

**“Pouring Salt on Old Wounds:
Psychological Reactions to the Protocols”**

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Introduction:

On October 10th 2009, after months of Swiss mediation and U.S. encouragement, the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Turkey met to sign protocols deeming diplomatic relations between the two nations. Immediately following news of these events, Armenians within the Republic of Armenia as well as the Diaspora protested unfair conditions set forth within the protocols. The following items and clauses of the Protocols were disputed: 1. Armenia will no longer have the right to negotiate Karabagh as under international law the region is legally a part of Azerbaijan territory; 2. Armenia must no longer raise concerns about the possible abuse of Armenian cultural patrimony and provide unlimited recognition of Turkey's borders, which were drawn as a result of the violent removal of Armenians from Anatolia in 1915; and 3. The call for a historical commission to discuss the events of 1915, which implies a dialogue, is necessary to determine historical facts surrounding the Armenian Genocide, thus questioning the veracity of the event and furthering Turkey's longstanding denial.

The next step following the signing of the protocols is ratification of the documents by Parliaments in Yerevan and Ankara. However, issues regarding pre-conditions have yet to be resolved. Particular discontent lies within the continued lack of recognition of the Genocide and Turkey's insistence that normalization depends upon progress in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the disputed Karabagh region. Both nations are currently at a standstill and ratification does not seem possible in the near future. The Armenian court ruling on January 12th, 2010, which established that the protocols with Turkey must conform to Armenia's constitution and as such not contradict Paragraph 11 of the Declaration of Independence, which states: "The Republic of Armenia stands in support of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia, has angered Ankara, leading Turkey to accuse Armenia of delivering a ruling which contradicts the already agreed upon accords. Armenian President Serge Sargsyan has stated he will formally submit the protocols for ratification to Parliament despite Turkey's efforts to "distort the deal" (Phillips,2010). Sargsyan has also threatened to withdraw from the accords if Turkey continues to stall with regard to

ratification. These events suggest that despite efforts for normalization through opening borders between the nations, reconciliation and acknowledgement is necessary first for true diplomatic relations to be reached.

Independent of political dissonance between the governments, it is also important to consider the effect of these protocols on the people of Armenia. The current accords between Armenian and Turkish governments have resurfaced the grief, anger and suffering of the generational impact of the Genocide. Many Armenians believe that their opinions and interests have not been honored in the signing of these documents, thus leading to a loss of faith in their own government coupled with the already established distrust of Turkish politics. The psychological impact of the protocols on the Armenian community is one that cannot be ignored. While they aim at normalization through establishment of diplomatic relations, the conditions set forth are a reminder of the painful history between the nations. Armenians have been forced to live in the past due to Turkish government denial; the impact of genocide on survivors and their descendents leads to burdening feelings of sadness, fear and anxiety (Kalayjian, 2002).

The Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP) organized a mission for Armenia from November 17-28th, 2009 to conduct trainings on empowerment and forgiveness. Within these trainings, individuals learned conflict resolution skills as well as the value of the practice of forgiveness. The trainings also included ancestral mediation followed by a healing circle in which participants were encouraged to share their feelings and experiences. The 7-step Biopsychosocial and Eco-Spiritual Model was central to all trainings. This model, devised by Dr. Kalayjian teaches individuals how to process and let go of their negative feelings, as well as how to transform trauma and suffering into positive lessons and post-traumatic growth. Difficult emotions were often conjured within these trainings as a result of the generational impact resulting from the Genocide.

The ATOP team was also interested in assessing Armenians' emotional reactions and opinions regarding the protocols and their psychological impact. Questionnaires

were distributed to evaluate these factors. Dr. Kalayjian devised the questionnaire based on a public opinion poll conducted by the Armenian Sociological Association (asa.am). This poll asked two questions: “Do you personally agree for the signing of Armenian-Turkish protocols?” and “What do you think about the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border? On September 21-25, one month before signing of the protocols, 1000 respondents in Yerevan completed the survey. A majority of respondents (52.4 %) were against the signing, 39.2 percent were in agreement and 8.4 percent were undecided. Results with regard to opening the borders were almost equal, with 47.9 percent agreeing to an opening and 40.9 percent against opening of borders. A smaller percentage (11.2%) reported to not care (asa.am).

The questionnaire devised for the current study expanded upon this poll in order to gain a deeper understanding of which parts of the protocols were most troublesome, with emphasis on psychological reactions to the protocols. The questionnaire contained the following six questions: 1. Have you read the protocol?, 2. What parts do you agree with?, 3. What parts do you disagree with?, 4. Why do you disagree with certain parts? 5. Please express your emotions and feelings regarding these protocols, and 6. What would you change to revise/improve the protocols? This paper discusses the results of this survey and implications for future work necessary for healing the psychological wounds and reconciliation between both nations.

2.Results:

Overall a total of 174 surveys were completed by random individuals residing in Yerevan and Vanadzor, Republic of Armenia (98 male; 76 female). Fifty percent (50%) of all respondents reported to have not read the entire protocol and 32.2 percent had either read some parts, 9.2 percent had read an analysis of it and only 8.6 percent of respondents had read the entire document. The majority of respondents (39.7%) agreed to only opening borders, disagreeing with conditions set forth regarding a committee to discuss historical accounts and returning Karabagh. About 17 percent

reported to not agreeing with any of the documents and only 3.4 percent agreed with everything.

The majority of respondents (33.9 %) expressed disagreement because the Protocols did not make an acknowledgement of the Genocide and had conditions of returning Karabagh. Another group of respondents (23 %) also disagreed, viewing the protocols as a clear distraction from acknowledgement of the Genocide and returning Armenian historical lands. Additionally, respondents experienced the protocols as a “Turkish trap” (5.2 %) and evidence of deceit on part of the Turkish government (5.7%). Another group of respondents (16.7%) disagreed with the entire protocols, 9.2% viewed it as unjust, and 3.4 % viewed it as only a means to economic prosperity.

When asked what they wished to change or revise with regards to the protocols, the majority of respondents (22.4 %) reported wanting to remove preconditions and return Western Armenian lands. Acknowledgment of the Genocide was next in percentage (12.6 %). The next group (13.8%) reported not wishing to change anything or had no knowledge of the protocols and 9.2 percent expressed other desires (Restriction in Turkish expansion, i.e. Turkish citizens would not be allowed to buy land or open businesses within Armenia).

With regard to the psychological and emotional impact of the protocols on the Armenian people, there was a mix of both positive and negative emotions. The majority of respondents (51.7%) expressed strong negative emotions ranging from sadness to rage. Twenty two and four tenths percent (22.4%) reported feeling a mixture of negative emotions, predominantly a combination of fear for the future and rage over unjust conditions, which do not favor Armenian interests. Other negative emotions expressed were: sadness (4.6%), disappointment (17.8%), anger (4.0%), and hopelessness (7.5%). A smaller percentage of Armenians (29.9%) reported positive feelings of happiness (4.0 %) and hope (25.9%) that a prosperous future and good relations are possible between the two countries. However, those who agreed for opening the borders were clear that they wanted preconditions removed, Genocide acknowledged, and trust built between nations before fair diplomatic relations could be

possible.

Additional analysis was conducted to determine differences between males and females in the survey responses. Differences between genders were examined since all other demographic data were equal (i.e. all respondents were Armenian, Christian, and university educated). A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether differences existed between gender and survey responses. Statistically significant differences were found between men and women on questions 1, 3, and 5. ('Have you read the protocol?' 'Which parts do you disagree with?' and 'Describe your emotions and feelings?').

Having read the protocol was not equally distributed amongst males and females $\chi^2(3, N = 174) = 7.6, p > .05$. 2.7% females and 12.6 % males responded "yes" to having read the entire document, 60% females and 44.2% males had not read the document, 29.3% females and 35.8 % males had read some parts, and 8.0 % females and 7.4 % males had read an analysis of the protocol. Disagreement with parts of the protocol was also not equally distributed amongst gender $\chi^2(4, N = 174) = 10.6, p > .05$. 25% females; 22.9% males disagreed with the entire document, 38.5% females; 55.7% males disagreed with conditions on Genocide and Karabagh, 1.9 % females; 7.1% males did not disagree with any of it, and 23% females; 12.9 % males reported not being knowledgeable of the protocols. Significant differences were also found between gender in the reporting of emotional reaction to the protocols $\chi^2(6, N = 174) = 3.7, p > .05$. The two main emotions expressed were hope and disappointment. More females reported feelings of hope (36.1% female; 26.1 % male), whereas more males reported disappointment (23.9 % male; 16.4% female). Many Armenians also reported a mixture of negative emotions, such as fear and rage (27.9% female; 25.0 % male).

3. Discussion and Future Considerations

Results suggest the majority of Armenians are against any preconditions within the protocols, and while agreeing to the opening of borders as a positive change, this

should not happen until Genocide is acknowledged. Armenians do believe diplomatic relations between both nations are possible. However, the majority of Armenians still display a great amount of distrust and anger in their relations with Turkey. Memories of the Genocide are still very much alive and the wounds cannot begin to heal until recognition and validation is given on the part of the Turkish government. This is consistent with what Harry S. Sullivan has theorized that after a mass trauma in order to achieve closure, there needs to be a sincere validation and acknowledgment (Sullivan, 1953).

In addition to distrust of Turkish government and politics, a high percentage of Armenians also expressed distrust and rage with their own government, whom they believe has also betrayed them through signing the accords despite unjust conditions. Dissatisfaction with Armenian government has been present within Armenia for some time. A small minority of leaders displaying a great deal of wealth do not exhibit concern or awareness for the country's citizens, resulting in many Armenians to report feelings that the government is not concerned with their opinion in regards to matters such as the protocols. Perhaps the most illustrative example of corruption within the Armenian government can be seen in the events of the 2008 presidential elections. Thousands of citizens believed the election results had been rigged. On March 1st, 2008, police who alleged they were armed and prepared to cause a riot, met protestors with violence. A total of 10 casualties were reported as a result of police assault. Despite these tragic events, corruption is still evident within the government. The elections of May 31st, 2009 were marred by fraud such as ballot stuffing, multiple votes and other undemocratic dealings. It is clear more work is necessary in improving the democratic infrastructure within Armenia in order to restore the people's faith in their government.

Overall, ratification of the protocols does not appear likely as both countries accuse each other of attempting to alter the deal. The Armenian court ruling which upheld the legality of the protocols but underlined that they could not contradict Yerevan's official position that the alleged Armenian genocide must be internationally recognized has angered Turkey leading to accusations that Armenia is trying to set new

conditions. In response President Sargsyan has stated that Turkey has made efforts to “distort the essence” and has suggested that Ankara is simply looking for an excuse to avoid normalizing relations with Yerevan before a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Grigorian & Hovassian, 2010). As of February 25th, 2010, Armenia’s Parliament has voted to suspend ratification of the accords. Undoubtedly the frustrations which still exist between both countries has led to this event

Further healing work is necessary in order for progress to be made amongst both nations. The psychological impact of the protocols upon the Armenians has magnified due to generationally transmitted pain, which is yet to be acknowledged by the perpetrators. Empowerment trainings focusing on forgiveness are necessary for healing to begin. These psychoeducational, healing and empowerment groups are also essential to have with Turkish people in order to transform their denial, rejection, and humiliation through embracing their painful history. The 7-step Biopsychosocial and Eco-Spiritual Model would be incorporated as a tool in these psychoeducational and healing groups.

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