

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. DR. HÜSEYİN BAĞCI¹

(PROF. DR. HÜSEYİN BAĞCI İLE MÜLAKAT)

This 40-minutes interview was conducted by Aslan Yavuz Şir on 21st of December 2012 at Middle East Technical University in Turkish. Interviewee Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Bağcı shared his impressions on his visit to Erivan last October for a workshop and as a participant to a live TV discussion by Yerevan Press Club as well as his views on developments regarding Turkish-Armenian relations and Turkish Foreign Policy.

AVİM: I believe you've visited Armenia on several different occasions including your last visit to participate in a workshop in Yerevan organized by the Yerevan Press Club. What are your impressions regarding the political and social perception towards Turkey in Armenia?

Bağcı: My first visit to Armenia was in 2009. I was invited by the National Security Council of Armenia for an international conference, and I was the only participant from Turkey among 29 participants from other countries. At that time President Abdullah Gül was pioneering a football diplomacy initiative, and so there was a good sentiment among both sides stemming from a tendency towards the establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey. It was a "spring mood" so to speak, long before there was an "Arab Spring" in the Middle East. And really during my visit in Armenia, this mood was clearly palpable at the conference, in the hotel, in the streets and among the academicians. This was until after the Protocols that were signed in Zurich were put back on the shelf. I think in the last three years between my two recent visits, I've observed two different sentiments, first being a positive tendency towards Turkey, evolving into a second sentiment, namely a disappointment with the process. In my last visit I've clearly felt both in the academia and

¹ Prof.Dr. Hüseyin Bağcı is a Professor of International Relations at Middle East Technical University in Ankara and the Chair of the department.

others a frustration, since it was a clear scoring opportunity, and since it ended up a missing chance. The disappointment was escalated further by the overwhelming public diplomacy initiative successfully pursued by the Azerbaijani government in the international arena that was clearly observable in the recent Safarov case and Turkey's support for this initiative. Still, this is only a fragment of the Turkey-Armenia relations. But the essential thing, the impression that I've had was the reaffirmation of the immediate necessity to establish political and diplomatic relations between two countries, in addition to other areas such as cultural and social relations. On the other hand, Protocols that were put back on the shelf or put in a "freezer" so to speak clearly corresponded with a negative impression of Armenia. However, Armenian people, despite the fact that they are religiously and linguistically different, are like "our people". Surprisingly I've learnt that the expression "to wrest a living from the stone"² was an Armenian expression, since the country is known as a "stone country". Capital city is full of excellent buildings made of stone. Thus, if one has to step in, so as to launch a rapprochement process between the countries, it must be Turkey taking the first step in this process. I don't think this would be easy with regard to the upcoming 2015, and the Turkish government would not be so willing due to domestic political concerns. However we must consider the possibility that the process will take a sharp turn after 2015, and Turkey will not accept Armenia's demands for the recognition of the genocide allegation and it will continue to be a problem in bilateral relations. The thing is, any improvement in the peace-building processes in the Caucasus will be in Turkey's favor. Interestingly, there are currently 80 students of Turkish language in Yerevan University. It could not be easy for the State, but Civil Society organizations, such as yours, can find ways to help these students by sending Turkish grammar books and other educational material. I think this is a clear sign of an increasing interest in Turkey. So, NGOs, and universities too, can help build bridges and make a contribution. As a member of the Middle East Technical University, I would like to contribute to that process myself if possible. We have to provide a basis for dialogue between the young generations, to make them communicate with each other. As long as these communication lines are not repaired, and we do not meet with these people, prejudices will remain where they are, and even strengthened. That doesn't mean we have to agree on everything, and we won't be, but we have to consider the possibility that as these relations and dialogue increases, the prejudices might be overcome more easily. Hrant Dink once said that let's leave aside the things we can't agree on and focus on other things such as cultural, social relations, literature, theatre, art, poetry etc. And yes, in those things we have to get closer. It was a pioneering project when President Abdullah Gul initiated the football diplomacy, but also a regrettable failure on both sides when it did not succeed.

2 "Ekmeğini taştan çıkarmak" T.N.

AVİM: So do you think track-two diplomacy would be reinitiated?

Bağcı: Absolutely. Universities, NGOs, chambers of commerce and trade, private sector and businessmen can play a dynamic role. Thus, trade relations are a primary factor in international relations. Why are we still restricting our trade with Armenia to go through Georgia or other countries and not establish direct trade links? No doubt this will also bring economic progress on the Turkish side of the border. Tourism itself could become a major sector. I think Turkey has to reach a balance in its relations with Azerbaijan, not a unilateral “enslavement” of a major critical issue in its foreign policy. Turkish and Azeri public must also be informed that disagreement on particular foreign policy issues is different than broadening areas of cooperation in critical areas. If we consider our relations with European Union and some countries in Europe such as France, we will see that we do not agree on everything, but we nevertheless continue to cooperate. In the case of France, we can remember that Turkish Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs responded harshly towards developments in bilateral relations, but we were the ones who ended up the embargo afterwards. Turkey is not a country to “bully” Armenia, but instead a country with the duty to be a “big brother”, compassionate friend or a good neighbor since we are pursuing a policy of “zero problems with the neighbors”. I think Minister Davutoğlu has to review his stance towards Armenia in the first place. Again, I don’t think it would not be possible to establish diplomatic relations in the initial phase, there domestic and international concerns involved. But I think we have to establish ways other than diplomacy with Armenia, and I also think that Turkey has to pursue a pioneering role. There is no reason for Turkey to have fears regarding Armenia, on the contrary, Armenia is a country half the size of Ankara including its total population. I might add that there is nostalgia in Armenia for Turkey, not only yearning or admiration: a wish that they had closer relations with Turkey. If I might exemplify, they would answer Turkey if they were asked to choose us over Iran. Culturally both countries are Muslim, but Armenians feel closer to Turkey. My impression is that if they were asked to choose visiting Istanbul or Tehran, they would clearly choose the former. We can utilize this sentiment. As an academic, I see myself among that peace-maker academician category. Our primary duty is to bring societies together, not create divisions among them. It’s especially essential to build these bridges among the young generations. So, student exchange programs between the two countries is an immediate requirement, so are the steps to be taken by Turkey to create opportunities for those students who are eager to learn more about Turkey. Kadir Has University’s recent initiative establishing a Department of Armenian Language is admirable, while Serdar Dinler’s role in this process has been a major one. Still, we need more.

I’ve visited Azerbaijan on several occasions. Surprisingly in a three-week

period I've visited both countries, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Azerbaijan, I was impressed that there were a significant number of Azeris who were not happy that Armenians were gone. Thus, there is still an Armenian church in Baku located at the heart of the city, and whoever I spoke in Azerbaijan expressed that they wished that the Armenian neighbors were also there. I want to give a striking example, the family of an academic which was expelled from/migrated from/left Nagorno Karabakh (which term you would choose) have an Armenian attendant in their homes take care of their children, who also migrate from Nagorno Karabakh. On the one hand we have people slaughtering each other, and on the other, we have people entrusting their child to another, taking precautions for their children not to forget their Karabakh culture and heritage. This is clearly an irony of history and a behavior of obvious pragmatic basis. This is essentially humanistic. I believe that the humanistic issues must be prioritized over political concerns in that particular case. I also believe that the politicians of both sides are behaving shamefully³, both Turkish and Armenian. It's my very obligation to express that the social impression is different than the political sentiments in both sides. These societies have no enmity whatsoever with regard to each other. It's a matter of establishing the mechanisms to build bridges and come together. Therefore, I think both the Turkish and Armenian government's policies are awfully wrong.

After Hrant Dink was murdered, there has been a critical change of perception in Armenia. Especially after the murder, gathering of hundreds of thousands people during his funeral and the meeting afterwards created a very good sentiment in Armenia. So Hrant Dink's murder, albeit shameful, has also led to some positive change in mutual understanding.

AVİM: You've underlined that there is a major mutual diplomatic failure. How do you describe the failure behind the Protocols?

Bağcı: It can be defined by two factors. As you can remember, during the signing of the Protocols, we've seen Minister Davutoğlu's pleased facial expression on the one hand, Minister Nalbantyan's discontent facial expression on the other. It was a sign of Turkey's diplomatic victory with regard to concessions made and benefits from the Protocols. If these protocols were picked out from the freezer and relaunched today, it would be easier to have positive results. Azerbaijan's policy has played a crucial role in that process. They immediately intervened, and massive public policy campaign was launched to counteract these protocols. A 6-member committee immediately came to Turkey and met with the members of Turkish parliament. Domestically

3 Professor Bağcı uses the expression "ayıp etmek". Turkish translation is that "Her iki ülkenin politikacılarının da çok ayıp ettiğini düşünüyorum."

the campaign targeted at the opposition groups, particularly nationalist sentiments in the parliament, such as MHP. They used the prejudices on the Armenian issue in their favor. In the end, Turkey postponed the ratification of the Protocols due to Azerbaijan's tremendous pressure. It proves the influence of Azerbaijan's economic power, ie energy, to affect Turkish Foreign Policy. I've expressed that in my visits to Azerbaijan, that Azerbaijan took Turkish Foreign Policy in its pawn in these matters. They pursued a policy which restrained Turkey in a critical problem. Azerbaijan is pursuing a very aggressive public diplomacy campaign using huge amount of resources, which I think is very successful. Last year, there were several conferences on the commemoration and criticism of Hocalı massacre held in 42 universities including Middle East Technical University. Azerbaijan has never been that influential. Immediately afterwards there was a huge meeting in Istanbul Taksim on Hocalı massacre. At the time, Minister of Internal Affairs İdris Naim Şahin's comments were far marginal than we could expect from the now deceased nationalist leader Alparslan Türkeş. As you already know, rapprochement process between Turkey and Armenia was first pioneered by Türkeş. Most people do not know, or neglect that particular fact. It was an original approach, expressed in the saying "nail unstiches the nail"⁴. At that time, two radical groups from Turkey and Armenia played a unifying role. Today, the dependence/independence on Azerbaijan will play a crucial role in the upcoming years with regard to Turkish-Armenian relations. Secondly, in his speech on May 16th 2009 at the Azerbaijan Parliament Prime Minister Erdoğan said that Turkey would not make any attempts by overstepping Azerbaijan. From that time onwards, that's water under the bridge. But still, I believe Turkey is taking Azerbaijan factor into consideration much more than she needs. If Turkey's interests require the establishment of diplomatic relations with Armenia, Turkey must be able to do that, and not follow a policy that is bound with Azerbaijan's blessing. Analytically, we've seen that Azerbaijan could be a most effective outside factor in Turkish Foreign Policy. Historically this has been an opportunity missed. So we've seen that Turkish Foreign Policy is not that independent or free from outside influences; most importantly not immune but a follower Azerbaijan's national interests in these matters. This does not necessarily mean that there are no Armenian domestic political groups which are disturbed by a possible rapprochement with Turkey; on the contrary, they will always be there to prevent these attempts. Still, this is a matter of political will, a will that was materialized when Minister Davutoğlu and Minister Nalbantyan signed the Protocols in Zurich. Therefore, I believe, the failure to ratify these protocols was a failure/mistake by Turkey in the first place. That's because of the inability of Turkey to follow an independent decision-making process in pursuing its foreign policy, and the result was not

4 "Çivi çiviği söker". T.N.

in line with Turkey's national interests. I also believe that opening of borders with Armenia is in favor of Turkey's national interests. However, government does not consider this aspect as a more favorable policy in the face of Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan in quantitative and qualitative terms, so they saw these relations with Azerbaijan and the interests that are derived from it as more important than Turkey's national interests. There is no doubt that economically Azerbaijan is more important. But if pursue a more historical and diplomatic line of reasoning, it's fair to say that this choice between two sides is wrong in itself.

Prejudices in both sides, namely Armenia and Turkey will continue. But we can say that in the last three years and since Hrant Dink's murder, there is a mutual common sense and humane response is emerging.

AVİM: We've already highlighted those factors that might stall the rapprochement process for Turkey. Do you think there are similar factors for Armenia as well? What is the role of Armenian Diaspora?

Bağcı: Armenians outside Armenia are stuck with their prejudices on Turkey, and this is because their existence in those countries where the Diaspora is located depends on their anti-Turkey sentiments. I acknowledge that there are tragedies in the past, so I find this sentiment understandable. I've experienced this on several occasions during my encounters with Armenians. But this does not help Armenia. Armenians living in Armenia are poor people. Their life standards are well below Turkey's and maybe 20-25 years backwards. This is an obvious economic fact. Let's recall that lots of people from the Diaspora came to see the Turkey-Armenia football match back in 2009. I'm inclined to see the humanistic aspect, which I think is the crucial factor here. Thus, politics is abstract, but the humanistic side is right before us, visible. I believe it was a major political risk when Mr. Sarkisian joined President Gul in this attempt to establish diplomatic relations despite the Diaspora, and he paid a price for it. Just before he came to Bursa for the football match in 2009, I was interviewed by several media organizations and I was asked if Sarkisian will come or not. My comment was that it was inevitable and only natural that he would come to Turkey, he would come and enjoy our famous İskender kebab with President Gul, enjoy the game and that's just customary for him to do so. This was a traditional diplomatic conduct. It could contribute to dialogue or have no results at all, but this must have been done and it was. The night President Sarkisian came to Turkey, I was on a live TV program with Suat Kınıklıoğlu and we were watching the game as the crowd was raising Azerbaijan flags. While we're brothers and sisters with Azerbaijan, we're two separate states. Azerbaijan flags meant that people were showing their reaction to Karabakh

and that's acceptable, but it was a Turkey-Armenia football match. I myself watched a football game in Spain with Mehmet Nevruzoğlu Aliyev, who served as Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Turkey for 15 years, and we raised Turkish and Azeri flags at that match too. We all express our nationalist feelings in these times. But this is different. Azerbaijan is not a country to be disregarded. But this does not necessarily mean that Turkey has to protect Azerbaijan's interests all the time. Turkey has to follow the policy of "first life and then beloved"⁵. Turkey must convince Azerbaijan by explicitly defining the reasons for rapprochement with Armenia, namely that for specific reasons Turkey intends to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia, and this process might damage Azerbaijan indirectly, however for the sake of Turkey's national interests this is necessary. There are numerous references to protect the heritage of the "ancestors"⁶ nowadays, but what is necessary to attain this goal is obviously neglected in the case of Armenia. Thus, the failure of Turkey and Armenia to establish bilateral diplomatic relations is a historical mistake. Despite the tragedies in the past, Turkey was among the first countries to give a helping hand to Armenia after the 1988 earthquake. Armenians also did their best to help Turkey after 1999 earthquake. Again and again, humanistic reasons prevail over political barriers. This has always been my basic point of origin. With my all due respect and love for Azerbaijan and its people, a closed border with Armenia is our shame. Considering our relations with other neighbors, and that we didn't have any major conflicts with Armenia, we could not protect the basic right of communication and movement for people on the both sides of the border. There is famous saying in Gaziantep, "neighbors want for each other's ashes"⁷. Therefore, Turkey has to take the first step in that respect, play a pioneering role, although this is my academic viewpoint and not a political stance.

AVİM: From a historical standpoint, how do you perceive Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu's recent remarks on a redefinition of Armenians as a part of "Turkish Diaspora" and "Just Memory"?

Bağcı: This is a belated remark. Minister Davutoğlu should not have any inconsistencies between his remarks and his practices. Thus, someone might ask Minister Davutoğlu the reason behind his reluctance to ratify the Protocols. Theoretically, I concur with Minister Davutoğlu's new approach. I also supported President Gül's initiative back then. These were humanistic approaches. But then we have to find ways to meet the young generation of Armenians in the Diaspora. In fact, we don't speak to each other, as we didn't

5 "Önce can, sonra canan" T.N.

6 Ecdad. T.N.

7 "Komşu komşunun külüne muhtaçtır" T.N.

in the past. Whereas I wish we invite them and they accept our invitation, then we can speak. I remember President Turgut Özal's project: he thought that Armenians should come and visit Turkey, even begin living here. Let me tell you a very recent experience. This year and before we visited President Putin in Russia, I've met with a Diaspora Armenian from New York. He was reluctant towards me as we were first introduced since I was coming from Turkey. My response was ironic: I asked him about his reluctance and that I'm a good person and not a cactus! When we were at Putin's house in October 2012 he told me "I visited 'Western Armenia' this year". I responded "yeah, well, that's great, we call it Eastern Turkey, how lucky for you! Which cities did you visit?". He said "Bitlis, Van Muş, etc. major cities in Western Armenia!". I responded "I'm glad for you, these cities are really beautiful cities in Eastern Turkey". Still, we were talking. He meant that he's been to Anatolia. I think we're stuck with the geographical definitions too much. It's similar to the absurd question whether we're European or not. We're located east of Europe, but we're the western neighbor of China. We're both Eastern and Western. I'm aware of our past with the Diaspora, i.e. ASALA's horrible terror. Retired Ambassador Bilal Şimşir has already put forward the horrible terror into words. Kamuran Gürun was among the first who wrote on the Armenian issue. The thing is we never spoke to the Armenians face to face. Elif Şafak's book played a crucial role in expressing a different aspect of the issue, namely one from the viewpoint of women. In the end Diaspora is an actor both in Turkish Foreign Policy and Armenian Foreign Policy. I say let's bring those Armenian students from Armenia to Turkey and send our students to Armenia, let's build bridges between them. I've met Raffi Hovannissian in 1994 in Tehran when I was there for a meeting. As you already know his father is one of leading academics in the Diaspora. Back then, Ahmedinejad was the Mayor of Tehran city, and we were at a dinner invitation by Ahmedinejad at one of the old palaces owned by the deposed Shah. The view of the palace was great. I told Raffi, let's take a picture together before this great view just for the sake of Turkish-Armenian relations and at the expense of my political career. We took that picture and we spoke a lot. And I think Turks and Armenians need to speak to each other today more than ever.