

Book review of ***Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation***, *Peace, Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 7, July 2005, available from <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk>.

Book Review

David L. Phillips, 2005, ***Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation***, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 168 pp.

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To review *Unsilencing the Past*, David Phillips's book about his endeavour to bring Turks and Armenians, and Azeris and Armenians together is a rewarding experience, particularly for those who are interested in Turkish-Armenian reconciliation and the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) conflict on Turkish-Armenian relations.

Phillips reveals firsthand information about the *Track Two Program on Turkey and the Caucasus* that was initiated during the Clinton administration, and the creation of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), "the program's centerpiece", (p. 3), on July 9, 2001. He also conveys to the reader his aim to bring Turks and Armenians together "to confront a tormented past and explore future cooperation" and dialogue. In addition, Phillips stresses that he aimed to promote mutual understanding and good will between Turks and Armenians and the establishment of neighbourly relations between Turkey and Armenia. He also believed that the *Track Two Program on Turkey and the Caucasus* would create a "context for civil society to develop mutual understanding with the goal of transferring their insights to decision-makers and shaping public opinion" (p. 1). Phillips expected that TARC would ultimately foster peace building between Turks and Armenians. The book narrates and analyses all these themes concurrently.

Unsilencing the Past is not an academic book based on research. It does not have a conceptual approach to explain the various themes mentioned in the book. For example, Phillips does not present various approaches to negotiation and mediation of conflicts. Instead, he emphasises Track Two diplomacy as an approach to break the logjam of non-dialogue between Turks and Armenians. Turkish-Armenian dialogue would probably

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have never succeeded without the plethora of Track Two diplomacy. Phillips gives a detailed explanation of the positions of TARC's Turkish and Armenian members and assesses their fundamentally different expectations of the Commission.

The book is not divided into chapters. Instead, Phillips uses descriptive headings to depict the political, diplomatic, security, economic, and humanitarian concerns and developments that he shared with TARC's Turkish and Armenian members. Moreover, Phillips shows profound knowledge about Turkish-Armenian issues and the deep distrust that the two peoples have toward each other. He also stresses that reconciliation and peacebuilding between Turks and Armenians can not be established without the resolution of the N-K conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, since the Azeris consider themselves to be Turks. Hence, Ozdem Sanberk's (a Turkish member of TARC) participation in TARC "ensured that Baku's interests would be looked after" (p. 39).

Throughout the book, Phillips stresses that reconciliation is a process and "it would take time to change the demonization of Turks by Armenians and the stereotyping of Armenians by Turks" (p. 32). The reconciliation process would be oriented toward the future. Reconciliation not only tries to find solutions to the underlying causes of conflict but also works to change the relationship between adversaries from that of hostility and resentment to friendship and harmony.

From the debates of TARC's members during the meetings that they conducted to enhance dialogue, one could conclude that reconciliation would not happen without

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justice. Without justice, peace can not be promoted. There are no miracle solutions for dealing with the repressive past and satisfying both sides to the conflict.

From TARC's story it is apparent that the Turkish and Armenian peoples in general, and TARC's Turkish and Armenian members in particular, lacked social capital, that is a culture of trust and cooperation that make collective action possible and effective.

Although TARC had no official status, as Phillips states, it was welcomed by the Turkish press in general, and initially supported by the government of Armenia and many Armenians in both the homeland and the diaspora.

In addition to the issue of lack of social capital, throughout TARC's story the security dimension is also raised and examined by Phillips. Concerning real and perceived security between Turkey and Armenia, Phillips refers to internal and external confidence building measures that would contribute to security.

According to Phillips, geopolitical events obviously affected the context in which TARC was conducting dialogue. Indeed, when Turkish and American political and economic interests diverged in Iraq, the U.S. administration used the Armenian genocide issue to exert pressure on Turkey to comply with U.S. policies in the Middle East.

Initially, TARC's creation was a priority on the U.S. political agenda. However, after the September 11, 2001 events and the Iraq war, the U.S. promoted its strategic interests in the Middle East and the Caucasus and failed to keep its commitment to peace building between Turks and Armenians.

TARC intended to unsilence the past to pave the way for structured dialogue and reconciliation between the Turkish and Armenian societies. The achievement of this goal was difficult because TARC faced an ethical dilemma. As the Turkish and Armenian members of TARC tried to leave their trenches carefully and image the future, they confronted the Armenian genocide issue. Phillips narrates how he tried to narrow the gaps between TARC's members. Hence, an agreement was reached between the Turkish and Armenian members of TARC to seek a legal analysis by the International Court of Transitional Justice (ICTJ) on the applicability of the 1948 U.N. Genocide Convention to the Armenian genocide.

Phillips ends his narrative by referring to the agreement of April 14, 2004 reached between TARC's members to stop their work as a reconciliation commission. With no bilateral talks between Turkey and Armenia, and with the waning of U.S. pressure on Ankara to open the Turkish-Armenian border, TARC was unable to exist any longer. The *Track Two program on Turkey and the Caucasus* was initiated not to substitute official diplomacy but to establish contacts with various officials to influence policy. From TARC's story, it seems that TARC suffered "when the U.S. government neglected its [i.e. TARC's] efforts because American priorities laid elsewhere." Phillips also says, "honest self-criticism leads me to believe that we relied too much on U.S. officials to support our efforts" (p. 148). However, Phillips does not leave the reader hanging in the air. There is an epilogue in the book to inform the reader that TARC succeeded in establishing a structured dialogue between Turkey and Armenians. TARC also "catalyzed diplomatic

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contact between Turkish and Armenian officials, laid the foundation for addressing the genocide issue, and brought a principled, treaty-based approach to opening the border” between Turkey and Armenia (p. 148).

Unsilencing the Past should be read as a primary source on TARC’s story. It is also an eyewitness account of the distrust and hatred between Turks and Armenians. It depicts accurately the obstacles that TARC tried to overcome. In addition, Phillips objectively presents the Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Armenian perspectives on the reconciliation issue. Phillips intends to say that without realising a balance between amnesty and retribution, and without creating trust between Turks, Azerbaijanis, and Armenians a sustainable peace and economic development would not be achieved in the south Caucasus. Hence, any peace plan by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is doomed to fail. Within this context, we believe that Phillips should have referred in more detail that Turkish-Armenian reconciliation can not be achieved without seriously addressing the security dimension of the conflict. This would enable the reader better understand the nature of the conflict and assess the political leverage of the regional powers on the direct participants in the conflict.

Phillips’s firsthand information and analysis are extremely useful in understanding the dynamics of Track Two diplomacy in conflict resolution. Other Track Two specialists may find some missing elements in this book, but for those who had followed TARC’s creation and endeavour through newspapers and other secondary accounts, the book is an indispensable source. Track Two practitioners, academics, and general readers who wish

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Turkish-Armenian relations should definitely read this profound, interesting, and

challenging book.