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THE ART OF DODGING THE QUESTION

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Last month, excerpts from an interview given by Armenias Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shavarsh Kocharyan to an Armenian TV channel surfaced.[i] During the interview, the channels anchorman Petros Ghazaryan kept asking Kocharyan whether or not Armenia recognized Turkeys borders. Meanwhile, Kocharyan kept dodging the question by failing to give a concrete answer and by trying to sideline the interview. The question dodging revolved around the 2009 Protocols signed between Turkey and Armenia that were meant to establish diplomatic relations and improve bilateral relations between the two countries. Anchorman Ghazaryans insistence on finding out about what Armenias stance was on Turkeys current borders, and Deputy Minister Kocharyans insistence on refusing the answer the question eventually reached comedic heights.

The question dodging began when the anchorman attempted to make the following statement: When we signed the Protocols which read that we recognized the borders of modern Turkey ☀ This was interrupted by Kocharyan, who stated there was no such thing in the Protocols. When the anchorman attempted to continue in the same vein, Kocharyan stated that recognition in the Protocols was within the context of the documents of international law. When the anchorman pressed on with the issue, Kocharyan implied that no such relevant document existed and added that the Protocols made no mention of the Treaty of Kars (1921).

It should be noted here that the Treaty of Kars had established Turkeys borders with the Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. After gaining its independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia refused to accept the validity of the Treaty of Kars, and instead promoted the idea of the validity Treaty of Sèvres (that was designed to completely partition the territories of the Ottoman Empire). Yet, the Treaty of Sèvres was never ratified by the Ottoman Empire and was subsequently nullified by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923).

Going back to the interview; after Kocharyan made his last remark, the anchorman asked if this meant then that Armenia did not recognize Turkeys borders. Kocharyan replied by stating that Turkey dreamed of the Treaty of Kars being included in the Protocols, but that this was not the case. He then went off on a tangent about Turkish politics, and commented about how Deniz Baykal, former leader of Turkeys Republican Peoples Party

(CHP), had apparently stated back in 2009 that Turkey did not recognize the Turkey-Armenia border (in fact, Baykal had said the exact opposite; that Armenia refused to acknowledge the Treaty of Kars that had he said had established the Turkey-Armenia border[ii]).

After Kocharyans tangent, the anchorman replied by pointing out that Kocharyan had not answered the question. When Kocharyan bizarrely replied that he did, the anchorman simply asked: Does Armenia recognize Turkeys borders or not?

One would think that such a simple question would require a simple yes or no answer. Kocharyan, however, insisted on dodging the question by talking about Armenias goal of following bilateral normalization without preconditions. The anchorman then repeated the very same question. As if it was relevant, Kocharyan asked the anchorman: What do you think? The anchorman naturally indicated that his thoughts on the issue were not relevant.

Following this, Kocharyan again attempted to steer the discussion off course by stating that talking about border recognition was useless without the establishment of diplomatic relations. The anchorman reminded Kocharyan that diplomatic relations were not mandatory for border recognition, but this was to no avail.

At this point, the anchorman tried a different approach. He referred to the Pan-Armenian Declaration on the 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide that was ceremoniously issued by the President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan this January. Pointing to the references made by the Declaration to the Treaty of Sèvres and US President Woodrow Wilsons Arbitral Award (which aimed to give a large part of the Ottoman Empires territories to Armenians, territories in which Armenians had never been anywhere near a majority), the anchorman asked if making such references presented a moral issue in terms of recognizing Turkeys territorial integrity. Kocharyan again demonstrated his formidable question dodging skills by nonsensically replying that Armenias position was clearly represented in the Protocols (even though he had previously, on another occasion, said that the Declaration presented the desires and notions of all layers of Armenians[iii]).

For the anchorman, this meant that Armenia had no clear position concerning the recognition of Turkeys borders. Kocharyan disagreed, stating that Armenias position was mentioned in the Protocols. The anchorman asked what then, was Armenias position. Kocharyan again provided no answer, and stated that Armenia simply recognized what was said in the Protocols and nothing more (also, he needlessly mentioned Deniz Baykal again).

The anchorman had grown tired by this point, he simply remarked: Mr. Kocharyan, I think I am trying to understand a very simple thing. Kocharyan was determined to not give an answer, and simply blamed Turkey for placing preconditions for the establishment of relations.

With this, Kocharyan had successfully dodged the question of whether or not Armenia recognized Turkeys borders. He had defeated the anchorman who had been determined to find the answer.

The answer though, is simple. Armenia is ambiguous about Turkeys borders. This is made apparent not only by the question dodging exhibited by Kocharyan, but also by the Pan-Armenian Declaration that makes references to the Treaty of Sèvres and Wilsons Arbitral Award.

Regarding the Declaration, Kocharyan had on one occasion said the following: There are people who start panicking at merely mentioning the Sevres Treaty. I cannot understand why. The Pan-Armenian Declaration does not say that Armenia will be seeking to reach the borders mentioned in that treaty. It only says that we appreciate it.[iv] This is a way of juggling words, pure and simple. The word appreciate here sounds mild to the ear, but it nevertheless means that Armenia has other aspirations for the Turkey-Armenia border. However, Armenia simply lacks the capacity to physically challenge the Turkey-Armenia border, so instead does it verbally.

Respecting a neighboring states territorial integrity is a prerequisite for establishing and maintaining good neighborly relations. Unlike Turkey, Armenia, for whatever reason, simply cannot bring itself to perform this act of respect that would showcase its good intentions. And until it does, this issue will continue to be a major hurdle in the normalization of relations between the two countries.

Lastly, it should be added that Armenias revisionist aspirations for borders are not limited to that of Turkeys, but encompasses the borders of all its neighbors. This is concretely demonstrated by Armenias ongoing occupation of 20% of Azerbaijans territory, despite four United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for the end of the occupation.

[i] Armenias stance on Turkish borders is to avoid a dead-end, *Mediamax*, http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/armeniaturkey/13322/

[ii] Baykal: Görüşme haklı olduğumuzu gösterdi, *Hürriyet*, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/12487550.asp

[iii] Armenian Deputy FM says desires of all layers of Armenians are expressed in the Genocide Decleration, *Armenpress*, http://armenpress.am/eng/news/796287/armenian-deputy-fm-says-desires-of-all-layers-of-armenians-are-expressed-in-genocide-declaration.html

[iv] Armenian Deputy FM Defends Anti-Turkey Document, *Armenia TV* (02.03.2015).

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