

Armenians in 2115

Strategic Directions for the Twenty-first Century



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION
ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES

A Seminar Report



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Part II: Five Scenarios

Subsequent to the above discussion, seminar participants outlined five scenarios affecting the Armenians. On the whole, Armenians do not have much control over these scenarios, but must take decisions and develop policies which take into account these global or regional dynamics.

Scenario 1: Russian influence over Armenia increases

Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has ideological and geopolitical implications which are more significant than economic considerations. EEU membership may have further repercussions for Armenia as it will be faced with a greater political integration with Russia.

Armenia's primary concern, the security of NK, is at the root of Yerevan's decision to join the EEU. It is likely that Russia will continue to maintain the status quo, and remain the main broker between Armenia and Azerbaijan, thus dampening the prospects of both an escalating war and a peace agreement.

Membership to the EEU ties Armenia's economic development (or lack thereof) directly to Russia. This can be beneficial to Armenia as long as the Russian economy is healthy. However, any downturn in Russia will have immediate ripple effects in Armenia – from labour migration to monetary policy. In short, in this scenario, Armenia will have limited room to maneuver in economic strategy. To increase its space to maneuver, Yerevan's message to the outside world is that EEU membership does not mean that Armenia cannot have economic relations with other countries. The

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Armenian government will continue to pursue other trading partners, including Europe, to “balance” the EEU. It is too soon to say if such an approach would succeed. The biggest test will be if and when the border with Turkey opens.

In Russia itself, the prospects for democratic development are scarce. Putin’s popularity remains high, based on the pillars of nationalism, economic prosperity and control of the media. The Armenian political system will mirror the Russian “formula,” although Armenian presidents have never managed to garner the popularity of Putin.

In sum, Scenario 1 suggests the entrenched dependence of Armenia on Russia in the economic, political and geostrategic domains. With no war and no peace, the current status quo will continue for the foreseeable future.

Scenario 2: Democratic development in Turkey – increases, stalls or reverses⁶

Considerable advances have been made in Turkey during the past two decades in terms of democratic development, even though the process is far from perfect or complete: the military has been confined to the barracks, relations with Kurds have been generally peaceful and openly discussed, and the Kemalist model of homogenising nationalism has been challenged and the presence of minorities asserted. Of course, the picture is far from perfect. Journalists are jailed, critics of the government are harassed and authoritarian tendencies remain strong.

The “opening up” of Turkey has generally benefitted the Armenian community there. In fact, certain Armenian intellectuals played a crucial role in this process – and in the case of Hrant Dink, he was murdered for it. However, the Genocide is still officially denied and the community still faces various forms of discrimination.

The main question here, in terms of scenario planning, is: will Turkey’s democratic development continue, or has it reached its limits? Current indications are that it has stalled, and might even be reversing to some degree.

6. Note that the seminar took place prior to April 2015 commemorations and the summer-autumn 2015 parliamentary elections in Turkey. Hence the summarised discussion of the report does not take these events or the increased violence during the second half of 2015 into account.

Working through civil society and academic institutions has proven to be an effective way of not only promoting Armenian issues but also safeguarding broader democratic gains. Many Armenians in Turkey remain actively engaged, supported by many non-Armenian sympathisers. Elements within Turkish civil society (and local Kurdish governments) are pushing for Genocide education and recognition as part of a broader democratic agenda. They are taking the lead, not the government in Ankara. They have helped to reframe the paradigm of the Armenian Question, reflecting a quest for the democratisation of Turkey rather than a singular issue of international recognition.

In contrast, the government of Turkey is in turn trying to frame the Genocide issue on its own terms: as one of “shared pain.” It has also returned some confiscated Armenian properties, mainly in Istanbul, to their Armenian owners. But this has been a self-interested political act which benefitted government-friendly construction companies.

Nevertheless, President Erdogan, who is known for unexpected decisions, might surprise Armenians again by making announcements that will undermine Genocide recognition efforts. In addition to another “shared pain” statement in April 2015, a sudden decision to open the border with Armenia, or the granting of Turkish citizenship to descendants from the Ottoman Empire, might be announced at some point. Armenians need to be strategically prepared for such developments.

In the medium-term, it is unlikely that any Turkish government will accept the use of the term “genocide” in relation to 1915. However, it is likely that within civil society and academic circles in Turkey, the term would be employed freely, and the presence of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire recognised. In this context, reparations and other mechanisms to right past wrongs can be discussed.

Improved Armenia(n)-Turkish relations might make another war between Azerbaijan and Armenia less likely, *if* Ankara decides to resist pressure from Baku. However, such a correlation cannot be made easily.

In sum, Scenario 2 suggests that Turkey will continue to struggle between the challenges of democratic development and the tendencies

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of authoritarian rule. Civil society will remain vibrant, and it will be the main agent of change pertaining to Armenian issues. Discussion of the Armenian Genocide will likely become “normal” even though the government will continue to deny it.

Scenario 3: War erupts between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Even though at this stage a full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is unlikely, an “accidental” war is possible as border skirmishes escalate, taking a dynamic of their own. The NK conflict is, after all, inherently unstable. While Azerbaijan is desperate to recapture territories it lost to Armenians in the early 1990s, it is wary of the destabilising consequences domestically of another military confrontation. War is a huge risk for both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Hence the uneasy status quo remains, even though it is untenable for both countries in the long run.

Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan can afford another war at this stage. However, the current situation is not sustainable in the long-run. If the two countries want to solve the conflict, they can, but need to find a new political means of engagement. Both sides are not ready for a solution. They see the conflict in terms of “winning it” instead of “solving it.”

The NK war (the loss of large amounts of land) and the increasing oil exports (significant revenues) have marked Azerbaijan profoundly in the past twenty years. If gas reserves prove to be substantial, new pipelines will be built, bringing Azerbaijan and Turkey closer together. This will have a negative impact on the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey on the one hand, and on the other, more significantly, provide Azerbaijan even more revenue to build up its armed forces. If the potential fields yield little or no gas, then the “no war, no peace” scenario is more likely to continue in the near future.

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There is also a danger for both sides in overestimating Russia’s capacity or willingness to engage in the South Caucasus.

Domestically, both sides use the conflict to justify a more militaristic regime, albeit to differing degrees, whereby human rights are further violated and democratic development thwarted or reversed.

In short, all the indicators point to the eventuality of another war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. A slight shift in regional dynamics, changes in Russian policy, domestic instability, ever more increasing oil revenues in Azerbaijan and even a frontline “accident” could upset the current status quo leading to either a “controlled” war or a major military confrontation. The outcome of another war is not clear, but sheer military spending is not in favour of Armenia.

Scenario 4: Wars in the Middle East continue and new political entities emerge

The wars in Iraq and Syria will continue to ebb and flow, with regional and global players being intimately involved. No one can be certain if state boundaries will formally be redrawn in the near to medium-term future, but it is a fact that new regional players have emerged and will play a role in parts of the Middle East: Kurdistan – be it a series of autonomous regions in several states or a separate independent state of its own – and radical Islamic movements such as ISIS. What impact would these new entities have on Armenians in the region, or on Armenia as a country?

Armenians in the Middle East have contributed considerably to the preservation and development of Armenian culture, including Western Armenian. Over the last forty years, however, there has been a sharp decline in the number of Armenians in the region, while the profile of those who have remained has changed to some degree – from being “ghettoized” communities to being more integrated into mainstream society. The decline in the number and the change in the characteristics of the community have had consequences for cultural production and identity formation.

Changes in the Middle East beg the question: where is the point of no return at which the Armenian communities can no longer be sustainable demographically, culturally and in terms of security? This question needs to be asked explicitly and analysed in light of the current geopolitical changes in the region. The analysis would lead to related ethical and strategic questions: should, for example, the emigration of Syrian Armenian refugees to Armenia, the US, Europe or elsewhere be

facilitated? Does the Armenian Church have an obligation to remain with the Armenian people no matter what the security conditions? If there is another civil war in Lebanon, what options do Armenians have?

The tensions between Arabs and other ethnic or religious minorities are expected to continue over a long period in many parts of the Middle East, with various consequences. While new community structures are built, schools still function (even in war-torn Aleppo) and many cultural events take place through a “thick” web of community structures, Armenians will continue to be adversely affected by security threats and be part of the emigration flow of Christians from the region.

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Scenario 4 can be summed up in a question requiring serious analysis: what is the future of Armenians in the Middle East?

Scenario 5: The European Union will remain in crisis, or will recover in the foreseeable future

The impact of the EU on Armenia and Armenians is rather minimal, and that is likely to remain the case over the next decade, as there are no visible prospects of Armenia joining the EU. Nor are there any prospects of the EU playing any significant security or geopolitical role in the Caucasus. Diaspora’s engagement with the EU will be limited as well, except for lobbying purposes.

If Turkey joins the EU, which is unlikely in the near future, relations between Armenia and the EU would change.

Hence, irrespective of developments in Europe, be it positive or negative for the Union, the tangible impact on Armenia will be negligible.

Nevertheless, there is an ideological and cultural component to Armenians’ relationship with Europe. Many Armenians feel close to Europe and see its value system as a counterweight to the country’s geopolitical location and choices.

