Turkish nation-state identity and foreign policy on Armenia: the roles of Sèvresphobia and ‘brotherly’ Azerbaijan

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CAN THE AK PAR TY BE A MODEL FOR EGYPT'S MUSLIM BRITHEED? 

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Turkish nation-state identity and foreign policy on Armenia: the roles of Sèvresphobia and ‘brotherly’ Azerbaijan

**ARTICLE IN BRIEF:** Turkey’s new foreign policy activism heightened expectations regarding Turkish-Armenian reconciliation -- expectations that remain unmet. Beginning at the nexus of national identity and foreign policy, this article addresses the way in which the Turkish nation-state identity’s constitutive discourse on Sèvres Syndrome and ‘brotherly’ Azerbaijan still play a critical role in Turkey’s foreign policy on Armenia.

**National identity and foreign policy: conceptual framework**

A nation-state’s identity is shaped by historical narratives. Fostering the integrity of imagined communities, historical representations -- rather than real environments of memory -- create a sense of historical continuity persisting over time. These representations are clearly reflected in those imagined communities’ relationship patterns with “others”; they are micro-level phenomena grounded on subjective images or perceptions. Indeed, “while the nature of foreign policy activism heightened expectations regarding Turkish-Armenian reconciliation -- expectations that remain unmet. Beginning at the nexus of national identity and foreign policy, this article addresses the way in which the Turkish nation-state identity’s constitutive discourse on Sèvres Syndrome and ‘brotherly’ Azerbaijan still play a critical role in Turkey’s foreign policy on Armenia.”

The two pillars of Turkish modernist national identity -- official Turkish nationalism (nation) and unofficial Islam -- have been galvanized by the interconnected discourses of “Sèvres Syndrome” and “brotherly Azerbaijan.” These constitute the Turkish discourse constraints that have hindered the revitalization of relations with Armenia.

**Turkish modernist nation-state identity and foreign policy**

The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres stipulated the military-bureaucracy-intellectual alliance served as the “historical block” -- a reference to the social structure that is itself comprised of an economic structure and ideological superstructure -- that sought to save the empire from dissolution through certain forms of modernization. The limits of Turkish nationhood.

Throughout this process, as an unofficial Ottoman legacy, the Islamic milllet (people or nation) has defined the limits of Turkish nationhood. This mindset of Turkish national elites was loyalty reflected in their reply to the question, “Who and/or how are the Turks going to be?” in the process of constructing republican Turkish identity.

At this point it is useful to ask how one can identify a nation without any ethnie? To draw substance from. From a political-geographical perspective, the answer is simple: “National identities [were] conceived with geography in mind.”

In the process of homogenizing/territorializing geographic representations of the Turkish nation in Anatolia, Turkish nationalist elites mainly focused on non-Muslims. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres stipulated that a Greek state would be founded in western Anatolia, a Kurdish state in southeastern Anatolia and an Armenian state in eastern Anatolia. This provided solid ground for Turkish nationalist elites in imagining a Turkish community (including Azerbaijani Turks), and over time this transformed into Sèvresphobia as a discursive element of Turkish nation-state identity.

Sèvres Syndrome

As a multinational and multi-religious empire, the Ottomans faced nationalist movements that were mostly backed by Western powers and led to loss of territory. In particular Greek Orthodox and Armeniancommunities had been used as a means of interfering in Ottoman authority throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sèvres Syndrome is a term that has been used in Turkish politics to express the paranoia of the Turkish people regarding Western “ambitions” to dismantle Turkey. The Treaty of Sèvres had a deep impact on Turkey’s security culture,
“inherited by the Republic, these fears continue to haunt some of the elite and public opinion.” The treaty, which was signed in 1920, had stipulated that an Armenian state would be founded in eastern parts of Anatolia. Its ongoing influence is related to imagining the Turkish nation through othering Armenians in the 1920s. Indeed, “the European-backed territorial claims of the Armenians over eastern Anatolia played a more determining role than the Greek invasion of Izmir in the development of a raison d’être of the new Turkish state.” In other words, the Turkish nation was not imagined on the basis of ethnicity and ancestry, but rather drew definition with de facto territorial sovereignty. For this reason, the Turkish leadership has long been quite sensitive as regards Turkey’s territorial integrity, which has been read as being commensurate with national identity. Disciplines such as geography and history have served the purpose of nation-building, especially in the 1930s. In the field of history, with the establishment of the Turkish Historical Society in 1931, the process of writing an “official history” began. It was stipulated that Turks were Asiatic in origin but that they were autochthonous populations of Anatolia, since it was argued that the Hittites of Anatolia were in fact ancestors of Turks. The message was clear: Anatolia had been the Turkish motherland without interruption for centuries. Nationalizing knowledge of geography was carried out with the purpose of turning Anatolia into a vatan by controlling the production of knowledge and its discourse, as well as changing toponyms and geographical representations on maps. Memories of the 1920s and the Sèvres Treaty were still influential, and this approach was fuelled by concerns over the imminent goals of Turkey’s neighbors, who were portrayed as enemies that had designs on the Turkish state. As a response to international pressures in the 1940s and 1970s regarding the events of 1915 and Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) attacks on Turkish diplomats abroad, which were seen by some as an assault on “Turkishness” and an effort to jeopardize Turkey’s security, territorial integrity and prestige, by the 1980s the Turkish official narrative of “othering” Armenians had become a standard state response under the military regime of the time. In order to bolster the official Turkish narrative, the regime adopted several measures, such as centralizing control over the construction of discourses, publishing defenses of the state’s position, collecting evidence to defend the state line, including the official narrative in the education system, and attempting to gain international support. Those institutionalized strategies have ensured the continuity of the narrative, and there has thus been continual resistance to change.

“The Sèvres analogy is repeatedly utilized in order to make sense of the new situations and events confronted by the state that make the availability of possible foreign and security policy options” and its influence can easily be observed on the press. For instance, in June 20, 2007, an article in the Armed Forces Journal that included an imaginary map showing the new borders of the Middle East, in which Turkey had lost some of its eastern provinces to Armenia and a “Free Kurdistan.” The map caused a huge reaction among the Turkish public, where it was perceived as an official policy by the AKP to disintegrate Turkey. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) was accused of “being the supporter of Sèvres” by many groups from across the political spectrum. The “Kurdish opening” of the AK Party is also associated with the Greater Armenia project, emphasizing the cooperation between the Armenian and Kurdish organizations during and after World War I. It has even been claimed that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is in reality an Armenian terrorist organization founded by crypto-Armenians.

Brotherly, Azerbaijan

In the process of imagining the Turkish community, a handful of Azeri nationalism apologists were quite influential. All of them were from different professional backgrounds, but the common denominator was the self-identification as Azeris. “Kurdish opening” of the AK Party is also associated with the Greater Armenia project, emphasizing the cooperation between the Armenian and Kurdish organizations during and after World War I. It has even been claimed that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is in reality an Armenian terrorist organization founded by crypto-Armenians. The flag of Azerbaijan was the flag of Turkey and Azerbaijan fly at the monument, in a good example of “flagging the homeland.” Less than two months after Turkish control over Baku was achieved, however, World War I drew to an end. As a result, Ottoman control of the region fell into the hands of the British Empire. Afterwards, Kazım Pasha (Karabekir) led an operation in east Anatolia, and this resulted in the elimination of the “Armenian threat” with the signing of the Treaty of Giannitsa on Dec. 5, 1919.

The establishment of pro-British governments in Armenia and Georgia was also regarded as a threat by the Ankara and Moscow governments. Ankara accepted the Soviet occupation of the Caucasus, and in return the Soviets recognized the Eastern borders of Turkey and
promised support for the Turkish War of Independence. Under pressure from Moscow, the government in Yerevan was forced to accept the current border with Turkey, with the Treaty of Kars (1921).

The influence of Azeri expatriates continued in the republican era; they pushed for the independence of Azerbaijan by publishing periodicals in Turkey that aimed at creating public awareness of the “brotherly” Turks who suffered under the Soviet occupation. In the 1930s, their activities were regarded as harmful to Soviet-Turkish friendship and kept under strict control. With the deterioration of Soviet-Turkish relations in the post-war era, pan-Turkist groups and publications started to emerge in large numbers, and had a distinctly anti-communist tone. The Azeri lobby in Turkey and other countries played a large role in increasing the feelings of brotherhood, in close cooperation with nationalist circles in Turkey. In addition, school textbooks in Turkey were spoken about by Turkish-Azerbaijan roots in Turkish history, have limited Turkey’s adherence to the motto of “one nation-two states” concept has defined relations between the two countries since the early 1940s. While the majority in Turkey is Sunni Muslim, the vast majority of Azeris are Shia. Given that the strong Turkish-Armenian ties are grounded on their common Turkic, the public ignores this religious divide. For instance, in its address to the Armenian parliament in 2009, Erdoğan stated, quoting contemporary Valicyan’s poem, “our religion is the same, our language is the same, our love is the same.” Turkey and Azerbaijan are one nation, two states. In this context, Turkey has been the only country that regularly represents its support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There are two observable processes for this friendly pattern of relations: (1) The presence of a significant Azeri community that acts as a lobby on behalf of Baku within the Turkish state; and (2) A strong preference among Turkish businessmen for trading with Azerbaijan (particularly in the energy sector since the early 2000s), mainly due to a combination of factors, including geographical proximity and ease of communication. Without doubt, those lobby serve the purpose of keeping this discourse alive.

Given escalating concerns about the AK Party’s adherence to the motto of “one nation-two countries,” particularly during the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process, opposition political parties took a common stance against the government with the accusation that the AK Party has betrayed “brotherly Azerbaijan.” In response to this growing opposition, the government recalibrated its position regarding Azerbaijan. Only two days after the signature ceremony for the protocols, Erdogan made a public statement linking the Turkish parliamentary ratification to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue at a party congress.

Arguably, Erdogan’s intention was to appease the Turkish public and deflect criticisms against the government that not only the rhetoric of “brotherly Azerbaijan” will be bolstered, but also — and more importantly — this will reinvigorate the prospects for revitalization of Turkish-Armenian relations.

**Conclusion**

The deeply entrenched and officially and unofficially sustained ideological constraints have constituted a major obstacle in the revitalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. Undoubtedly, official narratives and legacies of the past have placed limitations on the new foreign policy exposed by Turkey. Since these ideological constraints are so embedded, major efforts will be needed to transform the zero-sum game perception, and this demands the application of alternative approaches to policy.

Since Track I diplomacy channels have been shut down, promoting inter-cultural dialogue should be the primary objective. In this regard, Track II diplomacy (unofficial intervention with unofficial actors) and Track III diplomacy (unofficial intervention at the grassroots level) carried out through the initiatives of nongovernmental organizations, academics, journalists and students will help the sides overcome the historical/psychological barriers that exist. Those alternative channels of dialogue will likely play a significant role in terms of transforming mutual perceptions from enmity to amity, thereby laying the groundwork for Track I diplomacy that will be necessary to realize the ultimate phase of peace and reconciliation in bilateral relations.

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