**John Torpey** 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to international Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. Today we consider the eruption of a dangerous conflict in the majority Armenian enclave of Azerbaijan called Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey's involvement in that conflict. In order to address the conflict, we're fortunate to have with us today, David Phillips, director of the Program on Peacebuilding and Rights at Columbia University and a former foreign affairs expert and senior advisor to the US State Department and senior advisor to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. He chaired the Turkish Armenian reconciliation commission and the track 2 program in Turkey and the Caucasus. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today, David Phillips.

**David Philips** 00:59

John, thanks for having me on the podcast.

**John Torpey** 01:01

Great, great to have you. So as I indicated previously, Nagorno-Karabakh is an Armenian majority, almost entirely Armenian enclave in the middle of Armenia's neighbor to the east Azerbaijan. Can you tell us what's at issue in the current controversy and conflict?

**David Philips** 01:20

Ethnic Armenians remember the Armenian Genocide that occurred between 1915 and 1923 as though it was yesterday. Threats that Azerbaijan and Turkey made towards Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh precipitated a violent conflict. There were pogroms undertaken by Azerbaijan against Armenians in Baku and elsewhere, fighting erupted. It's a territorial dispute, not a religious or an ethnic dispute. Armenians simply feel threatened by Azerbaijan's aggressiveness. Their parliament voted to secede from Azerbaijan during the demise of the Soviet Union and there was a bloody war that was fought, during which almost a million people were displaced, mostly Azerbaijanis. Many tens of thousands died. Right now, Nagorno-Karabakh is controlled by ethnic Armenians. The recent conflict erupted as a result of aggressive actions taken by Azerbaijan, missiles that were fired against Nagorno Karabakh. Turkey has become involved. The Minsk Group, which includes the United States, Russia, and France, has been trying to mediate. But Tayyip Erdoğan the President of Turkey doesn't seem to be interested in international diplomacy. So right now, one of the most dangerous places on the planet is Nagorno-Karabakh. Unless there's a ceasefire, it could easily escalate, spill across the borders, involve regional actors like Turkey and Russia. The US has an interest in making sure that doesn't happen. The international community has an interest in making sure that ethnic Armenians don't suffer another genocide. So this is a flashpoint for conflict escalation.

**John Torpey** 03:16

So, I asked you about the stakes of a current controversy. And the first thing you said was that Armenians remember the genocide of 100 years ago, like it was yesterday. I think that's absolutely true. And I'd really be interested in hearing us talk a little bit more about how that shapes their perception of the world and how it helps shape conflicts like this one, and that one from the late 1980s, early 90s.

**David Philips** 03:43

So beginning in in 1915, there was a violent conflict within the Ottoman Empire. Russia got involved in defense of ethnic Armenians. Turkey and the Ottomans decided to deport Armenians not only from Istanbul but from eastern Anatolia. During the deportation, as many as 1.5 million Armenians were killed. There's been no reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia because Turkey denies its role in the mass killings. It says that it was a mutual tragedy, when in fact, the victims were ethnic Armenian. Until there's an acknowledgement on Turkey's part that it was responsible for what happened, Armenians are always going to suffer and they demand recognition. Many want reparations, some Armenian nationalists, look across the border between Armenia and Turkey at Mount Ararat and envision a greater Armenia. Even though it was 100 years ago, the wound that was inflicted by the Ottomans on Armenians is deep. The events occurred some time in the past. But to Armenians it seems like just yesterday. Until Turkey is prepared to address that Armenians will feel vulnerable and "never again" means something. They're not going to stand by and let either Turkey and or Azerbaijan commit another mass killing. At the root of today's conflict is a memory of what happened in the past.

**John Torpey** 05:32

Fascinating. But why is this happening now? Why exactly has this conflict bubbled up right now?

**David Philips** 05:40

Well, let's be clear. This is not simply a conflict between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. This is a conflict in which Turkey is deeply involved. Turkey has recently demonstrated a pattern of projecting military force. There are Turkish troops in Syria, in Iraq, in Libya. It's been aggressing in the eastern Mediterranean, looking for confrontation with Greece and with Cyprus. So Tayyip Erdoğan is flexing his muscles, looking to project power. This isn't just about Ottoman revisionism, or restoring the Ottoman Empire. This is a strategic and deliberate attempt by Erdoğan to distract Turks from the sorry plight that exists in their country. The Turkish Lira right now is trading at almost six lira to the dollar, the Turkish economy is stalled. There is no way forward for Turkey to regain its prosperity. Similarly, Azerbaijan is going through an economic crisis. Its revenues from oil and gas sales support the Azerbaijan economy, but with the depressed price of oil, Azerbaijan isn't seeing the cash flow that it had in the past. So it's very convenient to pick on Armenians as a distraction for both Turkey and Azerbaijan, signaling to domestic audiences that there are outside powers that are working to undermine Turkish and Azerbaijan interests. It's a well worn path for Turkey, to claim that great powers are trying to undermine it ever since the Treaty of Sadra in 1920. I hear it's blaming Russia for supporting Armenians. In fact, Russia is playing a double game, giving weapons to both Armenians and Azerbaijan. But overall, this is an effort by Erdoğan and Ilham Aliyev, to distract people from what's going on with their domestic economies. It's striking to me that you've described this relatively remote corner of what was once the former Soviet Union as one of the most dangerous places on the planet. And that has to do, as you say, with the other regional actors who might be drawn in. How do you see that playing out, and what can be done to mitigate and keep this conflict from going that direction? So in the broader context, there are disputes between Russia and Turkey, in northwestern Syria, Turkey intervened against Russian mercenaries and the Syrian armed forces. That bloody conflict has regional implications, as Russia and Turkey vie for influence not only in Syria, but other countries which they consider to be in their near abroad. One of those countries is in Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh is a convenient killing field for both Russia and Turkey to try to demonstrate their hegemony and their influence.

**John Torpey** 09:12

So another complicated aspect of this conflict is the fact that Turkey is a NATO member and Turkey for some of the reasons that you've been describing, under Erdoğan, has been going in a direction that's not particularly congenial, I think, to the rest of the European and American countries that make up the NATO alliance. Is Turkey going to have to be pushed out? Or is NATO itself going to unravel? Not necessarily because of this, but because it maybe has no mission, as some people would say, since the collapse of the Soviet Union? How do you see that aspect of this situation?

**David Philips** 09:54

So the North Atlantic Charter has no arrangement for evicting a member of the Alliance, no one ever dreamed that Turkey would go rogue and would be actively working against NATO interests, picking a fight with Greece, which is also a NATO member and buying sophisticated surface to air missile systems from Russia, with whom it's both an adversary and an ally. But John, let me just be very clear about one matter. Turkey is a NATO member in name only. If NATO were established today, because Turkey is Islamist, anti-American and hostile to human rights, it would never even be considered for membership. NATO is not just a security alliance. It's a coalition of countries with shared values, and Turkey right now as an outlier, and it would never participate in the alliance if it applied today.

**John Torpey** 10:54

Right. So, I mean, this also raises questions about American participation. Often in these kinds of situations in the past, the United States would have taken a leading role in trying to resolve and mitigate the conflict. Something you've written about this situation suggests that's not likely to be the case, in part because of potentially problematic involvement of the Trump family in business dealings in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the region. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**David Philips** 11:32

So in 1994, when the conflict ended in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia played a very constructive mediation role. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe established the Minsk Group, which included Russia, the United States and France as the mediators. Two days ago, the presidents of the US, Russia, and France called for a ceasefire. And Erdoğan's response to that was essentially to butt out, that Turkey would take care of this matter. So the influence and the capacity of the Minsk Group to conduct effective diplomacy has been diminished, mostly by Turkey's antagonism. It's also diminished by President Trump's uneven relationship in Turkey and in Azerbaijan. The Trump Organization has benefited financially from real estate deals in Turkey, to the tune of millions of dollars. Likewise, it's taken in revenue from a beauty pageant in Baku in Azerbaijan. So there's some serious questions about whether Donald Trump would act in his own personal and family interests or in the national interest. What's important to note is that the US has enormous leverage. It hasn't used its influence constructively during the current conflict. We can speculate as to why, but the financial involvement of the Trump Organization with Turkey and Azerbaijan may very well be a contributing factor.

**John Torpey** 13:27

That doesn't sound promising. I wonder whether you could talk a little bit about the UN's possible role in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, has the Security Council gotten engaged?

**David Philips** 13:39

So I'm not aware of any specific security council actions. But Russia is a member of the Security Council as a permanent member with veto authority. So anything that's gonna go through the Security Council is going to require Russian and US participation. Turkey is not a player of great influence in the UN context. So the UN has not become more deeply involved. Although Antonio Guterres has issued statements of deep concern. I don't see this being a UN matter, or frankly an OSCE matter. It's going to require the US and Russia to work together diplomatically, to send a very clear signal that there needs to be a ceasefire and a withdrawal of foreign forces. The US can also take important steps by suspending weapons sales to Azerbaijan. Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act requires Azerbaijan to stop its hostilities towards Armenia. Congress is very uniform in its views as to what needs to happen. So US leadership is called for. But whether or not the Trump administration is willing or capable of exerting that leadership is an open question. So far American involvement has lacked consequence. And we need to see in the future whether or not the Congress and the administration are going to be able to work together to address the situation.

**John Torpey** 15:27

Got it. So, I mean, all roads in your answer seem to lead back from Nagorno-Karabakh really to Turkey. And so maybe it'd be useful for listeners to hear a little bit about, you know, how Turkey has changed under Erdoğan. Erdoğan is seen as a modern day or contemporary sort of Ataturk, sort of larger than life figure in Turkish politics and Turkish life. But his view of Turkey's place and his attitudes, as you've suggested, towards religion, towards the religion of Turkey, which is Islam, has been very different from that of Ataturk. So maybe you could talk about the kinds of changes that have taken place in Erdoğan's Turkey, and what that means for its role, at least in the region.

**David Philips** 16:22

So Turkey was never a democracy. It was always a human rights offender, even under secular governments. So we should dispel with this notion of restoring democracy in Turkey. In the past, there was close security cooperation between the US and Turkey despite the gross abuses that Turkey was committing against its Kurdish minority. Particularly after the demonstrations in Gezi Park, Turkey has been cracking down on freedom of expression. It uses article 301 of its penal code to limit voices that are critical. So Turkey right now has become a gulag. Many people are imprisoned. Human Rights don't exist in Turkey for ethnic and religious minorities. There is a tendency for US officials to reminisce about Turkey of the past, when with a single phone call to the Security Council, US officials could get Turkey to do its bidding. That's simply not the case today. Turkey has become Islamist and hostile to human rights. There is a deep disdain towards the US for trying to tell Turkey what to do for expressing its concerns. Turkey really has gone rogue. And it's become one of the worst offenders of human rights in the planet. There are more journalists in jail in Turkey today than any other country in the world.

**John Torpey** 17:59

That's striking. I mean, there was a coup, a so-called coup attempt, several years ago that led to the arrests of lots and lots of people in teaching, in the bureaucracy and various parts of Turkish life that seemed to have been a major opportunity for Erdoğan to consolidate his power. I mean, is that how you see that, and what has come out of this supposed coup attempt?

**David Philips** 18:27

So I'm glad you use the term "the so-called coup", because there's some serious questions as to whether or not the coup was credible. It was apparently undertaken by members of the military with ties to Fethullah Gülen, a former ally of Erdoğan with whom Erdoğan did considerable business, enriching both Gülen and Erdoğan and his family. The Turkish military is nothing but efficient. And when this so called coup was launched, there are some serious questions about how it was organized. The coup plotters arrived at Erdoğan's hotel after he'd already checked out. They apparently control the Air Force, but Erdoğan's presidential plane was allowed to take off. It wasn't shot down out of the sky. It landed in Istanbul. There was no credible effort to control the media and the message. Sadly, we've developed some best practices and conducting coup d'etats over the years and Turkey failed all those best practices, which really gives rise to an important question: Did Erdoğan engineer the coup? Did he uncover it and then use it to crack down on opponents? More than 100,000 Turkish civil servants allegedly involved with the Gülen Movement have been dismissed. There are more than 50,000 former government employees who are in jail, the coup is, in Erdoğan's word, a gift from God, because it gave him justification to crack down and target his opponents. So we really need to see the coup as it is and raise serious questions as to its credibility.

**John Torpey** 20:18

Yeah, so that was indeed the basis of my characterization of this, the so called coup or supposed coup. So at the time, it certainly seemed to help him consolidate his position in Turkey, but now you say that Nagorno-Karabakh situation is a response to his sort of problems that he faces in Turkish society. Could you talk a little bit about how you see him coming out of this situation at present?

**David Philips** 20:47

So the broad popular support for Erdoğan has been gradually diminishing. Last year, he lost local elections in Izmir and Ankara and Istanbul. This is a result of gross corruption by Erdoğan and his family, as well as mismanagement of the economy. There are police recordings of Erdoğan and his son Bilal plotting how to get rid of millions of dollars of ill-gained assets. The son in law, Berat Albayrak, is responsible for the country's economic recovery. His performance on the job has been far from stellar. So it's convenient to solve a problem by creating a bigger one. I think that partly explains Turkey's adventurism in its near abroad. And once you start projecting power and military assets, it's hard to stop. Azerbaijan is just the newest theatre for Turkey's engagement. And targeting ethnic Armenians always plays well with grey wolves and other Turkish nationalists who blame Armenians and others for dismembering the Ottoman Empire. So, here we are at a critical crossroads. What to do with Turkey? How to address its aggression in the region, and most recently in Nagorno Karabakh? The US has adopted legislation called CATSA, Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions. When Turkey bought a sophisticated s 400 missile system from Russia for billions of dollars, it was required to impose sanctions on Turkey, but the Trump administration was unwilling to do so. When the Congress also voted overwhelmingly to recognize the Armenian Genocide, both the House and the Senate, there should have been sanctions attached to that. But the Trump administration has stood in the way. So there's a really broader question here, John, why is the US acquiescing to Turkey's aggression? Not only has the Trump Organization benefited in the short term, but given the fact that there are $400 million worth of debt that the Trump Organization is carrying, what future promises have been made between Erdoğan and Trump? Serious questions about both Turkey's integrity and Trump's integrity.

**John Torpey** 23:27

Well, alas, this is not the only country with which Trump is thought to have problematic relationships that may make him more compliant or pliant as a foreign policy matter. But this is going to be difficult to find out certainly in the near future. So I'm curious if the UN is not involved, if the United States is perhaps hamstrung by its leadership's position relative to Turkey, I mean, what about Europeans? I know you said the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, can't really do much. But there are after all, millions of Turks in Europe as migrants, and particularly in Germany, and they must all have a concern about this situation. Can they do much of anything?

**David Philips** 24:20

So, you're right to identify Germany, there are 3 million Turkish nationals in Germany, but at least a million and maybe 50% of the total are ethnic Kurds. Yesterday, the European Commission met; there's a debate going on in Brussels about imposing sanctions on Turkey for its military aggression against Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. France is the major proponent of sanctions. Austria is also strongly on board. Germany is resisting. So it's unlikely that we're going to see any robust action coming out of Brussels. But they should take the bull by the horns and recognize that Turkey is a strategic adversary and impose sanctions. The only way to bring about a change in regime behavior, or a regime change in Turkey, is for its economy to crater further. If Europe implemented sanctions, and the US did the same, through CATSA, or other legislation, it would have a huge effect on domestic politics in Turkey. I think we can all agree right now that Erdoğan is a bad actor. And the sooner we can remove him from the scene, through either democratic or non-violent process led by Turks, the better off Turkey in the world will be.

**John Torpey** 25:50

Technically, Turkey is still a candidate for EU membership. I suppose it's impossible to say that that's going to happen anytime soon.

**David Philips** 26:01

So the European Parliament voted a couple years ago to suspend candidacy negotiations. And what's most important to recognize is that the EU countries share values. Those values are different than the values that Erdoğan has, and which are demonstrated in Turkey today. So the notion that Turkey is going to be joining the EU anytime soon, as far fetched, Turkey's become an outlier. Even within NATO, there are serious questions about its place. And on Capitol Hill, there's a big debate going on about how to handle the negative trends in Turkey. In response, Turkey has turned to China. It's sought closer cooperation with Russia, but now in Syria and in Azerbaijan, Turkish and Russian interests are opposed. And there is military confrontation. So Turkey's future is very uncertain.

**John Torpey** 26:55

As is that of Nagorno-Karabakh. And I want to thank you for providing lots of insight about the origins and background to this conflict and the role, that Turkey's playing in it, which is obviously very problematic and worrisome. But that's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank David Phillips for taking the time to discuss the complexities of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons.