

France's policy on the Karabakh problem: from mediator to provocateur?

During the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia and after the end of the war, France was one of the countries whose policies on the issue were discussed the most. The statements of the French authorities and the decisions taken by this country were neither in line with international law, nor the mediator role of France in the problem, the basic priorities and principles of the EU, nor the decisions taken by international organizations, especially the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). But despite this, France insists on maintaining its negative policies. Azerbaijan and Turkey as well as the Natural France continues to react to this policy.

In fact, on the basis of France's approach to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia (the Karabakh issue with its short and common name), this country's general interest in the Armenian issue, its strategic interests in the Caucasus and the Middle East, the Armenian lobby in France, the European Union for the French rulers' countries (EU) and the roles they perceive within the framework of the global system and similar factors. France wants not to let its rivals lose the role of "patron of eastern Christians" that it has assigned to itself. On the other hand, in order to use it as an effective tool against the Ottoman Empire, effective policies were implemented on Ottoman Armenians, especially from the second half of the 19th century.[1]

Since the 1890s, Armenians settled in France collectively and used France as a center for education and organization, as well as a transition (expansion) point to Western Europe and the USA. Using the Armenian factor against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, France became one of the most active countries in the emergence and keeping alive of the so-called genocide allegations when it could not achieve its goals.

- France's interest in the Karabakh conflict

We see the name of France in the context of the Karabakh issue directly from the end of the 20th century. Interestingly, one of the steps that fueled the problem was taken in Paris. The fact that Abel Aganbegyan, the economic adviser of Armenian origin of the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, made a speech in Paris in 1987 regarding the unification of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region with Armenia, is recorded as one of the first provocative attempts to escalate the problem.[2]

The Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) convened in Helsinki on March 24, 1992, took a decision to hold a conference in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, in order to solve the Karabakh conflict, among the participants of the conference were Azerbaijan, the USA, Germany, Armenia, Belarus, Sweden, Italy, France, Turkey, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic composed of 11 countries, the name is indicated. Thus, France has been determined as one of the mediator states that should contribute specifically to the solution of the Karabakh conflict.[3]

Since the decision to hold a conference in Minsk was not realized due to the negative attitude of Armenia, France could not take an active role in this process at first, but nevertheless followed the developments regarding the Karabakh problem carefully. Even in early April 1993, after Armenia occupied the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan, it made statements condemning the occupation, albeit with a mild language.[4] However, despite the open report presented by the special rapporteur of the UN Secretary General, along with some other states, the Security Council tried to prevent Armenia from being openly accused in the decision on the invasion of Kelbajar.

With France becoming co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group since 1997, this country's role in



the Karabakh conflict has increased. According to the statements of the then President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, France wanted to be the co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, and the Azerbaijani side did not lean towards the proposal of France due to the effective Armenian lobby in this country. However, the French officials insistently emphasized that the Armenian lobby will not affect the policies of France, but the policies of Armenia through the Armenian lobby of France and promised to make a positive contribution to the solution process. Indeed, in 1997, French President Jacques Chirac made initiatives that almost brought about a peace agreement. On 10 October 1997, in Strasbourg, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia even made a joint statement that they were close to a solution and that they generally accepted the proposals of the co-chairs (the “progressive solution” plan).[5] However, after Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s resignation was forced to resign in February 1998 and Robert Kocharyan came to power in March 1998, he officially withdrew his positive response to the proposal for a “gradual” solution to the Armenian problem, and the peace attempt failed.

The peace talks, which weakened after the terrorist attack on the Armenian parliament in 1999, were revived when the leaders of these two countries were in France, due to the membership of Azerbaijan and Armenia to the Council of Europe in January 2001. Meetings were held with the mediation of Jacques Chirac and a joint press conference was held in Strasbourg and Paris in January 2001, and then in Paris on March 4-5, 2001.[6] Chirac expressed that he hoped that “the negotiations were carried out in a pleasant environment”, positive developments were made and that the peace agreement would be signed within the current year. According to the information released years later, the parties really came close to a solution, and even, about a month after these meetings, new talks were held in the USA, but “the opposition of some foreign powers” prevented the process from being successful at the last minute.

- France is part of insolvency, not solution

After this point, France's position in the peace process gradually weakened. French co-presidents visited the region within their delegations, French presidents made statements with the leaders of other co-chair countries or alone, but the role of France in terms of the solution of the problem was not as strong as before. In this sense, perhaps the last serious mediation initiative of France was the meeting between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Paris on 27 October 2014, with the mediation of President François Hollande. In the statement made about the meeting from the Elysee Palace, it was stated that the summit was the continuation of Hollande's visit to the Caucasus on May 11-13, and it was emphasized that France fulfilled its obligations as co-chair to find a peaceful solution to the Karabakh problem 20 years after the ceasefire. France has declared that it encourages the leaders of the two countries to intensify the necessary efforts for a permanent solution of the problem within the framework of international law principles and that the status quo in the region cannot be defended.

In the following period, the only important initiative in which the name of France specifically took place was the meeting between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia on January 16, 2019 in Paris.[7] Despite the statements criticizing the status quo of Hollande era, France has been a part of the insolvency, not the solution of the problem for the last 19 years. Especially during Sarkozy and Macron periods, he developed discourses and tried to take steps as if they betrayed his foreign policy principles and international law. It became one of the most important forces that provoked Armenia against Azerbaijan in July 2020, and during the war that started due to the provocations of Armenia as of September 27, 2020, it again acted against international law and the decisions of international organizations on the problem. Although there are those who attribute these steps of France (especially Macron administration) to the influence of the Armenian lobby in



this country, it is possible to guess that the main reasons are different. Admittedly, France, together with other factors on the basis of current policies in the Middle East and the Caucasus to be able to start to lose its influence in Kabul discomfort about the increase in Turkey's event, considerably work to sabotage this reason, the process of Armenia, with the possibility of departing this way from Russia the idea that he tries to "win" can have more say in the solution of the problem in the future if he can sabotage the full solution of the problem. It seems that France's bringing up unfounded accusations during the war, the French parliament's decision against international law after the war and the discourses of French politicians will partially work in terms of sabotaging the process. But France's much more to what extent Russia will reach its targets in a wider framework, Turkey, and will depend on the commitment to a permanent solution to the problem of Azerbaijan.

In fact, what was expected from France and other important powers was to act respectfully to international law, to ensure the implementation of UNSC resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884 on the Karabakh conflict, and to support Azerbaijan, which wants to do this if they cannot do it themselves. If they can't even do that, at least it was to stay silent. But it seems France could not achieve this either. In summary, France acts as a provocateur trying to undermine the solution process, while the state was officially on the list of mediators for the solution of the problem and even (as the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair), which was once working in this direction.

"They had a very good chance of keeping their mouth shut, but unfortunately they missed that chance." French President Jacques Chirac once used these expressions for European countries that supported the US invasion of Iraq. Nowadays, this sentence can be evaluated as the best summary of the situation that France has come to regarding the Karabakh conflict.

[1]Şenol Kantarcı, “Turkish-Armenian Relations Throughout History and the Emergence of the Armenian Question”,

http://dunyasavasi.ttk.gov.tr/upload/files/Ermeni_Kulliyat/9-Cilt/11-SenolKANTARCI.pdf, p. 200-2004.

[2]Thomas de Waal, Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war, New York University Press, 2003, s. 20.

[3]Araz Aslanli, the Karabakh conflict and Turkey-Armenia relations, Ankara, Berik Publishing House, 2015, p. 63.

[4]Nazim Cafersoy, Azerbaijan Foreign Policy in the Elchibey Era (June 1992-June 1993), Ankara, ASAM publication, 2001, p. 85.

[5]“Armenian, Azerbaijani presidents meet”,
<http://www.hri.org/news/balkans/rferl/1997/97-10-13.rferl.html> (8 Temmuz 2012)

[6]Araz Aslanlı, “The Karabakh Problem in the Light of the Latest Attempts of Global and Regional Actors: Is it Towards a Solution?”, Strategic Analysis, April 2001, p. 56.

[7]“Conflict resolution process”, <https://mfa.gov.az/en/content/111/conflict-helli-process>