

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Armenian Foreign Policy: Challenges in the Region of the Caucasus

Edward Nalbandian, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia, appeared at Columbia University this Tuesday to participate in a forum sponsored by the Harriman Institute. The Minister spoke animatedly about Armenian foreign policy, identifying the two major security challenges faced by Armenia as, “the peaceful and just resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh and the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations.” Nalbandian emphasized that despite rumors, the two issues are in no way interconnected. “A linkage between them could damage both processes,” he stressed.

Armenia’s dispute with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region dates back several centuries. The conflict most recently flared up in March 2008, with a breach of the Bishkek ceasefire agreement signed by the countries in 1994. The Nagorno-Karabakh region, which technically belongs to Azerbaijan, identifies itself as an independent republic and is not recognized by the international community, with the exception of Armenia. Essentially, the region represents an extension of Armenian control.

The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is emotionally charged, with each side accusing the other of ethnic cleansing. “Azerbaijan has been trying to conceal the ethnic cleansing and policy of violence against the people of Karabakh in 1988-1991,” declared Nalbandian. He was referring to the clashes that took place in the Azeri city of Sumgait in February 1988, when Baku’s militia attacked Armenian protestors at a peaceful demonstration over the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Fighting broke out, leaving both Armenian and Azeri casualties. The Sumgait pogroms led to a three-year armed conflict in the region.

Nalbandian proclaimed the “internationally accepted legal right for self-determination” in Nagorno-Karabakh—he urged that “differences should be settled by peaceful and political means. Use of force for the resolution of conflict is not an acceptable alternative and could seriously destabilize our region and have great consequences,” he said. This was most likely a message for Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, who has noticeably intensified military rhetoric in the past

few months, raising concern in the international community.

The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States has been working to mediate the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The group originated in 1992 specifically to facilitate resolution of tensions between the two regions.

Armenia’s reconciliation talks with Turkey, which began in April, have drawn significant attention to the Nagorno-Karabakh region, escalating the negotiation process. Armenia and Turkey have failed to establish diplomatic relations after Armenia’s independence in 1991. Turkey’s continued denial of the Armenian genocide and its strategic alliance with Azerbaijan have been matters of friction between the two regions.

Despite the Minister’s allegation that the issues of Nagorno-Karabakh and the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations are not interconnected, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has played a role in the negotiations. Turkey closed its borders to Armenia in 1993 in protest of Armenia’s occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. The reconciliation talks have ignited discussion about the opening of borders between Turkey and Armenia and have been a source of anxiety in Azerbaijan. Rumors circulate that Turkey has promised to maintain its resolution not to open borders until Armenia and Azerbaijan resolve the matter of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian Diaspora, a powerful financial contributor to the Armenian government, has also had an impact on Armenian-Turkish relations. Nalbandian faced challenges from Diaspora members in the audience, critical of the decision to reconcile with Turkey despite the country’s refusal to recognize the Armenian genocide. Nalbandian maintained that Armenia will not reconcile with Turkey unless Turkey acknowledges the genocide. “We have a large Armenian Diaspora, we can’t ignore public opinion,” remarked Nalbandian.

*Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner*

