

During the February 8, 2005 CPRF, David L. Phillips, from the Council on Foreign Relations, talked about Track II diplomacy in the Turkish-Armenian conflict. Matt Bryza, from the National Security Council, was scheduled to join him, but had to cancel at the last minute to travel to Georgia as part of the official US delegation attending the Prime Minister's funeral.

The issue of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation is a difficult Track II project to tackle. Shared history is one of the tools used in Track II diplomacy, but when it was first tried in this conflict, Armenians would say that there would be no shared history, because there was just one history: the Armenian genocide, and the Turks would say that the Turkish government would never acknowledge that there had been an Armenian genocide.

There had been very little people to people contact between sides in this conflict. Even prominent members of each community who had traveled widely had often only met people from the other side of the conflict a few times.

At first, when the groups met, there was a lot of tension, but after a few days they started to listen to each other more. There was a general feeling that this was probably the only chance the two sides would have to make a dialogue happen, so they wanted to do it right.

On July 9, 2001, the establishment of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) was made. There was some concern that the whole endeavor might be viewed with suspicion in Turkey. Previously, the experience had been that Turkey didn't want to talk about the Armenians. They said that they did not want to deal with these issues "under duress." Therefore, the resolution was initially withdrawn by Clinton, citing national security reasons. But, as soon as it had been withdrawn, Turkey said it was willing to deal with the issue once and for all. When the announcement was made, somewhat surprisingly, the Turkish headlines presented it as a historic opportunity. But also somewhat surprisingly, there were a number of Armenians (more than expected) who didn't want anything to do with Turkey until it admitted fault and gave land and reparations.

The first phase was the design of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission and launching Track II efforts, helping both sides come together for dialogue and a chance to look for common ground.

At first, it was impossible to be forward-looking, because history kept coming-up. It was clear that a process was needed for addressing the Armenian genocide. The Turkish members made a stunning request: for there to be a study on the applicability of the Genocide Convention to this. The outcome was only a legal opinion (not binding). It said that no treaty could be applied retroactively, which was good for Turkey. But the Armenians also felt that they had won something, as it also said that many people from one ethnic background had died, and that when the Turkish government had deported the Armenians, they knew that it would cause many deaths, so it fit the definition of genocide. This provided validation for many Armenian families.

Addressing this issue allowed the parties to then move forward and start discussing opening the Turkish-Armenian border. Although this did not happen, for several reasons, such as the illness of Azerbaijan's president (which would have made it an awkward time to make such an announcement, due to the close relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey), but there were other successes. TARC was originally scheduled to last for a year, but ended up running for three years. It opened dialogue on improving official contacts, opening the border, cooperation in certain areas, confidence-building measures, and encouraging religious understanding. There is now hope that the governments will move quickly toward reconciliation.