

# Nagorno-Karabakh

## *Embedded in Geo-politics*

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Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>1</sup> has taken a prominent position in international awareness during recent months. The European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, declared the parliamentary elections in Nagorno-Karabakh, which were scheduled for 23 May 2010, to be illegal. Meanwhile, 12 May had seen the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a cease-fire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Although the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh in the EU neighbourhood merits our permanent attention, recent developments concerning its negotiations in the context of geo-politics call for a review of the situation.

Nagorno-Karabakh used to be an Autonomous Oblast (AO) within the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Azerbaijan. But after a bloody war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it became a self-proclaimed independent republic that was not recognized by any state<sup>2</sup> but that was protected by, and connected to, Armenia through a corridor<sup>3</sup> on Azerbaijani soil. The occupied zone involves seven districts of Azerbaijan, including the better known Lachin (see map) and Kelbajar provinces.

In the run-up to independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, upheavals in Nagorno-Karabakh began in 1988, escalating in vicious fighting and in the occupation of territory around Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenia, until a cease-fire was signed in 1994 between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

With its 8,322 square kilometers, Nagorno-Karabakh is a bit larger than inhabited Israel without the Negev Desert, or almost twice the size of South Ossetia. Its capital is Stepanakert. It has a predominantly Armenian population of about 140,000 people, mostly Apostolic Christians.

During the fighting and upheavals, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis had to flee from each others' territories. In total, over half a million Azeris have since been living as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Azerbaijan, having fled from

Armenia, the provinces around the disputed area, and from Nagorno-Karabakh itself.<sup>4</sup> The situation is complex, multi-faceted and multi-layered, involving different issues, and local, regional and foreign forces. The various 'layers' and issues will be unpicked in this article.

### Different Parties and Issues Involved

It is first important to stress that all of the people from Nagorno-Karabakh – both the Armenians inside the self-proclaimed independent republic (140,000) and the Azeri IDPs surviving outside it (more than half a million) – are of course concerned, although they are not involved in the talks. The two sovereign countries of Azerbaijan and Armenia are also involved with their allies. Turkey is a staunch supporter of Azerbaijan, as the countries share a common heritage engendering mutual solidarity. Both countries closed their borders to Armenia in 1993 as a means to apply pressure to resolve the conflict. Armenia, on the other hand, can count on the support of the Russian Federation. In addition, Russia, the United States and France are involved as Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk group mediators and as countries representing interests. Finally, two issues are also linked to the conflict: the question of genocide in 1915; and the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia about reopening borders.

## Analysis

Since Armenia is land-locked between Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan, the closure of borders in 1993 by Turkey and Azerbaijan – with the exception of recent years – has meant slow economic development for Armenia. All goods to Armenia formally have to come in through Georgia or Iran.<sup>5</sup> The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which could have followed a more direct line from Baku to Ceyhan through Armenia, was built with a detour through Georgia. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan thus suffer from the frozen conflict: Armenia is relatively isolated and misses out on revenues; while Azerbaijan misses part of its territory and is stuck with almost 600,000 IDPs.

With Turkey's efforts to meet criteria to join the EU, under the zealous leadership of its Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, it is showing the world that it can be a regional power of significance. Turkey and Armenia began doing what was unthinkable for a good dozen years, namely to talk about opening borders. Some of the meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials were arranged informally around football matches, hence the term 'soccer diplomacy.' But under the auspices of the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the opening of borders was formalized in protocols that – although signed by both parties in October 2009 – have not yet been ratified. Realizing the complexity and interconnectedness of various issues, the Swiss purposefully disentangled these issues: the protocols therefore state no preconditions on either the genocide question or on Nagorno-Karabakh. In this strength, however, lies also the protocols' weakness, because the issues do influence the process of opening borders and vice versa. Thus even the meeting arranged with U.S. President Obama for both Prime Ministers Sargsyan of Armenia and Erdogan of Turkey on 12 April 2010 did not bring ratification of the border protocols closer. The problem is complex. Various issues are at stake.

### Issues

Azerbaijan is, of course, not too thrilled with these protocols. Perhaps Azerbaijan even feels a little betrayed by 'brother' Turkey, because Armenia had not met any conditions on the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, the reason why the borders were closed in the first place. Then there is the issue of genocide: Armenian pressure groups are lobbying various governments to have the 1915 massacre recognized as genocide. Third, the United States wishes for a possible alternative corridor to Afghanistan through Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan; and fourth, 'energy politics' cannot be excluded from the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation politics. These four points are explained in the following paragraphs.

Armenia was traumatized by the loss of at least one million lives in war and deportations fighting the Turks in 1915, just as the Ottoman Empire was crumbling. The Armenian Diaspora has a strong lobby in Washington D.C. and in European capitals to have the 1915 massacre recognized as genocide. 15 to 20 countries have recognized the genocide in the meantime. Turkey claims that

Turkish lives were also lost, and the Turkish government denies genocide, the difference lying in premeditated systematic murder or 'normal' casualties as a result of war.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to conduct rational foreign policy, the question of genocide has been delegated to a scientific Turkish–Armenian commission.

However, the Armenian Diaspora in the United States continues to be relentless and more hawkish in its demands than the Armenian government itself. During his presidential election campaign in 2008, Obama made some promises to the Armenian Diaspora on recognizing the genocide of Armenians. After Obama's election, however, and in view of the United States' important relations with Turkey, this promise was played down, using the building of relations between Turkey and Armenia as a reason.

In April 2010, however, the U.S. Senate proposed and accepted an amendment with regard to the genocide, thus reintroducing this delicate and painful issue into present-day U.S.–South Caucasus politics. As a gesture of protest, Turkey temporarily summoned back its ambassador from Washington D.C. The United States does not want to apply too much pressure on its relations with its NATO Ally Turkey, however, but also needs cooperation from Armenia and Azerbaijan if it wants to open a possible new corridor to Afghanistan. This would be an alternative route in case the way through the Persian Gulf and Pakistan becomes too unstable.<sup>7</sup> As it turns out, this plan is an incentive to help resolve the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh, or the alternative route will not offer much stability either.

Finally, 'energy politics' are also involved in the negotiations around Nagorno-Karabakh. Some changes in energy supply deals can be read as a message of Azerbaijan's discontentment with Turkey's unconditional signing of the protocols. Azerbaijan has signed a deal with Russia, and Russia and Turkey have a gas-line project in the works. If Turkey and Armenia factually manage to open borders, this will weaken Russian influence in Armenia. But in view of the global economic crisis (from which Russia suffers as well), trade and energy revenues may be more important than politics.

In view of the complexity of the situation involving regional politics among Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which are embedded in geopolitics with Russia, the United States and the EU, with each party having its own interests, it is not surprising that the protocols have not yet been ratified, nor that the updated Madrid principles in the negotiations around Karabakh have not yet been accepted.

### The Origin of the Conflict in More Detail: Differing Perspectives

The problem around Karabakh dates from when the South Caucasus countries of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were about to be incorporated into the newly formed Soviet Union, after the Bolshevik

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revolutions in 1917, yet managing to remain independent for a few years (1918-1921) before the Soviet Army invaded the South Caucasus. The three South Caucasus countries had united shortly as a Federation before becoming independent republics, thereby managing to postpone their incorporation into the Soviet Union. But by 1920, intervention from Bolshevik Moscow was increasing: part of the population was against the Bolsheviks, but communist Azeris were helping them. It was a time of relative confusion, with decisions being made and retracted even without clarity on who was formally and legally in charge.<sup>8</sup> The young Joseph Stalin was working for the 'Kavkaz Bureau' at that time, dealing with issues of organizing the territory and its peoples from different ethnic backgrounds.

The Soviets developed an ethnic-territorial policy, giving different (ethnic) regions various degrees of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh also needed to be given a formal place.<sup>10</sup> According to Armenians, based for example on ancient texts by Strabo and Plinius the Second, this area was Armenian from times immemorial, while Azeris can point to the city of Shusha in the Karabakh khanate, which was a big, predominantly Azeri cultural-political centre founded by Panah Ali Khan in the 1750s.<sup>11</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Karabakh area came in Russian hands during Russian expansion into the South Caucasus after winning the Russo-Persian War (1826-1828). From the 1830s onwards, Shusha split into an Azeri Muslim part and an Armenian Christian part of the city.

The origin of 'ownership' of Karabakh is thus defined differently at different points in time – even up to the final decision of the Bolshevik Caucasus Bureau in 1921, which first attached Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, although shortly afterwards this decision was reversed by Stalin, who added Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. The Armenians can refer to ancient history, to the Russian pre-Soviet period, and to the first decision of the Kavkaz Bureau, before it reversed its decision. The Azeris, meanwhile, can refer to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century khanate and to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Soviet period: Nagorno-Karabakh was part of the Azerbaijan SSR and 'thus' belongs to Azerbaijan. This argument is not flawless in the eyes of Armenians, since – in proclaiming its independence from the Soviet Union – Azerbaijan addressed the period from 1918 to 1921 when it was independent from both Russia *and* the Soviet Union. At that time Nagorno-Karabakh was not formally part of the Democratic Republic.



However, allegedly Stalin's decision states: "To leave [sic] Nagorno-Karabakh within the borders of Azerbaijan's Soviet Socialist Republic." Thus Stalin perceived this area to be Azerbaijani territory, although Armenians can also defend that it was not.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, by 1923 Nagorno-Karabakh was proclaimed an Autonomous Region of the SSR of Azerbaijan, and so it remained during the whole Soviet period, confirmed in the Soviet Constitutions of 1936 and 1977, until unrest grew during the *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies of the late 1980s.

In February 1988, the Assembly of Nagorno-Karabakh asked the authorities in Moscow to be unified with the SSR of Armenia. This request was not granted, because the Soviet Constitution did not allow for borders to be changed. The request in itself, however, was enough to trigger violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Azeris being expelled from Karabakh and pogroms held on Armenians living in Baku and Sumgait. The Russian Army managed to reinstall some order but failed to restore a feeling of justice and the unrest spread.



Azerbaijan declared itself independent from the Soviet Union in August 1991 and Nagorno-Karabakh did the same in the following month. Before the end of 1991, a referendum was held in Karabakh: pro-independence. This independence was formalized on 6 January 1992. Fighting broke out again. Massacres took place on both sides, forcing thousands of ethnic Azeris and Armenians to flee. According to Human Rights Watch, the Khojaly Massacre on 26 February 1992, whereby about 200 Azeri villagers, women and children were killed, is the largest massacre to date in the conflict. Armenians gained the upper hand with the assistance of the Russian 366<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment. A zone connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia was also conquered.

### After Independence from the Soviet Union: Negotiations

Without going into further details of the recent political history of Armenia and Azerbaijan, we can conclude that since the cease-fire of 12 May 1994 various leaders from both sides have lost their positions over the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. Even if the prime ministers were prepared to make concessions, the voters back home – dominated by feelings of nationalism – were not, and the people preferred to see their leaders resign.

Since the 1994 cease-fire between Azerbaijan and Armenia was signed, little tangible progress has been made, despite the many meetings that have taken place between the Armenian and Azeri presidents. The OSCE mediators presented the Madrid principles<sup>13</sup> on 10 July 2009 and called on the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan to endorse and finalize the following basic principles:

- 1) The return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- 2) An interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- 3) A corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- 4) Future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;
- 5) The right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence;
- 6) International security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.<sup>14</sup>

These points were generally agreed upon by both parties. In December 2009 and January 2010 the OSCE mediators then handed over an 'update' of the Madrid principles, stating with reference to point 4 that Karabakh should be included in the peace talks. Both presidents discussed this update jointly in Sochi in January 2010 in the presence of the Russian foreign minister.<sup>15</sup>

In the meantime, President Aliyev of Azerbaijan claims to accept also the updated principles, although his answer implicitly assumes a final legal status for Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, whereas point 4 does not stipulate this. Armenian President Sargsyan made it clear earlier that Karabakh could not return to Azerbaijan's control, but he did not add his intentions with regard to the Armenian-controlled territories around Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>16</sup>

So far, not even point 1 has been put to execution, although more details have been thought out about how to withdraw from the

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districts.<sup>17</sup> Partial withdrawal would allow for borders to open and communications and programmes to be launched, such as the beginning of the return of IDPs to some areas under the watchful eye of international observers. The next stage would be to determine the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, for example a federation or confederation, independent, or a solution inspired by other existing models (such as Cyprus, Kosovo, Scotland, Åland, etc.).

### *External Powers' Roles*

Since a purely legal solution has not been found, a political solution is needed. Some argue that a solution will only be possible when it is in the interest of external powers to work together more intensively. At the United Nations level, resolutions were brought to the fore to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh and to allow the return of IDPs to Karabakh, but these resolutions have so far not won a majority of votes. Where, then, is the leverage for a breakthrough?

Russia has an important role in the negotiations, but it is also trying to control them for its own interests. If Turkey and Armenia open borders and enjoy the profits of trade, Russia will have less influence in the region. On the one hand, the prolongation of the conflict can be in Russia's interest; on the other hand, various plans are being made for building pipelines, and this energy aspect is also good for the Russian economy.

The building of new, alternative pipelines is also in the EU's interest. After the August 2008 war in South Ossetia, Europe again received a wake-up call about being dependent on Russian gas. The United States also has both strategic and economic interests in the region. It is in U.S. interests to have the protocols ratified and to get the updated principles accepted so that a new corridor can be opened. Since some suggested solutions involve European institutions, perhaps the 'soft' and 'hard' powers had better work together on this problem. Almost 600,000 Azerbaijani IDPs have been living in stressful circumstances for 16 years now, not to mention the feelings of insecurity of many citizens in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

In approaching the subject of possible solutions, we must remember that non-resolution of a conflict can sometimes be to the advantage of the ruling powers, in spite of formal discourses claiming the contrary. Azerbaijan does not formally want to lose 15 to 20 per cent of its territory, and therefore may procrastinate. As long as the conflict is not resolved, certain groups perhaps even hope for compensation in money or in land, especially in Armenia, should the genocide be formally recognized. The conflict is also conveniently used by both parties every now and then as a distraction from national affairs. Even though resolving the conflict may be economically advantageous, politically the conflict

has an advantage for Russia to use the general feelings of insecurity as a means of influence in its 'backyard.' Iran, meanwhile, has a balanced approach, but currently does not have a significant role in the conflict resolution.

### The Military-Geographical Aspect

In the meantime, record oil revenues are being used to build an Azerbaijani army that aspires to be independent from NATO and Russia. Billions of U.S. dollars are being pumped into the defence budget, although a relatively small amount is being used for equipment and training. In spite of agreements to use a peaceful means for problem-solving, a military solution is not totally unimaginable after what happened in South Ossetia in August 2008, but it is very unlikely. With recent investment and its population of more than eight million, Azerbaijan has a bigger active capability than Armenia (with a population of almost three million).<sup>18</sup> However, Armenia is backed by a Russian military presence and air base in Yerevan.<sup>19</sup>

The military-geographical situation is, moreover, difficult. Karabakh is a small highland area preceded by plains that are easy to oversee and defend. Whereas a sophisticated air attack might be needed, it has been the Azerbaijani navy that has 'significantly increased its capabilities,'<sup>20</sup> which would be of little use in Nagorno-Karabakh. Finally, in a country with authoritarian rule, a real military force paradoxically remains a threat and a rival to the president. We should therefore not underestimate, but also not overestimate, the capacity of the Azerbaijani army in the coming decade.

### Focus on the Process

If perfect solutions are too difficult to find at the negotiation table, conflict theory recommends focusing on the process instead of on the result,<sup>21</sup> and to begin working on practical issues such as how to involve the citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh in a public debate on the future of Karabakh. The debate, of course, should be based on truthful and versatile information in a non-coercive environment, and it is important that the people can consider the various options.

The second question at stake is how to create a fair and just method for a population vote on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh? It is important to involve the displaced people who are originally from Nagorno-Karabakh or it would not be a fair referendum (even though this may pose some practical problems such as proof of where one previously lived).

Third, how should the spokesmen of Nagorno-Karabakh be involved in the conflict resolution process?

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Finally, the Lachin corridor, which is Azerbaijani territory but strongly associated with the safety aspect of the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh, should be included in the debate, referendum and conflict resolution process. It has been suggested that the Armenian forces could leave the 13 villages, but not the whole territory. How to go about this?

These points can be worked upon, for example with the help of NGOs, regardless of other developments. Ratification of the protocols between Turkey and Armenia on opening borders should help to develop trade and prosperity for all, thereby increasing stability and constructive solutions in the area.

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1. The Russian name is 'Nagorny Karabakh,' whereby 'nagorny' is Russian for mountainous, 'kara' is Turkic for black or dark; and 'bakh' is derived from the Persian 'bagh,' meaning gardens, or Turkish 'bahçe,' also meaning garden. Hence the title of Thomas de Waal's famous book on Nagorno-Karabakh: *The Black Gardens*. The Armenian name for Karabakh is 'Artsakh.' For more background information, see also: P. van Tongeren, H. van de Veen and J. Verhoeven, *Searching for Peace in Europe and Eurasia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities* (Boulder Co and London: Lynne Rienner, 2002).
2. Not even by Armenia.
3. Various terms are used for this territory depending on one's perspective: Armenia refers to 'liberated territory,' 'security belt' or 'buffer zone'; Azerbaijan refers to 'occupied territory.'
4. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refers to approximately 586,000 IDPs from a total Azeri population of 8.8 million. It is difficult to get exact, verified numbers, although *The Military Balance 2010*, for example, mentions a total Azeri population of 8,238,672; see online at [www.internal-displacement.org/](http://www.internal-displacement.org/).
5. Armenia has an estimated trade with Turkey of U.S.\$ 200 million – indirectly through Georgia and Iran. An estimated 40-75,000 Armenians work in Turkey illegally. See J. Valiyev, *Azerbaijan in the World*, Vol. III No. 7, 1 April 2010.
6. The term 'genocide' did not exist in 1915 and was introduced by the UN in 1948. The criteria named in 1948 have then in retroaction been applied to the 1915 killings. In the context of 'genocide in the Caucasus,' the case of the Circassians (or Adygs) in the North Caucasus should be mentioned. Almost one million were deported, with an estimated 400,000 killed in 1864 during the Russo-Caucasian war. See O. Bullock, *Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys among the Defiant People of the Caucasus* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), pp. 136-138.
7. *Jane's Intelligence Review* of May 2010 points out that "the US–Pakistan relationship is fragile," that both countries have different regional imperatives and that "further disagreements are probable," pp. 8-13. On 9 June, 20 NATO tractor trailers ferrying supplies to Afghanistan were torched, illustrating the desirability of a new corridor to Afghanistan.
8. The Azerbaijani communist leader Nariman Narimanov declared Nakhichevan, Zangezur and Karabakh to be part of Soviet Armenia. His statement, however, was soon retracted, although it is unclear why. For English readers, see the webpage of Conciliation resources at [www.c-r.org/](http://www.c-r.org/); for Dutch readers, see: D. Rochtus, 'Kruitvat Kaukasus: wordt Nagorno-Karabach volgend strijdtoneel?' *Internationale Spectator* 63/02, 2009, available online at [www.internationalespectator.nl/2009/](http://www.internationalespectator.nl/2009/).
9. AO or Autonomous Oblast; ASSR or Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with more autonomy; and SSR or Soviet Socialist Republic, with sovereign power.
10. Along with Nakhichevan and Zanzegur, the first of which came under Azerbaijan's control, while the second went to Armenia. See online at [www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/nagorny-karabakh/chronology.php](http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/nagorny-karabakh/chronology.php).
11. Shusha is on UNESCO World Heritage's Tentative List; see online at [whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1574/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1574/), accessed on 4 June 2010.
12. See the webpage of Nagorno-Karabakh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, commentary on Thomas de Waal's report entitled *The Karabakh Trap: Threats and Dilemmas of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, accessed 31 May 2010.
13. Preceded by the Paris and Prague principles.
14. See online at [www.osce.org/item/38731.html](http://www.osce.org/item/38731.html).
15. [asbarez.com/76649/update-madrid-principles-to-include-karabakh-in-talks/](http://asbarez.com/76649/update-madrid-principles-to-include-karabakh-in-talks/).
16. [www.armenianow.com/news/20959/armenia\\_azerbaijan\\_peace\\_talks](http://www.armenianow.com/news/20959/armenia_azerbaijan_peace_talks).
17. Such as Aris Ghazinyan in [www.armenianow.com/users/aris\\_ghazinyan](http://www.armenianow.com/users/aris_ghazinyan), 'Updated: Madrid Principles. Bakun Claims to Have Accepted Document, Expects Yerevan to Follow Suit,' 21 May 2010, accessed 4 June 2010.
18. For detailed comparisons, see *The Military Balance 2010* for Armenia (p. 174) and Azerbaijan (p. 176).
19. In Armenia, Russia has both an army (at Gyumri) and air force (at Yerevan) presence; see *The Military Balance 2010*, pp. 231 and 174.
20. Richard Giragosyan, 'Looking to 2020: Azerbaijan's Military Aspirations' (Noravank Foundation, May 2008), partly based on *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, 29 April 2008.
21. See Langer (1997) in W. Gudykunst and Y. Kim, *Communicating with Strangers* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), p. 287.