THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR: RUSSIA VS. TURKEY?

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Abstract
The Karabakh region and surrounding territories—occupied by Armenia for the last 26 years—represented a classic “frozen” ethno-territorial conflict in the post-Soviet world. The conflict erupted in September 2020, and Azerbaijan managed to liberate the occupied territories. This article examines the causes and consequences of the recent Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. After summarizing the historical origins of the conflict, the article offers an analysis of four main causes that renewed hostilities. The 44-day war resulted in a military victory for Azerbaijan and catastrophic defeat for Armenia. The outcome not only shook up the Armenian political establishment, but also revealed a contentious dimension in the alignment between Turkey and Russia. The article concludes by analyzing the motives of Turkey’s extensive involvement in the conflict and the Russian-imposed truce deal, both of which are likely once again to freeze the dynamics that hold the central parties hostage to Russia.

The second Karabakh war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis was fought over claims to the mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Thousands of people were killed and many homes, bridges, religious sites and schools destroyed. While Azerbaijan has focused on maintaining its territorial integrity and freeing it internationally recognized territories from occupation, Armenia has insisted on the principle of self-determination for the Karabakh Armenians. This latest war was a response to the failure of the first one (1992-94) to resolve the conflict. In the first Karabakh war, Armenia occupied seven districts of Azerbaijan adjacent to its Karabakh region. The Armenian occupation resulted in 30,000 deaths and the ethnic cleansing of 700,000 Azerbaijanis from Karabakh and the adjacent regions. It was a devastating defeat for the newly independent Azerbaijani state. Azerbaijan has always stated that it was ready to offer Nagorno-Karabakh the highest degree of autonomy within its internationally recognized borders. However, the Armenian side rejected autonomy, wanting to annex the region and adjacent
territories to Armenia. Azerbaijan pinned its hopes on the international community and diplomacy to restore its territories; it waited for 26 years, but these hopes were dashed. After the July 2020 clashes, the Azerbaijani leadership decided that war was the only way to reclaim its territories. Armenia provided the necessary pretext by attacking Azerbaijan on September 27, 2020. The humanitarian catastrophe experienced during the 44-day war could have been avoided had Armenian politicians sought a compromise.

The territories over which the two sides cannot come to terms are recognized by the international community as part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The position of the international community is based on four United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions (822, 853, 874, and 884), which were adopted in 1993. The resolutions recognized Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions as part of the Republic of Azerbaijan and called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces from the occupied territories. Similar statements have been made since then by many other international institutions, including the UN General Assembly. However, the UNSC resolutions have not been implemented, and negotiations between the two countries have failed to deliver any breakthrough. Against this backdrop, tensions gradually soared, leading to the existing trouble between the two countries.

To explain the causes and consequences of the second Karabakh war, which started on September 27 and ended with the Russian-imposed truce on November 9, 2020, we briefly examine (1) the historical context of the claims of each side; (2) the causes of the war through process tracing of the major events; (3) the role of the two major regional powers, Russia and Turkey; and (4) the nine-item truce agreement and its potential consequences.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

As a result of Russian expansion and the defeat of the local Karabakh Khanate, the Treaty of Kurekcay (1805) was signed by Khan Ibrahim of Karabakh and Russian General Pavel Tsitsianov, acknowledging Russia’s dominion over the Khanate and Karabakh’s integration into the Russian empire. In the 19th century, there were periodic waves of mass Armenian emigration from Iran and the Ottoman Empire into Karabakh, while Russia expanded into Iran and occupied eastern Anatolia in 1828. These events transformed Karabakh’s demographics over the next century. By the 1910s, the majority of the mountain-dwelling Karabakh population comprised Armenians, but adjacent villages and cities were also inhabited by Azerbaijani Turks. When the Russian Empire collapsed, three ethno-nationalist groups—Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis—declared their independence. The Azerbaijani Democratic Republic declared its independence on May 28, 1918, including Karabakh within its territorial borders, which the new independent states of Georgia and Armenia accepted as legal. However, the independence of regional states did not last long; they were occupied by Soviet Russia in the early 1920s.

In 1923, following the establishment of Soviet rule in the region, the mountainous part of Karabakh, inhabited by Armenians, became the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast within Soviet Azerbaijan. Thus, the term “Nagorno” (“mountainous” in Russian) was introduced into the administrative division of Karabakh. This was the first time in history that the
Karabakh region had enjoyed autonomy. Although some experts claim that the Karabakh region was given by Josef Stalin to Azerbaijan in the early 1920s, this claim has no factual basis. During the Sovietization of the region, some Armenians pressed a claim on Karabakh. However, the consensus of the Soviet leadership was to leave Karabakh within Azerbaijan due to cultural, economic and demographic reasons. Moreover, Azerbaijanis have always regarded Karabakh as their historic homeland—the cradle of Azerbaijani culture, where a large majority of their poets, composers, artists, cultural figures and intellectuals originated. In short, the Karabakh region, which was inhabited by Armenians and Azerbaijanis, was never part of Armenia, and has always been an integral part of Azerbaijan. However, the Armenian population always looked for an opportunity to unify with Armenia. According to the 1989 Soviet census, 189,085 people lived in the Karabakh autonomous region, of which 145,450 (76.92 percent) were Armenians, and 40,688 (21.52 percent) were Azerbaijanis.

Once the Soviet Union collapsed at the start of the 1990s, Armenia launched a full-scale war against Azerbaijan and occupied the Karabakh region, along with seven Azerbaijani-populated districts. The war, which resulted in the ethnic cleansing of up to 700,000 Azerbaijani citizens and left 30,000 dead, lasted until May 1994, when the countries agreed to a ceasefire through the mediation of Russia. As a result of its catastrophic defeat, Azerbaijan was shattered and a major portion of its population displaced, leaving the once proud Azerbaijani identity deeply resentful of Armenians. The loss of the cradle of Azerbaijani culture, the city of Shusha, combined with collective guilt and shame to sow the seeds of a new wave of nation-state building, with the goal of liberating ancient cities.

While Azerbaijani society was paralyzed by defeat, Armenia, emboldened by victory, refused to compromise. This transformed the peace negotiations into a means of protecting the status quo and consolidating the occupation. Armenia established a subordinate structure in the occupied territories called the “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” (the Republic of Artsakh) with the hope of winning international recognition and thus legitimizing the occupation. To the disappointment of the Karabakh Armenians, this entity was never recognized by any UN member, including Armenia itself.

Since then, Armenia and the influential global diaspora of Armenians have rallied either for the recognition of the Karabakh “republic” as an independent state or supported its unification with Armenia. Levon Ter-Petrossian, Armenia’s first president and a man who stood out as a thoughtful statesman, called for compromise, in addition to establishing relations with Turkey. However, the Armenian diaspora refused, and Ter-Petrossian had to resign from his post in 1998. He was replaced by the Karabakh nationalist leader Robert Kocharian, who rejected any compromise with Azerbaijan. Ter Petrossian had told Armenians, “It happened in Bosnia. The Serbs lost everything. I don’t think that the maintenance of the status quo is a real option … I do not think that Karabakh is capable of forcing Azerbaijan to its knees, because it will have to seize Baku.” His geopolitical wisdom, focusing on long-term thinking, was rejected by irredentist Armenian nationalist leaders, and Ter-Petrossian, unfortunately, was sidelined.
maximalist demands of the Armenians prevented a peaceful solution.

RECENT FIGHTING

Several factors have sustained this conflict and its most recent eruption: (1) the failure over the past 26 years of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the main international mission tasked with the coordination of the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve the conflict; (2) the aggressive rhetoric of Nikol Pashinyan, the current prime minister of Armenia, who has declared that Karabakh is part of Armenia; (3) the July 2020 skirmishes that resulted in the killing of an Azerbaijani general, along with several military officials; and (4) pressure from the Azerbaijani people on their government to restore their territorial integrity.

The Minsk Group, co-chaired by the United States, Russia and France, failed to resolve the conflict according to the principles and norms of the OSCE, the UN Charter, and the UNSC resolutions. Armenia’s desire to consolidate control over not only the region that previously belonged to the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast but also seven adjacent Azerbaijani districts, discouraged them from meaningfully participating in the negotiation process. The settlement formulas proposed by the Minsk Group, based on the UNSC resolutions, were not welcomed by the Armenian government because they would have meant the withdrawal of Armenian military forces from the occupied Azerbaijani territories. On the other hand, Armenia interpreted the geopolitical situation in the region as a sign of continuous Russian support for the existence of Azerbaijani territories under the control of Armenia. The subsequent Armenian governments failed to read the changes in the geopolitical environment of the wider South Caucasus region, especially the tri-lateral relations among Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

Russia has taken a leading role by demonstrating that the Caucasus is legitimately inside its backyard as a national interest, therefore conveying the right to negotiate a solution to this conflict. Russia’s alliance with Armenia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Armenia’s economic dependence on Russia, and the existence of a Russian military base in the territories of Armenia further complicate the international dynamics to the detriment of efforts to resolve Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The impasse has aggravated the animus on both sides and imparted a false sense of security to Armenians, who saw Russian support as a signal that the occupied territories are part of their country and that the issue had already been resolved.

Russia has been the main supplier of arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), a think tank that monitors military spending worldwide, oil-rich Azerbaijan spent more than $24 billion on arms between 2008 and 2018. Armenia, with limited resources, has received cheaper and older Russian weaponry, some donated. It spent a mere $4 billion during the same period, but allocated one-fifth of its annual state budget to spending on arms. Nevertheless, the alliance with Russia allowed Armenia to acquire otherwise expensive arms at cheap prices, significantly strengthening the country’s defensive capabilities.

The second cause relates to the policies of Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 via a popular uprising with the goal
of developing closer ties with the West to counterbalance Russian influence. \(^{13}\) Pashinyan represented a significant break from the hardline Karabakh Armenians who had dominated the state of Armenia since the war in the 1990s. At the outset, he signaled an intent to resolve the conflict, which the Azerbaijani government welcomed. According to recently declassified information, the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan at that time had engaged in secret negotiations over the settlement process. \(^{14}\) However, after consolidating his power at home, Pashinyan abruptly abandoned this approach and called for the unification of Karabakh and Armenia, declaring “Karabakh is Armenia, period.” \(^{15}\) Unlike the previous Armenian leadership, he worked hard to destroy the framework of the Minsk Group and rejected the step-by-step process. \(^{16}\)

Pashinyan’s irredentist rhetoric not only angered the Azerbaijanis, it also provided the reason for Azerbaijani political opposition groups to challenge their own government. The accusation: 30 years of ceding historic cities of Azerbaijan to Armenia, an act that implied the conflict had been resolved for the sake of the Armenians. Pashinyan’s raw nationalist rhetoric on behalf of his country, which included calling eastern Turkey an “historic land of Armenia,” angered the Turkish government as well. Tensions reached unprecedented levels when the Armenian government officially marked the hundredth anniversary of the defunct Treaty of Sevres, which would have dismantled the Ottoman Empire at the end of the wars in the 1910s and divided Ottoman territories, including Turkey, into several pieces. \(^{17}\) The treaty never entered into force and was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. \(^{18}\) However, in August 2020, Pashinyan proclaimed the Treaty of Sevres as historical fact and insisted, “We are bound by duty to remember it, realize its importance and follow its message.” \(^{19}\) Amplifying this stance, Armenian Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan called for a “new war for new territories” during a meeting in New York with the Armenian diaspora. \(^{20}\) The Turkish security establishment read these statements as Pashinyan’s intent to spread the conflict to Turkey and, provoked by Pashinyan’s confrontational rhetoric, Ankara decided to support Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani public and government apparently concluded that peace negotiations were never going to result in the return of their occupied territories. The point was confirmed in their view by attacks on civilians and the killing of a popular Azerbaijani general and his colleagues in a missile attack near the previously negotiated ceasefire lines of July 2020. \(^{21}\) The Armenian attack was a test run to gauge Azerbaijani resolve. It activated public opinion in Azerbaijan, propelled by the public display of grief at the funerals of the fallen soldiers and then by a massive demonstration in Baku and other towns demanding a corresponding response to Armenia’s aggression. Protesters shouted, “Liberation of Karabakh” and “Martyrs do not die; the homeland will not be divided.” Some protesters reached the parliament in Baku, caused some damage and called upon the government to act. The pro-war protests signaled a public concerned that the government of Azerbaijan was not taking the conflict seriously enough to fight for the repatriation of the contested territories. The protests strengthened the hand of the Azerbaijani political opposition, which echoed the public sentiment in favor of decisive action. Thus, Azerbaijanis bonded quickly around the premises and prospects
of nationalism, igniting dormant passions behind the goal of integrating the occupied territories into the homeland.

Pashinyan’s visit to Karabakh on August 5, 2019, and his open declaration that it is part of Armenia, destroyed all hopes for a peaceful solution. Turkey concluded that there was no room for a peaceful resolution and thus openly supported the Azerbaijani right to defend its territories. Turkey worried about the potential for public anger to deepen the leadership crisis in Azerbaijan and lead the most powerful Caucasian country into a downward spiral into uncontrollable political crises. Pashinyan’s statements about Karabakh, his visit to the Karabakh city of Shusha—considered by Azerbaijanis to be the cradle of Azerbaijani culture—and his declaration that Shusha would remain part of Armenia dashed any hopes for a negotiated solution.

TURKEY’S ROLE

Although international media and Armenian representatives, along with France, have blamed Turkey for instigating the current conflict, there is no concrete evidence that would suggest this. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s combative personality and his international posture have made him subject to criticism in Europe and the Middle East. True, Erdoğan never hesitates to use gunboat diplomacy when he deems it necessary. However, he did not instigate this conflict and was not involved in the ceasefire negotiations. Yet he exposed the Minsk Group’s failures and Armenian intentions to annex the occupied territories. Indeed, he has fully supported Azerbaijan, offering to provide whatever assistance the country needs—a position that aligns with both Azerbaijani and Turkish public opinion. Erdoğan has always been critical of the failure of former Turkish leaders to act resolutely on the side of Azerbaijan. His position reflects a sense of guilt on the part of the Turkish state for failing to help Azerbaijan during its most fateful period in the early 1990s, a point to which Erdoğan has referred previously. For instance, Turgut Özal, president during the height of the war in the 1990s, refused to provide aid to Azerbaijan and even declared, “Azerbaijanis are closer to Iranian culture and they are Shia; we are Sunni.”

Several factors help us understand Turkey’s shift from indifference to Azerbaijan to full support as a strategic partner: (1) the Turks’ view of the Azerbaijanis as ethnic kin whom they are obligated to support; (2) the fact that Azerbaijan is not attacking another country but seeking to restore its own territorial integrity—a cause that for many Turks is morally and legally just; (3) the ingrained and politically motivated feeling among the majority of Turks that Armenia has always been subservient to Europe and Russia in its quest to restore its status as a major power; and, most critical, (4) the role of economic relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The recent wave of nationalism is behind Turkey’s current assertive foreign policy. As its public becomes more nationalist, so do the policies of its government. Erdoğan has allied himself with the nationalist party of Devlet Bahçeli to secure the winning bloc in parliament and in presidential elections. This alliance has had a major impact on foreign policy. The Karabakh conflict has provided an opportunity for Erdoğan to display his nationalist qualifications and enhance his legitimacy before Turkey’s nationalist voters. Moreover, from the perspective of international law, Turkey has had firm grounds to choose the side of Azerbaijan; Baku is seeking to defend its homeland.
and territorial integrity.

As Armenians have worked tirelessly to see their suffering during World War I recognized as genocide, the Turkish public has consistently distanced itself from the Armenians, whom they regard as a tool in the hands of Turkey’s enemies to weaken the country and destroy its hard-earned positive image. Unfortunately, the use of Armenian suffering by the US Congress or the European Parliament against Turkey in well-publicized formal resolutions has not helped to elucidate an unbiased historical account of what occurred to raise Turkish consciousness and diplomacy in the region. Whenever these countries have thought they were aggrieved because of Turkey’s actions, both historical or current, the response has often been to frame it as Turkey’s unwillingness to recognize the events of 1915 as genocide.

Perceived as abusing the historical record by acknowledging that atrocities affected all groups in the relevant territories during the wars, contemporary generations of Turks have chafed at the insistence of Armenians to return repeatedly to the events of 1915 as the source of their grievances. Moreover, Armenian attempts to justify the occupation and ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijansis as revenge for the events of 1915 forced the Turkish public to identify with the cause of Azerbaijan. Erdoğan, in this instance, is not shaping public opinion but responding to it. Rather than seeking to understand the societal image and standing of Armenia and Armenians in Turkey, more than a few experts and scholars are quick to blame Erdoğan for exacerbating this conflict.

Finally, the economic and geopolitical situation compels Turkey to support Azerbaijan. Although Turkey and Azerbaijan describe their relationship in terms of “one nation with two states,” their economic interdependence has played a critical role in changing its dynamics. As a growing economy and population, Turkey is an energy-dependent country that buys most of its oil and gas from Azerbaijan. Moreover, the major Azerbaijani oil and gas pipelines pass through Turkey, which has been collecting fees from them. The two countries built the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and two pipelines to integrate their economies, and Azerbaijan is the biggest investor in the Turkish energy sector. Its state-owned oil company, SOCAR, owns the biggest refineries in Izmir. The trade volume between the two countries is close to $5 billion and likely to increase to $15 billion by 2024. As Turkey becomes more dependent on Azerbaijani oil and gas, its foreign policy will reflect these facts. Economics helps us to understand Turkey’s unquestioned support for Azerbaijan but does not explain why the recent war broke out.

RUSSIA, CAUSE AND CONTROL

The Caucasus is a region of global economic significance, as gas and oil pipelines run through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Georgia has had poor relations with Russia since the 2008 war, which resulted in the fragmentation of Georgian territory when Russia occupied and recognized the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Azerbaijan has pursued a sophisticated foreign policy by recognizing Russia’s hegemonic role in the Caucasus, and Baku has taken care not to provoke Russia. Yet, while President Ilham Aliyev has developed cordial relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he has also cultivated ties with Turkey, Israel and major European countries. In return, Russia has tried to keep Azerbaijan close, emphasis-
ing to Aliyev that Moscow holds “the key to the Karabakh conflict.”

A major cause of instability in the Caucasus seems to be Russian imperialist nostalgia; Russia still sees itself as a “great power” and treats the Caucasus as its backyard. Moscow’s heavy-handed imperialist policies, however, have resulted in the losses of Ukraine and Georgia, and the possible loss of Azerbaijan. According to Armenians such as Pashinyan, Russia’s main goal has been to keep the Karabakh conflict in limbo so that it can reduce Armenia to a “vassal state” while ensuring Baku does not follow a foreign policy independent of Russian interests.29 Russia has a military base in Gyumri, Armenia, and Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan were closed in 1993 as a result of the first Karabakh conflict. This, in turn, has ruined Armenia’s economy. Its able-bodied young people are emigrating to Russia, Europe, and the United States. The more vulnerable Armenia becomes, the more it risks lapsing into the vassal status that Russia desires. Armenia is the poorest state in the Caucasus, with a failing infrastructure and a shrinking population, evidence of how irredentist Armenian nationalism has destroyed the country’s social fabric and well-being, and compromised its independence from Russia.

Upon Russia’s arrival in the Caucasus in the 19th century, its main challenger was Iran, followed by Turkey. Today, Turkey enjoys excellent economic relations with Georgia and has close ties with many north Caucasian Muslim communities. Turkey is home to more than five million Muslims from the north Caucasus who were ethnically cleansed or deported by Tsarist Russia.30 As Russia is seeking to restrain Turkey’s backyard in Syria, Turkey is also seeking to expand its influence in Russia’s southern and most vulnerable border regions. Today, the Russia-Turkey relationship has been damaged by disputes over Syria and Libya, though the two regularly find some common ground for addressing their differences. Erdoğan and Putin respect each other. Yet, there are numerous disagreements between them. Turkey has never recognized the Russian annexation of Crimea and defends the rights of Crimean Tatars. As Russia becomes more dependent on oil and gas—a commodity whose market prices have declined, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of green-energy commitments around the world—it is becoming economically more vulnerable. Today, Russia sells raw materials and buys most of its goods from China. This is not the global image it prefers to portray, and Turkey is not what it was in the early 20th century—the sick man of Europe. As Russia continues to anger the people of the Caucasus with its excessive aggressions, it will ironically open more opportunity spaces for Turkey and other countries in the region to exploit.

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

During the 44-day war, the Russian public overwhelmingly remained on the side of the Armenians. This indicates the deep-seated prejudice against the Turks in Russian political consciousness. The enduring rivalry between Turkey and Russia is important to understand, as it reveals the orientation of the current Karabakh conflict. In Russia’s national myth and character, the Turks in general, and Turkey in particular, have taken a historical role of significant geopolitical consequence. Russia and the Ottoman Empire were at war in 1569–70, 1676–81, 1687–99, 1710–13, 1736–39, 1768–74, 1787–92, 1806–07, 1809–12, 1828–29, 1853–55,
1877–78, and 1914–17. Yet, Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey were allies. Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin economically and militarily supported the Turkish war of independence against European imperialist forces. Moreover, the contemporary borders of the Caucasus were, more or less, determined as a result of negotiations between Lenin and Turkey’s Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Turkey remains the principal destination for persecuted Muslims from Russia. Moreover, Turkey is the guarantor of two autonomous regions: Ajaria in Georgia and Nakhichevan in Azerbaijan. Contrary to some claims that Turkey is seeking to challenge the Russian position in the Caucasus, Ottoman Turkey was in the Caucasus before the Russians arrived in the region in the 19th century.

As Russia expanded its eastern and southern borders into the territories previously held by Turkic groups, its history and identity were shaped by this long series of conflicts. The perception of Russian threats comes from these wars that each Turkish student encounters in school. Russia has remained the enemy in the construction of the Turkish nationalist identity since this image was consolidated with the Cold War. When co-author Yavuz was a student in the provincial town of Bayburt in the 1970s, the aggressive colonizing image of Russia as the Turks’ main enemy was part of both the official and unofficial curricula. Relations between Erdoğan and Putin are rooted in this historical background. Although history does not explain everything, the constructed memories and images of the past do play an important role in how the two sides see each other.

People adapt accordingly and expand their preconceived images through social, cultural, economic, educational, and political interactions. When these are negative, the images become solidified. Today, neither Turkey nor Russia can completely free itself from the images of the past. Nor is either country captive to its past. Perceptions of Russia are much better than they were previously in Turkey, while any residual negative images might easily be mobilized to explain Russia’s imperialist designs in the Caucasus or the Middle East.

Moreover, there is a shared feeling in Europe and the United States, though perhaps not in Baku or Ankara, that Russia is a declining power in the Caucasus. Turkey has been careful not to challenge Russia directly, but Ankara is also acutely aware of Russia’s limitations in the region. If Russia allies itself completely with Armenia or fails to respect the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, it is more likely to lose Azerbaijan and turn Armenia into a “garrison state” in the service of Russia. Today, Azerbaijan is much richer and more developed than in the 1990s, when it was defeated and lost 20 percent of its territory. Azerbaijan’s military is also better trained, and its morale projects national confidence.

A “CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS”? The Armenians portray Azerbaijanis as Turks and treat them as children of the Ottoman Empire. David Laitin and Ronald Suny explain that “much of Armenian identity is wrapped up in what they have suffered at the hands of the Turks, and since the Azerbaijanis are ‘Turks’ (Azerbaijani is a Turkic language), hostility felt toward one people is transferred to another.”

Azerbaijani Turks were not part of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and were never involved in the events of 1915, which the Armenians consider genocide. This hostility has been regularly...
activated to justify Armenian irredentist nationalism. During the Karabakh conflict of the early 1990s, Laitin and Suny note, “Armenian militias along with civilian compatriots systematically cleansed [of its indigenous Azerbaijani population] the corridors separating Armenia from Karabakh in a cold-blooded campaign.” The hatred of Turks was thereby transferred to the Azerbaijanis, who became the victims of systematic killings and ethnic cleansing.

Pashinyan prefers to portray the conflict as a war between Muslims and Christians, claiming that the Turks had to be stopped in Karabakh or they would seize Vienna again. His rhetoric echoes that of two convicted genocidal Serbian leaders: Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic. Pashinyan wants to defend his occupation of another country and ethnic cleansing of 700,000 people on the basis of orientalist images of Muslims and Turks. Yet, in this conflict, the Islamic Republic of Iran is fully supporting Christian Armenia. Meanwhile, Turkey, Israel, Great Britain, and Hungary are supporting Azerbaijan.

This is neither a religious nor a civilizational war. The rhetoric ignores that this is a war over territory and a conflict of two rival nationalist movements. Pashinyan has gone on to claim that Armenia is defending the “West” against Turkey because Turkey wants to again be at the gates of Vienna. This orientalism and “otherization” of the Azerbaijani Turks recycles repugnant motifs that the historical record has refuted. In order to gain the sympathy of other countries, Pashinyan presents the conflict between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan as a “civilizational front line,” even though Shia Iran stands with Armenia in the dispute. In many surveys and studies, Azerbaijan is consistently recognized as a predominantly secular country similar to Finland or Vietnam.

There have been several threads of persistent disinformation throughout the war. The first is attributed to French President Emmanuel Macron. Apparently catering to Armenian-origin voters ahead of the upcoming 2022 French presidential elections, he claims that Syrian-Islamist mercenaries are fighting on the Azerbaijani side. Rather than being sensitive to global justice, international law, and norms, France has supported the occupation of Karabakh for 26 years. Erdoğan has angered Macron by exposing French intentions in Karabakh as well as in Libya. Meanwhile, Armenians from France, the United States, Canada and Lebanon have joined the fight, and those who have died in the conflict have been acclaimed as heroes in social media posts. However, there is yet to be any evidence of a Syrian fighter fatality in Karabakh. This calculated stream of disinformation, similar in respects to the claim of chemical weapons raised before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, has been advanced not only by France, but also by Russian interests. When the ceasefire was signed on November 9, 2020, neither France nor Russia raised the issue of mercenaries.

Moreover, in order to mobilize the Armenian diaspora around the world, Pashinyan has portrayed Armenia once again as a victim of Turkey, vulnerable to being wiped off the global map. The Armenian president and prime minister presented the Karabakh war as “the continuation of the genocide against the Armenian people.” This instrumentalization of past human suffering is an unmistakable example of how a victim can become the victimizer under specific circumstances when it seeks to use the scars of healed wounds to justify a new round of retribution. Regrettably, the Armenian officials have selective memo-
ries, failing to accept the worst atrocities of the 1991–94 Karabakh war, such as a series of massacres carried out in Khojaly and elsewhere, in which hundreds of innocent civilians were murdered.

RUSSIAN-STYLE TRUCE

Russia has always maneuvered to exploit the fears and insecurities of both sides in a conflict to promote its own interests while seeking to preserve its status as the hegemon of the Caucasus. More than the Azerbaijanis, it has been the Armenians who relied on and demanded a Russian presence in the Caucasus, which Russia has sought to legitimize on its own accord. Facing a decisive defeat and the loss of the entire Karabakh area to the Azerbaijani army, Armenia had no option but to ask for Russia’s assistance. Russia used its leverage over Azerbaijan to prevent complete control of Karabakh by Azerbaijan, as reflected in the truce that was imposed on November 9 and signed by Putin, Aliyev, and Pashinyan. Armenia had no option but to capitulate to Russian demands, while Azerbaijan reluctantly agreed even as it took control of the contested region. Armenia had long ago accepted vassal status under Russian protection, but a historical analysis of conflicts in the region leads to the following conclusion: Russia consistently exploits the fears of these ethnic groups by pitting one against another. Whenever Russian troops enter a region under the pretext of peacekeeping (as in the case in Georgia), it becomes much more difficult to be rid of them. In the Caucasus, the idea of Russian troops as peacekeepers is an oxymoron; Russia is always tempted to behave unilaterally with the hope of reclaiming some level of imperialist intentions. Moscow never sought a solution to the conflict but instead a framework for managing it to advance its interests. The current truce agreement is just that: a vague, open-ended, unclarified instrument to deepen the Russian presence in the region.

The nine-point truce agreement portends historical significance, as it will become the foundation for the final peace treaty. As news of the truce spread, celebrations broke out in Azerbaijani cities, while protests, unrest, and chaos reigned in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, with people pouring into the streets, chanting, “Where is Nikol? Where is that traitor?” Armenian opposition parties, including nationalist diaspora communities, have called for the Pashinyan government to resign. Azerbaijan won the war, but Russia did not allow it to be translated into a full diplomatic victory, which would encompass recognizing the claim of territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Still, Azerbaijan recovered the territories around Karabakh, including 30 percent of the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region. Of course, this carries the caveat that Russian troops will guarantee the truce. Azerbaijan liberated its most important cultural center, Shusha, allowing displaced Azerbaijanis from the first Karabakh war to return to their homes—constituting a symbolic strategic victory for Azerbaijan. Russia is also a winner; it crafted the truce while saving Armenia from total defeat. Moreover, it will deploy close to 2,000 troops in the conflict zone as a peacekeeping force—meaning a Russian presence not only in Armenia but also in formerly occupied Azerbaijani territories.

Meanwhile, Armenia bears the greatest losses. It paid a heavy price by losing thousands of soldiers, resources, and territory, along with the failure of its state institutions to be honest to their population about
the war conditions. The poorly trained, inadequately armed Armenian forces had no feasible option but to withdraw. They paid the greatest price because of the failure of their politicians, who refused to compromise and differentiate the circumstances of the possible from the desirable. They cared little for the well-being of their people, with the exception of those cliques who were the most loyal to the ruling government and most financially capable. Armenia could have salvaged much better terms had they pursued diplomacy after their military victory in 1994. With this truce, there is no mention of an autonomous Karabakh nor any recognition of its political status. In his address, Aliyev announced to the nation, “What happened to the [political] status? The status has gone to hell. No status. And there won’t be any status. It won’t happen as long as I am president.” However, the widespread belief among Armenians is that there will be some form of cultural autonomy regarding Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity.

There are several consequences of the 44-day war and the truce agreement:

First, although Turkey is not mentioned in the truce agreement, the country stepped forward from the back channels to be a partner to the center monitoring the ceasefire between the parties. Azerbaijan has insisted on including Turkey, and Aliyev made it clear that Turkey’s military role in Karabakh is inevitable and indispensable. Yet, due to Armenian opposition and Russian reluctance, Turkey’s role has not been fully articulated in the agreement. Nevertheless, Turkey stands as the second-most prominent regional power in shaping the outcome. On November 11, 2020, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu, signed an agreement to establish a joint ceasefire-monitoring center in Azerbaijani-controlled territories.

Second, the war and the truce have exposed the weakness of international institutions, particularly the fact that Western governments focus more on arms sales and the support of powerful lobbies with specific geopolitical interests than on broader human-rights guarantees. This realization may encourage players in other frozen conflicts to take matters into their hands without relying on the support or guidance of international institutions.

Third, the Karabakh war has already transformed the balance of power in the region. As Russia crafted and imposed a truce agreement resulting in the surrender of Armenia, this, in turn, has angered many in Armenia and its diaspora. As a result, there are calls to shift dramatically the orientation of Armenia away from Russia. These calls will have very little impact; Armenia cannot turn against Russia for reasons of economy, energy, and security. Russia is aware of Armenia’s dependence and does not want to make an enemy of Azerbaijan. Armenia’s capitulation has major consequences for the domestic politics of a relatively young and poor country, which could spiral downward into violence among diverse groups. This would compel its able and young population to move away; its cities could become virtual ghost towns without an able labor force to sustain basic services. The truce agreement has prompted intense soul searching in Armenia and greater critical thinking over the balance of risks and benefits associated with irredentist nationalism.

The worst act during the war occurred when Armenia emptied Karabakh of its civilian population, weakening Karabakh’s claim to autonomy more than its defeat on the battlefield had. According to the Inter-
national Crisis Group, half of the population and 90 percent of children, women, and the elderly have fled to Armenia.43 There was no resistance to their leaving. Despite all this, the government of Azerbaijan has indicated that it would welcome the Armenian inhabitants of Karabakh back to their homes.

Fourth, as far as Azerbaijan is concerned, it won the war on the battlefield but has yet to advance its claim at the negotiating table to assume full control over the former Nagorno-Karabakh region. The truce agreement is open-ended, and many people have genuine concerns about the presence of Russian troops in Azerbaijan.

Fifth, Azerbaijan obtained a land connection to the Nakhichevan enclave. After a final peace settlement is signed, there is a good chance that these two economies could be integrated to improve the daily lives of their people.

Finally, the Karabakh war suggests that frozen conflicts are not frozen forever. International institutions should address genuine concerns rather than maintaining the status quo. As a result of the failure of the negotiations mediated by the OSCE’s Minsk Group beginning in the mid-1990s, the Azerbaijani public has become disillusioned.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the second Karabakh war, a majority of the Armenian population left the war zone despite calls by local Armenian authorities in Khankendi (Stepanakert) to remain. As of November 14, 2020, Armenian news outlets have reported that Armenians were burning their homes, gardens, and even the forest in and around Kelbajar and other regions before returning those territories to Azerbaijan by December 1, 2020. This display of a refusal to live side by side with the “Turks” (a deliberately chosen Armenian insult) defies rational analysis and undermines any hope of coexistence. Despite these actions, however, there is hope for regional cooperation among the three south Caucasian states (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) if they abandon nationalist rhetoric and recognize that regional integration would improve the economic and social conditions of their citizens.

The final peace treaty for Karabakh should address the genuine concerns of all parties and recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. It should also provide political-cultural space for Armenians to carry out their own local governance. If no party is satisfied with the terms in a final deal, the risk of resentment sparking a new round of conflict will increase. Armenians and Azerbaijanis should commit to developing a shared language to acknowledge each other’s fears constructively and provide the essential space for their respective desires to be realized within the scope of international law.
For a comprehensive book on the demographic changes in the Karabakh region, see Farid Shafiyev, *Resetting the Borderlands: State Relocations and Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018), 64-108. The Caucasus governor-general (Prince Grigorii Golitsyn) reported to Czar Nicholas II on 14 June 1900, that “when Russians conquered South Caucasus the number of local Armenians did not exceed 45,000, and now there are above 1.5 million Armenians in the Caucasus” (Documents of Meeting of the Special Council of 14 June 1900, Russian State Military Historical Archive, fund 2000, record 1, volume 6593, page 14). For more details, see Jamil Hasani, “The South Caucasus in the Triangle of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, 1920-1922.” Unpublished paper presented at The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2018, p. 19.


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Audrey L. Alstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992), 207-208. Some experts and journalists persist in their erroneous claims that it was Stalin who gave the Karabakh region to Azerbaijan. Some experts, such as Thomas de Waal, who has written on the conflict, rather than seeking to comprehend the entwined complexities, relies on unhelpful and misleading analogies to confuse the search for clarity. For instance, de Waal claims that “Armenia’s statehood and its independence are inseparable from Nagorno-Karabakh. It is Armenia’s Jerusalem.” This statement neither understands the context of Armenia’s statehood nor the history of Karabakh and it is more misleading than helpful as an analogy to understand the conflict. Karabakh has never been the cradle of Armenian culture or religion. It never became part of Armenia. His attempt to be neutral at the expense of historical facts is condescending and unconstructive. He ignores the fact that the dominant Armenian presence in Karabakh only has been a story since 1828. See more for de Waal’s statement, “The Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict hints at the future of war,” *The Economist*, October 10, 2020, https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/10/10/the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-hints-at-the-future-of-war.


Cited in David D. Laitin and Ronald Grigor Suny, “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Thinking a Way Out of Karabakh,” *Middle East Policy*, no. 1 vol.7 (October 1999), 166.


17 Gerard Libaridian, a leading scholar on Armenian foreign policy and former adviser to President Ter-Petrosyan, criticized Pashinyan’s remarks. He called these statements equivalent to a declaration of a diplomatic war. See Gerard Labaridian, “Step, this time a big step back,” Aravot, September 2, 2020, https://www.aravot.ru.am/2020/09/02/335325/.

The Treaty of Alexandrapol (December 1920) between Turkey and Armenia annulled the Treaty of Sevres. Moreover, the Treaty of Kars (October 1921) between Turkey and the Armenian Soviet Government also annulled the terms of the Sevres Treaty.


22 Interview with a high-ranking Turkish government official, November 19, 2020.


24 See Özal’s statement, Milliyet, February 16, 1990.

25 Some scholars suggest that especially in the last decade, Erdoğan turned back to the nationalist discourse of his former political party (National Salvation Party [MSP]) which is the representative of the ideology of Milli Görüs (National Outlook) where Islamism is articulated with nationalism to a great extent. Mehmet Arısan, “From ‘Clients’ to ‘Magnates’: The (Not So) Curious Case of Islamic Authoritarianism in Turkey”, South East European and Black Sea Studies, no. 1 vol. 19, (2020): 25

26 M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Turkish-Armenian Historical Controversy: How to name the events of 1915,” Middle East Critique, no. 3 vol. 29, (2020): 345-365.


28 It was President Haydar Aliyev who coined the motto, ‘one nation, two state’ to describe the deep emotional connection between Turkey and Azerbaijan. More on the relations between the two states, see Murad Ismayilov and Norman A. Graham, eds, Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations. One Nation—Two States?, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).


32 The monument was built by Italian sculptor Pietro Canonica and it was opened in 1928 in Taksim Square, Istanbul. The monument was built to commemorate the formation of the Turkish Republic. The monument has two sides. It incorporates military and civilian aspects of Atatürk. The other side honors two Russian generals (Mihail Vasilyevic Frunze and Marshal Kliment Yefremovic Vorosilove) in recognition of the Russian military and financial aid to the Turkish War of Independence.


42 The Truce Agreement of November 9, 2020 represents more than an end to the conflict, as it provides a framework for negotiating future treaties.