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Religion in a Non-Religious War: The Conflict over Nagorno Karabakh

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What's at Stake?

The instrumentalization of religion—especially Islam by Azerbaijan in foreign relations—in the nonreligious Nagorno Karabakh conflict could further deepen the differences among the parties in the conflict and in the region, and make a final resolution and reconciliation even more difficult.

Background & Key Developments

The conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno Karabakh—a 4,400 sq. km enclave within the internationally recognized boundaries of Azerbaijan that was an autonomous region in Soviet Azerbaijan, with a population of about 150,000—goes back to the early twentieth century. Toward the end of the USSR, a full-scale war erupted in 1991 after the Karabakh Armenians declared independence.

A ceasefire was brokered by Russia in May 1994, following which the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group became the main forum for negotiations, co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France. The crux of the conflict has been Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and Karabakh Armenians' right of self-determination. Since 1992, negotiations have focused on reaching a "grand political agreement" between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, but for nearly three decades, the talks have not led to a settlement.

The conflict between majority-Shia Azerbaijanis and Christian Armenians is not religious in nature. Yet since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Karabakh conflict has been variously presented, largely by the media in the West, as an ethnic rivalry between "Christian Armenians" and "Muslim Azerbaijanis." Even as both sides to the conflict over

the years have persistently rejected such characterizations, religion continues to be instrumentalized, especially in foreign policy and international relations, extensively by Azerbaijan and by the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia.

While by and large Azerbaijani society is secular and, notably, mostly Shia, over the years Baku has mobilized its diplomatic and state resources to gain the support of countries, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, as a "fellow Muslim country," as well as through its membership in multistate organizations. Since 1992, when Azerbaijan joined the Organisation of the Islamic Conference—a club of 57 Muslim states—statements in support of Azerbaijan have been issued at every OIC summit. "Islamic responses" to the Karabakh conflict—a discourse embedded in religious language and beliefs—have crossed over local and regional lines in various intensities. Domestically, even as the growth of Islam has been closely watched and controlled by the secular state, religion still interacts with other more prominent
political and social factors—especially regarding Karabakh.

In the early 1990s, clerics and religious groups *outside* Azerbaijan amplified the religious dimension of the conflict and presented it as a conspiracy against Islam. During the first Karabakh war, Rovsan Badalov, the former commander of mujahideen fighters, called on his fellow Azerbaijanis to launch "a holy war" against the Karabakh Armenians. The Azerbaijan Karabakh Liberation Movement called for a jihad as "the only way to fight against the Armenians." Notably, religiously inspired militancy seems to be tolerated by the state when used as a device for defining the "other" as an enemy and for mobilizing support toward an "Azerbaijani solution" to the Karabakh conflict—but not when it is used for sociopolitical critique of Azerbaijan or its government.

For Armenia and Karabakh Armenians, the appeal to religious affinities has been more on the domestic and limited foreign relations levels rather than as part of strategic foreign policy by the state. During the military operations last year, certain Armenian clergymen in Karabakh supported the war efforts through religious and nationalistic language. Traditionally, Armenian society has viewed "Christian Russia" or Greece or "Christian Europe" as sympathetic to their national causes. Reportedly, even some former noncommissioned Greek officers were willing to fight on the Armenian side during the second Karabakh war. Some Armenians from the diaspora had volunteered to fight in the war and were considered "foreign fighters" by Azerbaijan. However, this perception is changing within Armenian society in view of the fact that during the recent second Karabakh war, the sentiment behind such expectations did not seem to be reflected in international responses to the conflict.

Looking Ahead

Religion is most likely to remain a critical factor in Azerbaijani-Armenian relations in the post-war period. Baku continues to strengthen its ties with the Muslim and Turkic world to further isolate Armenia and gain full control over Karabakh proper. Other ongoing issues of relevance include access to religious sites, particularly centuries-old Armenian churches and monasteries in territories that have come under Azerbaijan's control. Some of this also entails a politics of historical representation, with Azerbaijan presenting Armenian Christian monuments in the territory as "Caucasian Albanian"—implying that they belong to Christian ancestors of the Azeri people.

Looking forward, religion could also be a factor in the wider regional churches. It is likely that religion will continue to be instrumentalized in this region to pursue political and diplomatic interests rather than for the pursuit of peace.

Further Readings

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