

## Türkiye and Armenia on the path to normalization: Are shared interests enough to overcome the burdens of the past?



In recent months, Turkish-Armenian relations have been moving toward a broader space of understanding and coordination, amid a mutual desire to push the normalization process into more advanced stages. That momentum is being driven by rapid geopolitical shifts that have reshaped the calculations of regional powers and compelled many states to reassess their positioning and their domestic and foreign policy choices.

Despite the historical legacy weighed down by hostility and the wounds of the past between Ankara and Yerevan, the logic of necessity and pragmatism has become strongly present in both sides' calculations. The US-Israeli war against Iran, along with the turmoil it has caused in energy markets and the disruption of supply lines and trade chains, has pushed the two countries to approach the normalization file from an explicitly pragmatic angle, one that moves beyond — even if only temporarily — the historical dilemmas that for decades have stood in the way of any partial or full rapprochement.

To be sure, the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement did not begin from scratch.

Attempts have been underway for years through multiple political and diplomatic channels. But recent developments have given this track added momentum and pushed it to the forefront of regional calculations. Both countries are seeking to use the current moment to strengthen their strategic and economic gains.

This raises a key question: Is normalization between Türkiye and Armenia now closer than ever, or will the imperatives of geography and economics remain unable to overcome the burdens of history and the calculations of regional powers?

Normalization is no longer a luxury

Day by day, it is becoming clear that Turkish-Armenian normalization is no longer a political luxury, nor a diplomatic option that can be postponed or deferred to a later stage. It has gradually become a vital necessity imposed by successive regional shifts from the Karabakh war to the Russia-Ukraine war, and most recently the US-Israeli escalation against Iran, with all the disruption it has caused in energy markets and supply lines.

These developments have shown that the continuation of the rupture between Ankara and Yerevan serves neither side's interests. Rather, it deprives both of valuable opportunities to reposition themselves and secure economic and strategic gains at a regional moment in which maps of influence, corridors and balances are being redrawn.

For Armenia, normalization with Türkiye represents an attempt to break out of the equation of isolation that deepened after the Karabakh war, and from the geographic suffocation that constrains its economic and political options. As a landlocked country, it has for years found itself facing closed borders with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, and limited corridors that make it more dependent on outside actors.

Hence the rise in domestic political discourse calling for a reconsideration of this situation and for transforming Armenia from a besieged state into a transit point and crossroads in the South Caucasus.

The decline of the Russian umbrella, Moscow's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, and the contraction of its traditional role in the South Caucasus have also pushed Yerevan to widen its room for maneuver toward Türkiye and the West. With clear pragmatism, Armenia has begun searching for its interests by knocking on new doors and trying to build relationships that are less dependent on the Russian guarantor and more open to the regional neighborhood.

For Türkiye, meanwhile, normalization with Armenia reinforces Ankara's ambition to cement its position as a central hub for energy, transport and trade

linking the Caucasus, Central Asia and Europe. It also gives it an opportunity to expand its presence in regional supply and connectivity routes through the development of transport networks and the opening of new corridors, including the Kars-Gyumri line.

From this perspective, the meeting of the Turkish-Armenian working group on rehabilitating and operating the Kars-Gyumri line cannot be seen as a technical detail or a limited logistical file. Rather, it is a highly significant political indicator that the normalization process is moving from the level of general statements to the level of infrastructure and practical regional connectivity.

### The economy as political leverage

Political literature suggests that when the doors of diplomacy close, the economy may become the key most capable of breaking deadlock and opening new paths to rapprochement. That is exactly what Türkiye and Armenia are trying to test today. When normalization collides with the legacy of history and the wounds of politics, economic interests become a less sensitive space and one more conducive to building on.

In this context, economic cooperation and investment opportunities have imposed themselves forcefully on the scene of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement as a practical gateway to overcoming the long rupture between the two countries. One of the clearest signs of this is the renewed discussion of reopening the Kars-Gyumri railway line, which links the city of Kars in eastern Türkiye with Gyumri in northwestern Armenia.

This line carries significance that goes beyond its immediate logistical function. Historically, it was part of a broader railway network linking Türkiye to the Caucasus region, and during the Soviet era it represented one of the important routes of communication between Türkiye and the former Soviet Union, before effectively ceasing operations in 1993 with the closure of the Turkish-Armenian border in the wake of the first Karabakh war.

Accordingly, the renewed push to operate this line cannot be read as a technical matter or a limited transport project. Rather, it is a political and economic indicator that the normalization process is moving from the realm of statements and general diplomatic meetings to the level of practical implementation. The railways here are not only testing the two countries' ability to move goods; they are also testing the seriousness of political will and the readiness of both sides to turn rapprochement from a declared idea into a reality capable of movement and application.

The energy file also looms large in the background of this process, especially in light of the disruptions caused by the escalation against Iran in energy markets

and supply lines. These shifts have pushed Ankara and Yerevan to look more seriously at the Caucasus as a strategic transit space, not merely a region of border disputes. Turning the Caucasus into an international node for energy and trade, and a link between Asia and Europe, thus becomes a potential economic gain for both sides.

### Azerbaijan and Iran enter the picture

Behind the Turkish-Armenian normalization process stands a set of regional files and calculations that cannot be separated from the broader scene, foremost among them Azerbaijan, which appears as the “present absentee” in any potential rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan. No Turkish opening toward Armenia can be understood in isolation from Baku, Türkiye’s strategic ally and the party most sensitive to any shift in Ankara’s relationship with its Armenian rival.

Any Turkish-Armenian normalization, therefore, will not be complete or sustainable if it proceeds outside Azerbaijani calculations. Baku has considerable ability to influence this process, whether by accelerating it if it sees it as an extension of a broader settlement in the South Caucasus, or by obstructing it if it views it as bypassing its interests or circumventing its political and security conditions. As such, Turkish-Armenian relations remain, to a large extent, governed by the regional triangle that includes Ankara, Yerevan and Baku together.

Iran, for its part, is present in the background of the scene even if it is not a direct party to the normalization process. Tehran views with acute sensitivity any regional arrangements that could reduce its influence, weaken its geographic position, or strip away some of the pressure cards it has accumulated over the years.

The infrastructure projects and transport corridors being discussed among Türkiye, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the broader connectivity they could open between Türkiye, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Europe, could weaken the Islamic Republic’s position as an alternative route while increasing Turkish-Azerbaijani influence along its northern border.

Accordingly, translating normalization into practical steps remains contingent on the two sides’ ability to manage these overlapping calculations with precision and careful deliberation. Normalization does not move within a purely bilateral framework between its parties, but within a highly sensitive regional environment in which economic interests intersect with security concerns, and corridor projects compete with calculations of influence and sovereignty.

### Domestic calculations

Domestic calculations in both Türkiye and Armenia are among the most prominent issues imposing themselves on any discussion of normalization between the two countries. This process does not move within the realm of foreign policy alone; it intersects deeply with national memory, electoral calculations, and the balance of public opinion, along with the domestic gains or risks that may follow. In this sense, the domestic arena may be a decisive factor in determining the level, direction and pace of normalization.

At the Armenian level, normalization with Türkiye appears to be an extremely sensitive file given the heavy historical legacy between the two countries. Any government push toward rapprochement could expose the Armenian leadership to accusations of compromising historical memory, bypassing the legacy of the victims, or accepting the results of defeat without sufficient guarantees. These are accusations that resonate with sectors that believe opening up to Ankara should not come at the expense of memory and national dignity.

At the same time, however, there is another Armenian current that views the issue from a more pragmatic angle and believes that the continuation of the rupture no longer serves national interests. Rather, it deepens geographic isolation, weakens the economy, and increases dependence on the Russian umbrella or on limited corridors through outside parties. Under this equation, the Armenian government finds itself facing a difficult choice: How can it open up to Türkiye in search of vital interests without appearing to be relinquishing memory or accepting an unbalanced settlement?

In Türkiye, meanwhile, the picture appears relatively less complicated, but it is not devoid of sensitivity. Normalization with Armenia could bring Ankara clear economic and strategic gains, whether by strengthening its position as a regional hub for energy and transport between Asia and Europe, or by revitalizing eastern Anatolia and opening the way for investment in trade, tourism, infrastructure and supply lines.

Yet this process runs up against an equally important calculation: the Turkish-Azerbaijani relationship. Ankara cannot deal with normalization with Yerevan as a separate bilateral file, because any miscalculated step could be read in Baku as bypassing its interests or diminishing the weight of its strategic alliance with Türkiye. Turkish policy therefore appears to face a delicate equation: moving closer to Armenia in a way that advances its regional and economic interests without harming its close alliance with Azerbaijan.

Is the economy alone enough?

In light of the foregoing indicators, one pressing question hangs over the circles debating the Turkish-Armenian normalization file: Can the economy alone heal

the wounds of the past and overcome the memory of historical hostility between the two countries? The answer to such a highly sensitive question does not allow for a definitive judgment or a one-dimensional reading. It cannot be said with certainty that economic interests alone are capable of erasing the burdens of history, nor can their ability to ease the severity of the rupture and open new spaces for understanding be denied.

The answer here is neither a full “yes” nor an absolute “no,” but depends on the nature of regional transformations, the scale of the pressures facing both sides, and their ability to turn shared interests into a sustainable reality.

From this perspective, it can be said that the economy does not erase the national memory of either country, but it may reorder its priorities. Deepening trade cooperation, opening borders, operating transport lines, and expanding investment opportunities are all factors capable of creating mutual day-to-day interests that make the continuation of the rupture more costly than managing it.

Over time, these interests may help push the wounds of the past aside within practical political calculations, even if it is difficult to imagine them erasing those wounds entirely, especially in the short term.

Ultimately, Ankara and Yerevan today stand before complex regional challenges that are pushing them to reassess their positions with clear pragmatism. The regional landscape, with all its developments, is forcing both sides to take a step back and reevaluate the cost of rupture and the utility of opening up.

Accordingly, the two countries may move toward a more advanced stage of normalization not as a complete historical reconciliation, but as functional normalization driven by necessity, based on an equation in which the force of economic and strategic interests takes precedence over closed historical approaches.