitude. He also criticizes Gündüz Aktan and Özdem Sanberk because of their contact with ICTJ without informing him.

In the book, David Philips argues that ICTJ tried to prepare an opinion, with

which neither side won. Although ICTJ report was more disturbing for the Turkish side, the impression that there were concessions for both sides decreased the reliability of the report. What is more, considering the difficulties of archival studies in different countries as well as the lengthy procedures of these works, ICTJ report was not prepared professionally. ICTJ is not a legal authority; it is a civil society organization that mediated between two sides in the overthrow of the racist government in South Africa. Indeed, according to the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the Convention cannot be applied retro-actively. In the report the 'motive' aspect of the Convention as well as the acts implied upon a group of people because of this group identity were disregarded. What is more, there is no racial hatred towards the Armenians such as anti-semitizm Germany, and this fact was also disregarded.

The book of David Philips examines the adventure of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission, which can be defined as a short-lived dialogue initiative. It is not an academic study; however, it could be useful in transferring the former experiences to new similar dialogue initiatives.