
Meghri: The Pan-Turkish Superhighway and Other Wrong Turns

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Rumors about the Meghri region of southern Armenia just won't stop. Armenia supposedly was to hand over Meghri to Azerbaijan in exchange for Armenian sovereignty over Karabakh. That always seemed highly improbable: Meghri is an essential link to the outside for landlocked Armenia. More likely - if recent reports can be believed - Azerbaijan will receive internationally guaranteed access rights across Meghri so as to connect the Azeri enclave of Nakhichevan with Azerbaijan. Not because Armenians want that to happen, but because the U.S. State Department ("USSD"), Turkey, and Azerbaijan see Meghri as the long sought-after Pan-Turkish corridor, and part of a larger strategy.

The USSD's twin goals in the Caucasus and Central Asia are to keep Russian imperialism at bay (the so-called "containment" policy) and to lay oil and gas pipelines. But there are only two ways - through Georgia or Armenia - to penetrate the region from the West and Turkey. Georgia, though open, is torn by ethnic separatism and under pressure by Russia. The importance of a Karabakh resolution to the USSD is that it would throw open nearly the entire Caucasus by unsealing the Armenian/Azeri border.

A TURKISH ROUTE THROUGH MEGHRI

The USSD's plan appears to be this: Armenians will receive access rights across Lachin into Karabakh in exchange for identical Azeri access across Meghri. But take a look at Turkey's 6-mile border with Nakhichevan. That tiny border, skillfully obtained by Turkey from Iran during the Soviet era, is about to prove its true worth. If Azerbaijan now gets unfettered rights across Meghri, Turkey can easily transfer material, including military equipment, to Nakhichevan. Azerbaijan will then legally take ownership and ship them through Meghri into Azerbaijan.

Ordinarily, Armenia would not permit that. But if a peace agreement stipulates that Armenia and Karabakh can freely use the Lachin corridor only as long as Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan (and thus Turkey) can freely use Meghri, Armenia is locked into having its southern region used as a Pan-Turkish superhighway.

The sheer brilliance of this arrangement, from the Turkish standpoint, is that Turkey will have the right to use this superhighway forever, even if it never establishes diplomatic relations, or opens its own border, with Armenia.

MEGHRI AND LACHIN

The issues of Meghri and Lachin should never have been linked at all. Unfortunately, even the Armenian Foreign Ministry is now implying that they are somehow analogous. Let's be clear that Armenian forces came to control Lachin in the 1990's only because Karabakh was attacked by Azerbaijan. Nakhichevan, on the other hand, was not attacked by Armenia, and Meghri was closed only because of Azeri aggression. Lachin is Karabakh's, not Armenia's, guarantee of survival and so should be primarily an issue between Karabakh and Azerbaijan. Meghri, in contrast, is unrelated to Lachin/Karabakh, and is a matter solely between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

But because the prize of Meghri is negotiable only with its owner - Armenia - the USSD and Azerbaijan have had a vested interest in excluding Karabakh from direct talks. Indeed, Pres. Kocharian cited such pressure in an interview with Golos Armenii in April. While strenuously defending Armenia/Karabakh's negotiating posture, Kocharian added that other countries had

told him, Surely Armenia, upon whom Karabakh is so evidently dependent in questions of defense, the economy and so forth, is able to put pressure on and to force Karabakh to agree ..."

Armenia needs to say: Let Karabakh be solved, then we'll talk about Meghri. This would be, after all, similar to the stance of Turkey, which refuses to open its border with Armenia until Karabakh is resolved.

HUGE STAKES AND PRESSURES

With the superpowers' ambitions at stake and with foreign and corporate agents swarming over the area, pressures and inducements are clearly being used on governments and individuals in the Karabakh negotiations. We already know, for example, about the White House/Roger Tamraz oil pipeline scandal of a few years ago, the questionable practices of Halliburton Company (the petroleum services giant of which VP Dick Cheney was president) in Russia, and widespread regional corruption.

The West, incidentally, will almost certainly beat out Russia economically and politically in the Caucasus, and probably Central Asia, when the area opens in the post-Karabakh era. The USSD is thus cleverly buying Western hegemony at cut-rate prices by throwing Armenians a few crumbs over Karabakh.

But will the Pan-Turkish Meghri corridor actually come about? Hopefully not, but we don't know. Details of the OSCE/USSD-brokered negotiations are secret. We do know that Armenia's negotiating posture is much weaker than it should be because, sadly, it has been keeping the politically influential Diaspora at arm's length.

DISTANCING THE DIASPORA

A good example of Pres. Kocharian's distancing the Diaspora is his rambling interview in late January with CNN-Turk TV. Kocharian disavowed the issue of reparations stemming from the 1915 Genocide. Armenia cannot have land claims against Turkey because the Genocide took place "in Turkey, and the Republic of Armenia did not exist at that time." As for 1915: "You can label that as non-genocide, but in any case mass murders have taken place, and people have been deported." And on and on it dragged.

The President was roundly criticized by political parties in both Armenia and the Diaspora. Regardless of Kocharian's intentions, his words wounded Diasporan sensibilities and all but gave away many Armenian national rights.

The worry is this: If Armenia's leadership tossed aside such important Armenian issues and the bargaining power they represent, one can only wonder what resources and leverage it is throwing away in the Karabakh negotiations.

After the Karabakh conference in Key West last month, Kocharian should have held public meetings with the Diaspora in a show of solidarity and to take advantage of the Diaspora's political clout. The kind of clout that brought about Section 907 which has deprived Azerbaijan of hundreds of millions of dollars in American aid. If Azerbaijan had an influential American diaspora, its president would surely have used it to his country's advantage.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

No country - not Ireland, Greece, Israel, nor even Turkey - has managed to avoid tension with its diaspora due to differences in culture and vantage point.

Actually, there are more differences within Armenia itself than between Armenia and the Diaspora. But the USSD is taking advantage of minor misunderstandings to isolate Diasporan power from, and thereby weaken, Armenia.

In a presentation in April at Harvard's oil-company-backed Caspian Studies Program, the USSD's Karabakh negotiator, Carey Cavanaugh, emphasized that Armenia was "ahead of its diaspora" in regard to a Karabakh settlement. The implication, a malicious one, was that the Diaspora does not want peace and should be ignored.

A week later in Queens, NY, his deputy, Kenneth Maclean Hillas, was asked by a Diasporan audience whether President Bush's non-recognition of "the genocide" on April 24 hurt the Karabakh negotiations by causing Armenia/Karabakh to distrust the U.S. Hillas replied that Armenia itself had not objected to Bush's failure to use the word "genocide". As if Armenia's alleged lack of comment on a single day somehow proved that the people of Armenia do not care about the Genocide. And as if Karabakh should be unfazed when the U.S. is dishonest about Armenian issues. Hillas's remark implied that the Diaspora's commitment to the Genocide is irrelevant and that Armenia and Karabakh's arms can be twisted with impunity.

Recent visits by Armenian Americans to a few Congressional offices revealed the lie, clearly being spread by the USSD, that the Diaspora somehow opposes peace.

Meanwhile, Cavanaugh and Hillas have been declaring that Karabakh will be "brought into the negotiations at the appropriate time", as if they rather than the people who live there should determine its fate. The arrogance is breathtaking.

GETTING ON THE SAME PAGE - NOW

With the Meghri and Karabakh negotiations accelerating, Diasporan political groups, Armenia, and Karabakh must put aside their pride and talk - now - at the highest levels. We must get on the same page and stop the USSD's transparent plans to use Armenia as a doormat on which Turks will wipe their feet. Those plans are contrary to America's national interests and values.

It's not about agreeing on all issues but rather marshaling the Diaspora's considerable resources to help bring about the best possible peace. The Diaspora can offer Armenia assistance with the Congress and the American media, large parts of which distrust the State Department anyway. Let the Diaspora, which is untouchable, be the "bad cop".

The Diaspora can also help Armenia to repair the counterproductive image it has presented to the world. For example, the damaging perception has grown, say even critics in Armenia, that the Karabakh conflict is a matter only between Armenia (not Karabakh) and Azerbaijan and that both are aggressors.

Shortcomings in public relations and relations with the Diaspora have the same root cause: a failure to reach out.

For its part, the Diaspora must understand the immense pressure on Armenia economically and politically by those who historically wish only to use Armenia. The Diaspora has indeed made mistakes. But the Diaspora wants to help, not dictate.

Let's not be our own worst enemies. Time is growing short. Alarm bells are ringing.