

Problems and Solutions in the Karabakh Conflict: From the Beginning to Today*



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ABSTRACT

The Karabakh conflict –which had preoccupied regional and global powers for a prolonged period– has once again become the center of attention with the Second Karabakh War that started on September 27, 2020. Despite the end of military operations, it is clear that this conflict, which lasted for more than 30 years, will not be solved immediately, and that there will be long arguments during the peace negotiations until the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is secured. From the very beginning of the conflict, long-drawn meetings were organized, and many works have been published in academic and popular literature about the issue. However, there is a significant lack of studies that holistically address the historical, ethnic, cultural, religious, political, and legal aspects of the problem. One could argue that the matters of foreign relations, political history, ethnic composition, religious characteristics, and the economic life of the people living in Karabakh are of particular importance in understanding not only the background of the conflict but also its trajectory and possible outcomes. Such matters have shaped a large part of the arguments of the opposing sides, especially in the early days of the conflict. Despite the difficulties in dealing with these matters all at once, it is possible to establish an overall opinion on the causes and the progression of events by revealing the connections between the major topics at hand. In this work, an attempt is made for a more holistic approach to the matter by taking into consideration certain points that are often overlooked in the heat of political arguments.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, conflict, Karabakh, peace building

SINCE THE LATE 1980s, KARABAKH HAS BEEN one of the most frequently discussed regional conflicts in the international arena. Yet, despite the visibility of this issue, Karabakh as a topic remains fairly distorted, either due to lacking information or as a result of differing perspectives. This situation is closely linked with the legacy of historical processes as well as today's political atmosphere.

Before examining the historical background of the Karabakh conflict, it should be noted that as a result of the political preferences of intervening external powers, the conflict was not resolved fairly since 100 years and was left to fester until it finally broke out once more in 1988. Thus, the current conflict is a natural consequence of a one century-long political and military enforcement. This historical process is of great significance considering that the same players are in the field today.

Another set of important factor to consider is today's political alignments along with the conflicting interests and prejudices (e.g. Turcophobia, Islamophobia, fears about a unified Eurasia) of the countries involved.

This study adopts a holistic approach to evaluate this issue by reference to historical and current political alignments.

Geography, History, and Anthropology

Nagorno Karabakh (otherwise known as Upper Karabakh) was not the historical name used to describe this area and was first used in 1920. Karabakh was a whole until then with its valleys, mountains, and high pastures. The valleys, and high pastures, and mountainous regions, which are known as summer (*yaylak*) and winter (*kishlak*) camps, respectively, in pastoral nomadic terms, constituted two different but inseparable

elements of the same living space as they did in many other regions of the Turkic world. Each clan, tribe (*boy*), and tribe confederation had a designated area to occupy during two (sometimes even four) seasons. The size of the territories might change with the size of the population and the herd, certain historical claims, and political and military power. But the main principle (dual summer-winter life) remained unchanged. For this reason, the owners of each area were well-known and the territories were mostly named accordingly (someone's summer camp, winter camp, etc.)

Naturally, the same situation could be observed in the Caucasus region. The range of seasonal migration of the Turkic tribes of Southern Caucasus ranged between 30-40 km and 100-150 km. The longest migration route was between Borchali and Ganja, while the shortest were within the Karabakh region. The tribes who passed the winter around the low valley regions moved toward higher altitudes with spring's coming thereby avoiding hot temperature and disease, as well as providing far better grounds for their animals to graze. Out of this way of living emerged a specific type of civilization and socio-economic structure which, in the past, was defined under different terms such as the Horse-mounted Nomadic civilization, the Nomadic civilization, the Steppe civilization, or Turan civilization.

For many Turkic tribes of Karabakh, the region seemed whole, with its wide, fertile valleys and high pastures. The ownership of these pastures and valleys belonged to these tribes. Lower regions were called "aran", and the upper regions, "yaylak" or simply "the mountain". In other words, Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh was not the term used by the locals and could not be used as a political or administrative term either.

Turkic tribes had been living in the lower region for much of its known history. In the upper region ("Nagorno Karabakh"), there were pastures that belonged to these tribes and among these (also partly in the lower region), lived Christian communities. Thus, the lower and the upper regions of Karabakh constituted a socio-economic whole and belonged to the Turkic tribes. Therefore, the absence of permanent settlements in the upper region (*yaylak*) means that the land is neither "vacant" nor idle. When compared with the sedentary village organization, the valley settlement (*aran*) could be defined as "the village", and the high pastures, as "the area of economic activity".

Christians in Karabakh

The Christian communities mentioned earlier are also important in the context of this topic. Beginning with the late Middle Ages, there is a mention of "five *meliks*" (lords) in Karabakh, referring to the small administrative units of five Christian communities, largely located in the Upper region. Territory under the control of one of these *meliks* would be called *meliklik*. There were five *meliklik* in total and therefore they were called *hamse* (five) *melikleri* in local sources (e.g. *Ferzeliyev, 1989; Ahundov, 1991*). The local ruler was called *melik*. While these rulers, who sometimes had limited autonomy, were appointed officials initially, the title of *melik* later became hereditary and remained in the family. The territory under the rule of a *melik*, even in relative comparison, was not a large domain and could be described as a town or a district in today's language. Among these domains which were comprised of ten to twelve villages on average, and there was only one (Khachin) that had two to three times the number of villages in other *meliklik*s. This historical background would help to

better illustrate the current administrative and demographic conditions by taking into account the fact that the number of Turkish villages in the regions of Karabakh today is between 80-100. Authentic information on the meliks – collectively called “Karabakh-nama” – is found in many sources of the time dealing with the history of Karabakh.

All 5 of these *meliklik*s were Christian and, for this reason alone, are defined as Armenian today. However, historical data reveals that none of these have significant ties to Armenianness in origin. This was an indisputable fact for the serious and non-politicized researchers of ancient times. Among the Melik lineages, only the Meliks of the Cross were indigenous, and the others were those who came to Karabakh from other regions (Melikstvo, 2020). However, it is clear from the sources that one of them is from the village of Nic in the province of Şirvan in terms of ethnic origin, and the others are from Christian Turks. However, European and Russian researchers who interpret belief as the main identity element and present-day Armenian sources (regardless of sectarian differences, cultural traditions, naming, and other linguistic features) present all these as Armenian. (Calalyan, 1989: 3-4). A significant part of the disagreement regarding this subject arises from these distortions.

In light of these data, it is necessary to focus more, not on the ethnic differences in the region, but on the differences of religion and sect. The translation of these differences into ethnic and religious conflicts began with the interest of the European states and the Russian Empire in the region in the early 1800s. Just before this period, however, important developments took place in the territory of Karabakh. The establishment of the Karabakh Khanate and some related events coincide with these years.



Asgeran Castle, built by Khan of Karabakh Ibrahim Khan in 1787. (Virtual Karabakh website)

Karabakh Khanate

The Karabakh region was subordinate to the Turkish states ruled by the Safavid dynasties in the 16-18 centuries and later by the Afshar dynasties. In the middle of the 18th century, Nadir Shah made some administrative and demographic changes in the region. Panah Ali Khan, who was previously in the service of Nadir Shah, was an aggressive and entrepreneurial person who provided important services in the military field. When Nadir Shah died in 1747, the central power weakened and the administrative stability was shaken, which led to territorial disintegration. A total of around 20 independent or semi-independent states were established. In this atmosphere, Panah Khan came to Karabakh with 200 warriors and laid the foundations of the Karabakh Khanate. He enabled local Turkish tribes who had been exiled to Khorasan and other regions during Nadir Shah's period to return to their homeland. Panah Khan was able to dominate the whole of Karabakh (including 5 meliks) from the first years when he established the khanate.

Panah Khan took measures to develop the region and to strengthen regional military capabilities. In this context, he established several castles and fortresses. The first of these was Bayat Castle, which was constructed in 1748. Later, Şahbulak Castle (1751-1752) was constructed. Panah Khan barely survived in late 1748 after defending Bayat castle for a month, which was besieged by neighboring khanates. After those events, he looked for a more advantageous position in a strategic sense, after Bayat Castle proved itself strategically insufficient for the defense of the region. Finally, he built a fortress on a plain on a mighty rock between mountains. The castle, which was originally called Penahadad, was soon named Shusha. The foundation of Shusha, which today people call “our thousand-year-old city”, was laid by Penah Khan in 1752.

In the following period, the Karabakh khanate established close relations with the Ottoman, Qajar, and Russian administrations as well as with neighboring Turkish khanates and Georgia, facing periods of both war and peace.

The Russian Occupation of the South Caucasus

At the beginning of the 1800s, the first troops of Russia, which had been interested in the Caucasus for some time, began to land in the region. Previously, an alliance agreement (1883) had been made with Tbilisi. On May 14, 1805, a treaty was made with İbrahim Halil Han, who was the current Karabakh Khan. According to the treaty, which declared in the first line that it was signed by “*Şuşalı ve Karabağlı İbrahim xan ve Bütün Rusiya orduları infanteri generali, Qafqaz müfettişliyinin infanteri müfettişi kont Pavel Sisianov*”,

İbrahim Khan was attached to Russia and the Russian Emperor accepted the integrity of the state and the country in return, as well as

pledging that İbrahim Khan and his successors would remain in power in Karabakh (The Treaty of Kurakchay, 2020).

Later, two more important treaties were made. After the Russia-Iran war in 1804 through 1813, the Treaty of Gulistan (October 12, 1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (February 10, 1828) were signed between the Qajar State and Russia. These treaties determined a significant part of the state borders that have been preserved since then.

Of course, Tsarist Russia, which was much more active against the small states in the South Caucasus, did not care about the sovereign rights of these states and turned them into provinces despite the relevant treaty articles. Instead, the members of the dynasty were granted some privileges in the fields of education and career.

Russian Revolutions, the USSR and Karabakh's Disintegration

After that, there was no significant change in regional administrative or power structures until 1918. When the central authority collapsed in Russia as a result of the February and October revolutions in 1917, separatist tendencies accelerated in the region, and finally, independent states were established. In the South Caucasus, first a joint administration, and in May 1918, the states of Georgia (May 26), Azerbaijan (May 28), Armenia (May 29) declared their independence.

In these circumstances, Zangezur (the area between Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan today) and Karabakh came to the fore for the first time as a topic of discussion between Armenia and Azerbaijan. To put it briefly, the Azerbaijan National Council, which made an agreement with the Armenian National Council on giving Yerevan and its surroundings to Armenia so that it can estab-



Map of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, 1918-1920. (Virtual Karabakh website)

lish an independent state, did not make any more territorial concessions, and in the end, the entire Karabakh remained within the boundaries of the People's Republic of Azerbaijan, which was officially recognized by the great states participating in the Paris Peace Conference. Armenians revolted in Karabakh on March 22, 1920, and serious conflicts took place. Finally, on April 28, when Russian (Bolshevik) troops occupied Azerbaijan and entered Karabakh, a new situation occurred.

Before the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), on July 5, 1921, at the meeting of the Caucasus Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party, it was decided that "Nagorno-Karabakh would be considered to be within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and granted autonomy along with making Shusha the administrative center." But at the time this decision could not be implemented. After the establishment of Soviet control in all

three states in the South Caucasus, the Southern Caucasian Federation was established and autonomy proposals regarding Nagorno-Karabakh were brought to the agenda in this context. The South Caucasus Federation had issued official decisions dated October 27, 1922, and December 22, 1922, to accelerate the agenda.

After the establishment of the USSR, the process took momentum and Azerbaijan accepted the situation and announced on July 7, 1923, that the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was established within the borders of the Azerbaijan Republic.

Although there has been no development regarding the administrative or legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh for a significant time after this date, some revisions were made regarding the powers of the autonomous government within the scope of a decision taken by the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR on June 16, 1981 ("Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast").

The Final Days of the USSR: The Games of Gorbachev and Yeltsin's Russia

In the period of “glasnost and perestroika”, which was initiated by Gorbachev’s leadership of the USSR in 1988, Armenia and the Armenian diaspora led important initiatives. For this purpose, many organizations were established and intensive propaganda activities were initiated. The idea that Nagorno-Karabakh should be given to Armenia was first expressed semi-officially by the Armenians towards the end of 1987 in some national and international platforms and thus the Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions were initiated. On February 20, 1988, at the extraordinary meeting of the Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast a decision was made to take DKMV from the Azerbaijan SSR and connect it to the Armenian SSR; ergo, the trigger of separatism was pulled. On December 1, 1989, the Armenian SSR and the Karabakh National Council announced in a joint meeting that the DKMV was linked to Armenia.

As a result of these developments, an administration called the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province Special Administration Committee, which is directly subordinate to Moscow, was established by the initiative of Gorbachev personally to reduce the tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan, to improve the region, and to preserve peace. Gorbachev appointed Volski to lead this initiative. The efforts of this Special Administrative Committee resulted in the further strengthening of the Armenians in the region and the escalation of the conflict. Thus, the initiatives of Gorbachev’s Moscow, who first fanned the fire of the conflict and then became a mediator, played into the hands of the separatists.

In a period when developments of this type often turned into armed conflicts, the Azerbaijani side thought that separatism had reached

advanced stages and tried to take hard decisions to cancel the autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1991. The Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians declared the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on September 2, 1991, with Khankendi being the center. Azerbaijan declared that this initiative was illegal.

In parallel with the developments in Karabakh, pressures were applied to the Azerbaijani Turkish people living within the borders of Armenia. The Turkish population, who could not bear the pressure and inhumane deeds, started to migrate to Azerbaijan from the beginning of 1988. By the end of the same year, there was no longer a Turkish population in Armenia. According to official data, 310,000 people, and according to the evaluations made by Azerbaijani activists based on local sources, more than 500,000 people were displaced and degraded into refugees. Therefore, while the Azerbaijani administration was trying to cope with separatism in Karabakh on the one hand, it was forced to deal with the problems of the large mass of immigrants coming from Armenia on the other. (In a short time, Turkish immigrants from Georgia were added to this problem, and the reason for their displacement was also the extremist Armenian groups operating in the region claiming that Southeast Georgia belongs to Armenia.)

Having to fight against Armenian aggression and separatism at home and abroad, and dealing with the problems of refugees who flocked from all sides, the Soviet administration at the head of Azerbaijan, unfortunately, could not overcome these difficult challenges. Poor decisions were made and the solution to these problems was sought from Gorbachev’s administration, which was the very source of these problems in the first place. Civil society initiatives and constructive solutions were all blocked.

Starting from the end of 1989, the APF became an important authority that deals with the solution of almost every problem that Azerbaijan was facing and which the public looks to with hope, sometimes in cooperation with the government, sometimes by guiding it, and sometimes despite it.

In this complex atmosphere, a process called the “population operation” started to occur spontaneously in Azerbaijan. Intellectuals, who formed the core of this operation, first started to organize in associations, then realized that this was insufficient as the challenges increased and the situation became more difficult, and the view of gathering in a single, broader-based organization prevailed. Thus, the Azerbaijan People’s Front (APF) was established, which later gained a notable reputation.

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The APF formed defense battalions in the areas subjected to Armenian military attacks. Similar units that were formed before the APF later joined the APF and continued to fight.

As a result of many socioeconomic, political, and military processes throughout the Soviet era, the state began to break down in mid-1991. The states that formed the union began to decide whether to continue in the USSR by holding referendums. The Declaration of Independence was

published on October 18, 1991, in line with the results of a popular vote held in Azerbaijan. In December 1991, the USSR was formally dissolved.

The Karabakh Problem in the First Years of Independence

After the dissolution of the USSR, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict did not stop, but it was no longer a “domestic issue” of a state like the USSR and acquired an international status. From 1991 to February 1992, conflicts continued along almost all of the Azerbaijan-Armenia borders in Upper Karabakh. Especially in early 1992 when Armenian attacks on Nakhchivan could only be stopped at the expense of great loss. On February 26, 1992, Armenian troops, acting together with a Russian mechanized regiment, carried out the Khojaly massacre (which, according to many, was more than a genocide).

After the Khojaly genocide, Azerbaijan’s Soviet-era President, A. Mutallibov, could not withstand the reactions of the people and fled the country, taking refuge in Moscow. The President of the Assembly acted for the state administration for 3 months. The period until the election was held was the darkest in the recent history of Azerbaijan, the most open to external manipulations, and full of excitement for the idea of achieving real independence and opening to the Turkic World. During the negotiations with the National Assembly and the Government throughout March, the APF insisted on forming a coalition of the existing government, and thus resolving the crisis the country was in, without holding an election for a year. In the end, the Assembly, which made a decision that was not useful to the conditions of the period, found it appropriate to hold the presidential elections. The elections were decided to be held on June 7, 1992.



Ebülfez Elçibey, President of Azerbaijan between 1992 and 1993.

Meanwhile, Mutallibov, who recently fled the country and took refuge in Moscow, returned to Azerbaijan early on May 15 with the support he received from Moscow, hoping to regain power. The next day, popular reactions led by the APF expanded to the streets. On May 16, Mutallibov had to leave Azerbaijan once again. It soon became clear that these disturbances were intentional and planned by the Armenians and their partners in Moscow. During these turbulent days, two extremely important cities, Shusha (May 8) and Lachin (May 18), which had resisted for a long time, were captured by the Armenians. Those incidents further increased tensions. People took to the streets and started to demand immediate action and liberation from occupation.

The president of the Azerbaijan People's Front and presidential candidate, Abulfaz Elchi-

bey, won the elections held under these difficult conditions and took over the country's administration. Shortly after he took office, Elchibey quickly started to implement firm decisions on Karabakh. In July-August 1992, Azerbaijani troops cleared many regions of Upper Karabakh from the invaders and took up positions in front of Khankendi. But after that, it was almost impossible to move forward. The most important reasons for this situation were the inadequacy of the regular army units that were just being formed and the sabotage of foreign-linked senior officers.

In the following period, some negotiations and diplomatic moves were made. But there was no real progress.

In March 1993, Armenians, again with Russian-backed troops, launched intense attacks on Kalbajar. Within days, they made significant progress, and eventually, the townspeople were forced to leave the area. The Armenians only allowed 10 hours to leave the region, which of course was impossible. Therefore, great massacres occurred. Within such an atmosphere, Elchibey asked Turkey to send several helicopters to evacuate people. This request, however, was rejected.

The US Intervention

After that, the Elchibey administration, which intensified its diplomatic efforts, succeeded in taking the UN's resolution 822 dated April 30, 1993. According to this decision and three decisions adopted in the following months (no. 853, 874, 884), the entire region was defined as Azerbaijani territory and the Armenians were required to evacuate the region. Although these decisions, which are still not fulfilled, were an important diplomatic success, they did not produce actual results and the clashes resumed.

The so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which was not recognized by any state (but openly supported by countries such as the USA, France, Iran, Russia, etc.), became the base of activities such as drug trafficking, terror training, and smuggling.

In June 1993, a coup attempt was launched in Azerbaijan, and when this coup, which is known to be supported by Russia, progressed and the country faced a civil war, Elchibey left the capital and withdrew to Nakhchivan to wait for events to settle down. In the meantime, the National Assembly, citing the absence of Elchibey in the capital, discussed the proposal to transfer the powers of the president (as required by the constitution) to Heydar Aliyev, who was the President of the Assembly at the time, and in line with the decision taken, Aliyev was deputized to act as president. Elections were held after a short time and Aliyev was elected president.

Shortly after Aliyev took over the powers of the president, Armenians resumed attacks in Karabakh, and districts such as Akdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, and Gubadli were occupied by the Armenian army within a few months. Thus, almost all of Karabakh was captured by the Armenians. The Azerbaijani people became immigrants in their own country. Armenians were brought from Armenia first and later from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which was not recognized by any state (but openly supported by countries such as the USA, France, Iran, Russia, etc.), became the base of activities such as drug trafficking, terror training, and smuggling.

The last important attempt to liberate the Azerbaijani lands was made in early 1994, nonetheless, after the violent clashes, no result was achieved. In this atmosphere, the parties were convinced of a ceasefire agreement and that agreement was signed on May 5, 1994. This cease-fire agreement has been violated continuously from that day until September 27, 2020, and sometimes by large-scale clashes (such as April 2016 and July 2020).

A Failed OSCE Project: The Minsk Group

In this process, the Minsk Group was established, and its status and activities have always been controversial. When the peaceful solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was proposed for the first time at the Helsinki meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Council of Ministers on March 24, 1992, the view of holding the Minsk Conference for this purpose was adopted. During the OSCE Summit held in Budapest on December 5-6, 1994, the co-chair system was adopted for the Minsk group. While different countries were presided in the first 3 years, since January 1, 1997 (until today) the co-chairmanship of the Institution was held by three states: the USA, Russia, France. The countries, who joined the group as the conflict parties of Azerbaijan and Armenia, are as follows: Germany, Belarus, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Turkey, and Finland.

During its existence, the Minsk group brought 3 different packages to the agenda, the first two of which were not accepted by Armenia, and the last that was not accepted by Azerbaijan. However, it is stated that certain principles have been determined within the scope of the peaceful resolution of the conflict. The work of the Minsk

Group, which produces continuous round definitions and complex solutions, has been mostly criticized, especially in the Azerbaijani public opinion as it is considered as “swinging the balance”. Particularly commentators and observers, acting on the fact that the pro-Armenians predominate in the press and diplomatic circles of the group co-chair countries, often stated that this system would not yield results. Indeed, in 27 years, unfortunately, not even a single step has been taken. And finally, the UN resolutions were realized by the force of the Azerbaijani army.

The Karabakh Problem in the Context of Regional and Global Powers

Since the region in question was within the borders of the USSR, the USSR and then its successor the Russian Federation, after 1991, played a primary role in the incidents. The person who stated in a semi-official voice for the first time that “Nagorno-Karabakh” should be given to Armenia, was Professor Abel Aganbegyan, who also served as an economic consultant to the Kremlin at that time. Aganbegyan explained this at length in a speech he gave in Paris in November 1987, and when the sound recording of the speech reached Azerbaijan, important protests took place in the capital Baku centered on the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (AMEA). The author of these comments, who worked in AMEA at the time, participated in all relevant processes and had the opportunity to observe from the very beginning.

In the following days, when conflicts broke out in Karabakh, the economic situation of the Armenians in Karabakh was extremely poor and the Kremlin, alleging that people wanted to leave the region because of this, made large monetary transfers to the regional budget. Ergo, they supported the separatist terror, knowingly

or unknowingly. Subsequently, by establishing the Special Committee headed by Volski, mentioned above, they reset the sovereignty rights of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic over its territory. After the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Russia, which exploited the military and economic opportunities in the region, supported the separatist movement, both economically and militarily. Finally, Russia became Armenia’s partner in Khojaly massacre. This may not have been a state policy, of course, but since none of the military personnel involved in the incidents were investigated, different interpretations will always exist.



Russian President Vladimir Putin with President of the Republic of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan, March 5, 2020. (President of Russia website).

During the 27 years that followed, Russia expressed its approach in a way that would not upset both sides, “accepting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan” like other countries, without however making any attempt to ensure this integrity. To most observers, Russia did not want the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be resolved

so it could maintain its influence in the region. Meanwhile, they tried to make Armenia fully dependent economically. On the other hand, Russia watched over Azerbaijan, keeping it close by different means (strengthening personal ties with the administration, granting it important privileges in Russia, being “generous” in arms sales, etc.) As a result, although Russia was closer to Armenia, it tried not to alienate Azerbaijan.

In fact, under normal circumstances, Russia –a Russia “looking at its roots, searching where it came from”, as Putin recently stated– should not have trouble with the Turkish states by giving such support to Armenia. However, it seems that there are pressures of various circles on the Kremlin, and the more Russia will lose blood as it yields to the influence of these circles.

The way in which the Russo-Turkish cooperation in that period has overcome this deadlock created by Western-collaborationist elements within Kremlin circles offers hope to the entire region.

Those who ruled Russia during the late 1980s and 1990s –as prominent Russian commentators often say– did not act in the country’s interests, but from Western-based discourses and EU-US interests. In this respect, the Gorbachev-Yeltsin period was a dark period for the USSR and all of its balances, but especially for the peoples of the Asian region. During the 1990s, called the “transition period”, the interests of these nations –as well as the Russians themselves– were ignored, and their collaborationist approach accelerated and deepened regional conflicts, economic collapse, and cultural degeneration. In this atmosphere, not surprisingly, the

incidents in Karabakh were made more complicated, and the problem quickly gained an international character. Developments show that this was a planned operation, not an accident.

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Another important state related to the Karabakh question is Iran, which has not been mentioned up to this point. Iran was an observer of these incidents and attempted to intervene from the beginning. Iran deals with the issue in several ways. First of all, what is happening in a neighboring country is of course important to Iran. Also, the Azerbaijan question is Iran’s most sensitive issue, possibly even its weakest spot. Even referring to the name of Azerbaijan disturbs many circles in Iran (same with Greece and Macedonia). This is because a larger part of historical Azerbaijan was located within the borders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the other hand, the renewal movements and nationalist movements that were seen in Northern Azerbaijan throughout recent history had quickly resonated in South Azerbaijan and affected the Iranian state significantly.

Considering that Iran was ruled by the Turks for about 1,000 years, it was impossible that the establishment of an independent state in Northern Azerbaijan would not affect the Turks in Iran. Given that this group constitutes approximately half of the total population and is the largest ethnic element of the country, it was unthinkable for the Iranian state to remain indifferent to the developments. Armenia was unconditionally supported exploiting the problems of the Republic of Azerbaijan with Armenia and deploying the same official discourse for the

management of Azerbaijan on South Azerbaijan as a legitimizing excuse. These were indeed excuses because Iran always regarded Azerbaijan as a potential threat and gave support to both Armenia and the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh republic during the later period. For years, negative broadcasts have been made regarding Azerbaijan through Iran's official and semi-official media organizations. (Such broadcasts even mentioned that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were "martyred" in the first days of this last war).

Additionally, each rapprochement and joint work between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and other Turkish Republics has been labeled by Iran as "Pan-Turkism". However, one should note that Azerbaijan and other Turkish states have not attempted to prevent Iran from establishing very close relations with Tajikistan in Central Asia, without accusing Iran of pursuing a "Pan-Iranist" policy of expansionism. Iran's approach, while trying to base its relations with Azerbaijan on Shiite sectarian policies that deny Azerbaijan's national identity, has always encouraged and supported separatist terror in Armenia and Karabakh. Of course, some joint projects have been carried out with Azerbaijan from time to time, but these initiatives have not been capable of changing the general trend. In the latest war that started on September 27, 2020, Iran supported Armenia with its words and actions in the first days. However, this support was not continued as Iran felt the need to develop a relatively stronger discourse on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Although Georgia initially tried to remain neutral, especially in the period 1989-1992, and especially with the influence of Armenian circles within the central administration, the Armenians in the South and Southeast regions close to Armenia as well as Georgia witnessed serious

attempts to evacuate the Turkish population in Georgia and forcefully encourage their immigration - like in the case of Armenia. These policies failed with the active involvement of the APF, and soon it was seen that Georgians began to support the Azerbaijani thesis. This was because the Armenians had begun to make territorial and autonomy claims in Georgia, too. In subsequent years, Georgia tried to maintain a positive relationship with both Azerbaijan and Turkey to find allies in the struggle against Armenian allegations and to overcome the economic problems. In the last war, both the Georgian public and the state administration supported the struggle of Azerbaijan.

Pakistan is among the first countries to support Azerbaijan, which already is the closest supporters of both Azerbaijan and Turkey in key issues.

One of the countries close to the region, Ukraine, has been supporting Azerbaijan for the last 5 years. Ukraine has taken a firm stand in favor of Azerbaijan since the first day of the last war and provided explicit support, not only against Armenia but also by criticizing Russia's influence in the region and its sensitivity towards Armenia. The reason is obvious: with a similar process, Ukraine first lost Crimea and has been facing a separatist threat in its eastern provinces for a long time.

Pakistan is among the first countries to support Azerbaijan, which already is the closest supporters of both Azerbaijan and Turkey in key issues. It should be said that this support is a great source of morale for the Azerbaijani people.

Turkey's situation is perhaps the most interesting issue in this context. There is an image of cooperation for reasons such as neighborhood, ethnic and cultural affinity, and shared strategic interests. But almost all the people in Azerbaijan and the majority in Turkey, have adopted the slogan of "one nation, two states" and have outgrown the limits of mutually beneficial cooperation. There is now solidarity between the two parts of one nation.

There were not many surprises in the approach of the EU member states to the incidents in the region. In particular, Greece and France unconditionally supported Armenia. Armenia's relations with the EU are essentially regulated through these states. Additionally, France uses its influence on the Armenians in Russia through the Armenian diaspora in the country and tries to lead the pro-Western, liberal, and collaborationist circles in Russia in this way. Considering the Armenian factor while examining the pro-Western circles in Russia and considering the pro-Western influences when evaluating the situation of the Armenians is, therefore, important. Ergo, the EU, and especially France uses the Western and liberal circles within the Armenian diaspora in Russia. An important part of Russia's support to Armenia stems from the consistent pressure of these circles put on Moscow. A similar situation is valid for pro-American circles in Russia; they also have an important share in Russia's support to Armenia.

As expected, the most active global power in the region is the USA. The USA was involved in the region from the very beginning. It gave open support to the Armenians after 1991, and deprived Azerbaijan of annual grants for newly established independent states on the pretext

of "blockading Armenia". It thus imposed sanctions on Azerbaijan, whose international trade was interrupted due to the war. Subsequently, the United States made substantial annual grants to the Nagorno-Karabakh Administration. The U.S. Armenian diaspora, of course, played the most important role in this process.

These are the main players in the region regarding the Upper Karabakh conflict. Germany was not mentioned because its position is unclear and unlike France, it usually acts under the umbrella of the EU. Of course, there are certain accounts of other important actors such as China, India, and Arab states, but for the time being, they have not sided with any party or expressed an explicit interest formally.

New Era: Determinations and Expectations

What can be said about the current situation and its aftermath, after a glance at what has been taking place since the recent history of Karabakh, i.e. separatist activities and recurring conflicts?

The active conflict that started as a result of the violation of the ceasefire regime by Armenia on the morning of September 27, 2020, turned into widescale war and lasted for 44 days. The war, which was ended with the trilateral declaration of Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia in the morning of November 10, changed the 27-year status quo, and a new era has begun

- Many problems, which have been the subject of 27 years of talks and negotiations, were solved after 44 days of war (7 districts around the Upper Karabakh were rescued by Azerbaijan.)
- A part of Upper Karabakh and the city of Shusha, which is the most important settlement for Azerbaijan, were saved.

- Demands in UN resolutions have been fulfilled and, in this case, nothing contrary to UN principles was done.
- The Minsk Group, whose efforts for 27 years have not yielded any results, has continued to be ineffective during this latest war.
- Turkey has stepped in assertively as a balancing power against Russia, which has been active in the field so far.
- It has been observed that the EU does not intervene in the actual situation and cannot change the situation in the future.
- Although the United States of America has not put forward a clear stance so far, it will affect developments in the Russia-Turkey axis requiring them to take a stance accordingly.
- By continuing its policies to support Armenia, especially at the beginning of the war, Iran has lost all its influence and prestige on the Azerbaijani public.
- On the other hand, the prestige and importance of Israel in Azerbaijan have enhanced.
- Azerbaijani people's interest in Pakistan has increased and friendship ties have been improved.
- Azerbaijan-Turkey unity and integration were realized on the base.

It was understood that the anti-Azerbaijan-Armenia opposition would continue in the 2 + 2 format, which has been voiced by some circles right after the Ceasefire Agreement on November 10. Here, the Armenian party's insistence on rejecting Turkey's constructive role seems to be a problem.



The latest situation in Karabakh on November 25, 2020.

It is seen that some challenges have been expressed both by Azerbaijan and Armenia regarding the content of the agreement, in terms of the visible gaps and the way it has been implemented. Without belaboring the details since the incidents in Armenia have been widely covered in the media, it would be sufficient to remember that the Armenian population defines this agreement as “submissive”, “loss of gains”, “betrayal”, etc., and that the Armenian people took to the streets to protest the government.

For the Azerbaijani party (especially in the first few days), the only dissatisfaction was related to the halting of the operation “2-3 days before complete victory”, and the postponement of the liberation of the entire Upper Karabakh to an uncertain date. Nevertheless, the people interpret the military operation as successful, acknowledging that an important military victory has been achieved. However, during the one-week implementation period, Russian power in the region, trying to pursue a supplementary agenda other than peace-making under the name of a “humanitarian package”, have triggered negative repercussions on the Azerbaijani population. In addition to this, the upcoming arrival of the Turkish forces that are expected to serve in the region arouses concerns on the part of Russia. But it would not be too optimistic to say that doubts and concerns will disappear soon. The fact that at the time of writing, the draft regarding the duty of Turkish soldiers in Azerbaijan was accepted by the Turkish Grand National Assembly.

Possible Results of the Three-Way Agreement and Building Peace

When it comes to the possible outcomes of the agreement, it should be said that there are different expectations for Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the events that will develop will take shape accordingly.

Moreover, to promote Turkey-Russia cooperation by spreading it to wider areas will be beneficial for the region, and ultimately the world. Otherwise, it is impossible to establish peace and talk about sustainable development and peace in these lands.

In the next steps of the peace process, more progress towards the normalization of Turkey-Russia cooperation is a fundamental prerequisite. Although it seems likely that this cooperation may encounter some difficulties at first, as in the case of Syria before, it is undoubted that it will settle in time and can be successfully carried out with the efforts of both sides.

Ultimately, there is hope to see the benefits of the 2 + 2 format for the region, to minimize the interference of external forces that are unaware of local conditions and fundamental problems of the people in the region. Moreover, to promote Turkey-Russia cooperation by spreading it to wider areas will be beneficial for the region, and ultimately the world. Otherwise, it is impossible to establish peace and talk about sustainable development and peace in these lands.

The inclusion of Iran in this format is also mentioned from time to time, especially by Iranian officials. However, in the context of Iran's approach towards Azerbaijan, it seems difficult for this to take place for the moment. At the current point, it seems impossible for the Azerbaijani public to accept Iran's involvement in the process. This is always going to be difficult unless Iranian elites mentally accept the existence of Azerbaijan as a sovereign state and nation, and their independent, Turkish, secular identity. However, if the problem is overcome, of course, as an important power of the region, Iran will be able to use its power to contribute positively to the process.

Regarding the recognition of the “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”, Armenia has desired from the beginning to preserve a “security belt” consisting of seven districts around it. Of course, this request is impossible. It is the product of an approach incompatible with international law.

As for the Upper Karabakh and the situation of the Armenians living there, this is Azerbaijan’s domestic issue. Here, Armenia can establish similar relations to those with larger Armenian communities living in other countries (Russia, France, USA, Argentina, etc.) To go beyond this would be to interfere with the internal affairs of Azerbaijan, which is legally unacceptable.

Azerbaijan’s key demands following the declaration of the peace agreement can be summarized as follows:

- Armenian troops will be removed from all points within the borders of Azerbaijan.
- The Upper Karabakh will not be given any special status. All residents who will live there –Armenian or Turkish, no matter what– will live freely as citizens with all the rights and obligations accepted by Azerbaijan.
- Armenia is meant to pay indemnity to Azerbaijan both in return for the last war and in the amount to be determined by taking into account the illegal income obtained from the underground and aboveground resources of Karabakh for 30 years.

This indemnity issue is very important for Azerbaijan because the mineral deposits –including gold and silver deposits– and agricultural areas of Karabakh were used extensively and the revenues from these sources were determined as 53.5 billion USD according to UN sources.

Additionally, hundreds of cultural monuments including temples, libraries, and museums were plundered and destroyed. Mosques were either demolished or used as pig barns. Almost all the buildings in the region were dismantled to their foundations, and their materials were transported and sold. All this has a price according to international law, the Azerbaijani side insistently demands that it be paid. One could also imagine that the total amount, including the costs of the last war, could reach several hundred billion.

It would be the most important guarantee of peace and prosperity in Armenia if it establishes friendly relations with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia by abandoning its unjust territorial claims on these countries –as well as the allegations of genocide against these countries, Turkey in particular.

Azerbaijan, which saved its lands from 30 years of occupation and ensured its territorial integrity, will certainly advance towards the rule of law and democracy, which the people have long missed, and will provide an environment for the smooth development of all religious and ethnic identities not only in Karabakh but throughout the country. 🌸

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