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The On going Official Contacts and Cooperation on the Turkish-Armenian Border

The Impossibility for Neighbours to Elude Geography

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The sealed Turkey-Armenia border is not a frontline

The 328 km long Turkish-Armenian border starts near Lake Çıldır, and extends to Dilucu, near Iğdır, running southwards following the Aras River. The military zones flanking on both sides the border isn't though entirely closed to civilians and leaves room for agriculture and tourism activities. The Turkish-Armenian border is not a ceasefire line and is regulated by a set of agreements which are at the basis of the ongoing dialogue and cooperation between border authorities from both sides. Though sealed as a result of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in reaction to the attack against Kelbajar, it has never stopped being a zone of contact and didn't transform into a ceasefire line.

The Turkish government issued a decree on 3 April 1993 halting the supply of wheat across Turkish territory to Armenia and closing direct land communications between the two countries. The impossibility to reopen the border for the last seventeen years has transformed it into a barrier to direct human and business interactions preventing the populations from the borderland from bridging the century-old gap dividing them. However the official cross-border contacts and practical cooperation has never stopped. The absence of bilateral diplomatic relations can't dismiss mutual obligations and responsibilities linked to the very fact of being neighbours.

Contacts between border authorities to address neighbourhood issues

The Turkish-Armenian border still continues to put in contact several governors and district governors. On the Turkish side, the first degree border authorities are district governors based on the borderland and the second degree border authorities province governors. According to the bilateral agreement, the counterparts of the district governor of Çıldır and of the governor of Ardahan are respectively the border commissioner of Ani and Akhourian and the border commissioner of Armavir and Ararat. The district governor of Digor and of Akyaka are matched with the border commissioners of Alagöz and of Ani-Akhourian, the counterpart of the governor of Kars is the governor of Shirak. The counterpart of the province governor of Iğdır is the border commissioner of Armavir-Ararat, and the districts governors of Aralık, Karakoyunlu and Tuzluca with the border commissioner of Echmiadzin.

The border authorities are meeting every two months on the border meeting points. Extraordinary meetings are hold on resquest of one of the sides. Issues which couldn't be solved by the first degree border authorities are handled by the second degree border

authorities. The border authorities are representing their respective governments. The national flags are therefore standing on the negotiation table. It has been reported that the Turkish side, for the meetings held in Turkey, puts on the table the Armenian flag, considering the Armenian government as its counterpart. However they are received on the Armenian side with the flag of the Russian federation in charge of the protection of Armenia's border with Turkey.

The official contacts between Turkish and Armenian border authorities is regulated by the agreement signed on 15 July 1937 in Moscow on the settlement procedures of border incidents and conflicts. Conventions and protocols aiming at regulating Turkish-Soviet trans-border relations remain at the fundament of the on-going contacts and cooperation between Turkey and Armenia. This direct cross-border dialogue is aimed at preserving peace and the rule of law on the borderland, at settling border incidents (including the accidental trespassing of the border by the cattle) and is guided by the principle of friendship and good-neighbourly relations.

Turkey signed new border agreements with Georgia and Azerbaijan in 1997. Despite the existence of a similar text with Armenia, official contacts between Turkish and Armenian border authorities are proceeding on a regular basis thanks to the border agreement signed during the Soviet times. Interestingly, the cross-border cooperation further developed on the eve of Armenia's accession to independence with the signature of a protocol granting the airport of Gyumri the permission to use a small portion of Turkish airspace over Kars for civilian flights.

These cross-border official contacts transformed into a real cooperation in the realm of the use of transboundary waters and the joint management of the Arpaçay / Akhourian dam.

The Turkish-Armenian cooperation over the Arpacay-Akhourian

The construction of the Arpaçay / Akhourian dam started in 1975 and ended in 1983. The dam is jointly managed by Turkey and Armenia. Turkey and Armenia utilise the regulated waters of the Aras river from the joint regulators for irrigation purposes. Just prior to the regulators at the left bank of the river in Armenian territory, Armenia withdraws water, whereas from the right bank of the river Turkey withdraws water. The dam bridge is connecting both sides. The permanent joint commission is meeting every month. Eight monthly measurements are made at the joint regulators of Karakale Serdarabat, Kars Kızılay, Güven, Halıkışla and Iğdır Sürmeli, four on the Armenian sides and four on the Turkish sides.

The Posof, Arpacay and Araks rivers used to form boundaries between Turkey and the USSR. In 1927, Turkey and the Soviet Union signed the '*Protocol on the Beneficial Uses of Boundary Waters*' - the so-called Kars-Protocol - which concern, inter alia, the use of the Arpaçay and the Aras rivers. This protocol is still in force. The basic provisions of the arrangement are a fifty-fifty allocation of water and several regulations on infrastructure and dam building. A Joint Boundary Water Commission was established later and in 1928.

The Protocol on the joint construction of the Arpacay-Akhourian Dam is dating from 1964. This protocol provides a set of rules concerning the joint construction of the dam whose water would be shared on a fifty-fifty basis. Both states are free to use their water for irrigation purposes and may build a hydropower plant on their respective territories. This protocol was later followed by the 1975 officially ratified *'Cooperation Agreement on the construction of a dam on the bordering Arpacay river and the constitution of a Dam Lake'* which assures the basic principles that were already outlined in the 1964 Protocol.

On 26 October 1973, *'The Agreement for the Cooperation between the Republic of Turkey and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics for the Construction of the Bridge and the Bridge Lake Formation on The Arpacay River Border'* was signed. The provisions of that agreement play a key role in the regulation of boundary waters, because it explicitly provides for regulations concerning the tributaries and makes several clarifications omitted in the 1927 agreement.

As the last water agreement between Turkey and the USSR, a protocol was signed on 7 March 1990. According to this agreement, "...any shift in the riverbeds of the Arpaçay, Çoruh, Posof and Çaksu rivers would be prevented jointly or the necessary facility to adjust the watercourses would be built in collaboration". However several engineering aspects of river development along borders that would demand improved bilateral cooperation. For instance, Turkey intends to facilitate and improve use of the Aras river's water from the joint regulator of Serdarabat which was constructed for irrigation purposes. Since the envisaged technical measures on the Turkish side would imply removal of the river bed on a short stretch of river, approval by the Armenian government and technical cooperation with the Armenian authorities would be necessary.

The on-going dialogue between border officials and the cooperation for the joint management of the Arpaçay / Akhourian dam over the Turkish-Armenian border can provide a good basis for the settlement of other joint technical commissions.

Despite the Iron Curtain, the necessity of cross-border dialogue and cooperation stemming from neighbourhood issues have been acknowledged.

A closed border can't allow to elude geography.