

Can Fukushima Cause a Turko-Armenian Rapprochement?

Written by Serhan Ünal

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SERHAN ÜNAL, MAY 9 2011

The Fukushima nuclear power plant (NPP) disaster presents a chance to reinvigorate the stalled momentum for a Turko-Armenian rapprochement. The earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear melt-down which devastated Japan may have world-wide repercussions. One of these could be the creation of confidence-building measures over the similarly risky status of the only NPP in Armenia: Metsamor. Metsamor NPP was built in 1979 and was closed after a 1988 earthquake in Armenia. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and following the Azeri-Armenian War over Nagorno-Karabakh, it was re-commissioned by Yerevan in 1995 to meet increasing energy demand. Metsamor NPP uses first generation technology, and is distinguished for being “the oldest and the least secure” of the existing NPPs, according to the European Union (EU). It is located some 20 kilometres from the Turko-Armenian border and faces serious financial problems, even in re-fuelling. Under such conditions, it is difficult to convince Armenia to take the necessary security measures; there is a vital risk for the whole region, a risk to match a Chernobyl-like disaster. At this very point, this unlucky and risky situation of Metsamor provides Turks and Armenians with a timely opportunity. At present, the security of NPPs has been forced onto the world’s energy security agenda. Ankara should use this momentum smartly and take one step toward Yerevan. A deal on Metsamor’s security can enable parties to deepen the dialogue; both parties stand to gain from this cooperation.

Firstly, Turkey can help Armenia in finding loans and forming a consortium to shoulder the burden mutually, for the sake of regional security and stability. According to a prediction, a new NPP will cost approximately \$5 billion. It is totally inconceivable for Armenia, which only possesses approximately \$2 billion in national revenue as of 2010, to make such a large investment. Perhaps Turkey can play a primary role in forming a tripartite or quadripartite enterprise in which Armenia, Turkey, the EU and the US have shares, to make investment and generate electricity for the Armenian economy by using reliable, sustainable, cleaner and less dangerous resources. Russia can be enticed to join the new project to maintain the regional balance too. Thus, all the major actors (Washington, Brussels and Moscow) will be included in the investment with regional parties Yerevan and Ankara. The Minsk Group, which mainly consists of France, Russia and the US, can also be the institutional roof under which negotiations occur. Under the consortium (or the Minsk Group), profits can be re-invested to the region and this can develop the necessary infrastructure for re-opening the common Turko-Armenian border.

Secondly, the establishment of a consortium (or at least developing a plan for the future of Metsamor mutually) may cause much-needed political and social linkages across both countries. What is needed in Turko-Armenian relations is mutual understanding and confidence. During the negotiations, an interaction between the parties is inevitable; this will be the key for better understanding. If the parties can build confidence during the technical and economic negotiations, this may spill over into other areas from the issues being agreed on. Because the main obstacle for the Turkish government and its Armenian counterpart is public opposition to any agreement made with the opposite side, this obstacle can be eliminated through political and social rapprochement. Plus, as peculiar to Turkey, Azerbaijan’s opposition is significant; but, even Azerbaijan which has a cease-fire with Armenia, not a permanent peace, may support a solution to the risky situation of Metsamor. Within the framework of good neighbourhood and mutual understanding, parties may take one step further. This programme could proceed under the label “Atoms For

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Confidence”, like US president Eisenhower’s famous “Atoms For Peace” speech. There is real hope and possibility for this to succeed.

Even if the parties cannot build confidence and move discussions to other fields—like debates over the events of 1915 or the future demarcation of their common border—there will remain one, concrete achievement: the removal of a regional nuclear disaster risk. The momentum now exists. All nuclear-powered countries are debating the risks of nuclear energy, and some countries have already decided to suspend their investments. For example, Germany has just decided to speed up its abandonment of nuclear energy. Public opposition to nuclear energy could play a part in raising more awareness about the topic. This may enable the Turkish and Armenian governments to take steps towards each other much more easily, by exploiting the dangerous situation of Metsamor, without facing harsh public opposition. There is nothing to lose for either party; the chances are that they both stand to gain mutually from the deal. The international community would appreciate this positive development, too. In brief, the destructive tsunami which wreaked untold devastation upon Japan can serve as a cautionary tale for the South Caucasus, by forcing regional actors to engage in confidence-building measures and to remove the common danger of nuclear disaster.

Serhan Ünal is a student at the department of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara/Turkey.