



Nagorno Karabagh: transition and the elite

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The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered unprecedented processes of rapid and long-term transitions in virtually all aspects of life: political, social, economic, religious, cultural, and territorial.

One of the most contentious problems in the processes of transition and social restructuring, especially in the former Soviet periphery, is the right of self-determination of nationalities versus territorial integrity of newly independent states. In the Caucasus, unresolved conflicts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that 'froze' when the region was sovietized re-emerged in, for example, Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ajaria, Nagorno Karabagh and other parts of this region which is the 'ancestral homeland' of over 23 nationalities. Soviet colonialization did not bring relief or solutions to these existing territorial and cultural autonomy disputes, but contained them through various state measures ranging from granting limited autonomy to forced population shifts.¹ Thus, when an opportunity rose in the period starting with *perestroika* in the mid-1980s, 'disadvantaged groups responded quickly to cues suggesting that they are justified in acting on old grievances' (Gurr, 1993, p 37).

Nagorno Karabagh serves as an example that when social and political restructuring is resisted or ignored over a long period of time by a dominant group (Azerbaijan), alternative measures are sought by the minority group (Armenians), either to 'force' a change or to create a new social order. The measures sought to institute changes vary from peaceful, civic initiatives to armed struggle and full-scale war. The scope and range of the means are determined by internal and external factors and are in proportion to the resources that are available to each group.

The current situation in Nagorno Karabagh highlights the troubled legacy of the Soviet empire and of how—as in the case of decolonization processes in other parts of the world—a former Soviet society is going through a process of multilayered territorial, social, economic and cultural reconfiguration (cf. Mouradian, 1990).

For almost a decade, Nagorno Karabagh—as small 4388 km² enclave in the South Caucasus with an Armenian population of about 150,000²—remains the oldest unresolved conflict in the former Soviet Union. The crux of the conflict

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is the right of self-determination of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabagh on one hand and the territorial integrity of what is now the Republic of Azerbaijan (formerly Azerbaijan SSR) on the other.

What had started as a popular movement for self-determination in 1988 turned into a full-scale war in 1991—with far-reaching political and military implications for the region. In September 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Nagorno Karabagh declared an independent ‘Republic of Mountainous Karabagh’ (RMK)—encompassing the territory of the former autonomous region, plus the Shahumyan district in the north. This was confirmed by a referendum in December 1991, when elections were held for a new parliament (boycotted by the Azeri minority). No state, including the Republic of Armenia, has recognized RMK’s independence.

The historically documented continuous presence of Armenians in the *mountainous* region of Karabagh, at least since medieval times, is a fundamental factor in this process of restructuring and in the political discourse of the Karabagh elite.

As with the case of some 200 groups involved in conflicts around the world (Gurr, 1993, p 36), especially territorial disputes, references to history, collective memory and experience are utilized to legitimate claims and mobilize group efforts toward attainment of collective goals. Karabagh Armenians have used their history as one of their key recourses and points of reference to: (a) articulate their grievances; (b) demonstrate to the ‘outside world’ that their claims are based on objective ‘historical facts’; and (c) reconstitute their eroded national consciousness.

History and territorial claims

Throughout the centuries, the boundaries of the region known as Nagorno Karabagh today (the toponym Karabagh—‘black garden’—has been used since the 13th century) have shifted and redrawn depending on invaders, types of conquests, territorial and administrative divisions and the relationship of the major powers dominating the region. The long list of foreign domination includes the Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, Turkmens, Ottoman Turks, Persians, Tsarist Russians and finally the Soviet Union.

One of the earliest records indicating that the region was part of Armenia goes back to the second century BC—that is, the ancient provinces of Artsakh and Utik, situated between Lake Sevan (north-west), the River Kura (north) and the River Araxes (south).³

Following the first partition of Armenia in the late 4th century between Byzantine and the Persian Sasanian empires, the area was divided and made part of Caucasian Albania (not to be confused with Albania in the Balkans). Given the geographic proximity of Albania and Armenia they maintained close cultural, religious and economic contacts with each other.

In the early 4th century, after the Christianization of Armenia, the Albanians adopted the Armenian brand of Christianity through the efforts of Armenian

missionaries sent to Albania. They pledged canonical allegiance to the Armenian Church and upon their request, the grandson of Gregory the Illuminator, the patron saint of the Armenians, was designated the head of the Albanian Church. Over the centuries, while autocephalous, the *catholicoi* or patriarchs of the Albanians were consecrated by the head of the Armenian Church.⁴ Furthermore, the Armenian influence extended beyond canonical jurisdiction whereby progressively Armenian supplanted Albanian as the language of the church and state (Dasxuranci, 1961; Hewsen, 1982). By the 10th century, the Albanian Church was fully absorbed by the Armenian Church and became known as the 'Armenian Catholicosate of Albanians or Aghwank' which survived until the mid-19th century.⁵

In the 7th century the region, including the Caucasian Albanian kingdom, was conquered by the Arabs. The eastern lowlands were first Islamized and then Turkified by the 11th century, when a Seljuk Turkish dynasty was established in the region. The population in western parts of Albania, which included what is Karabagh today, was largely assimilated by the Armenians—who were the majority in the southern region—and, to a lesser degree, by the Georgians (cf. Toumanoff, 1963, pp 58–59).

For decades, long before the armed conflict between Karabagh Armenians and Azerbaijanis started, the 'authentication' of the history of the region had become the scholarly battleground of historians, political scientists, archaeologists, researchers and bureaucrats.

Despite the lack of linguistic and cultural similarities, Azeri historiography has constructed an 'Albanian connection' in the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijani nation. In this version of history, Albania is presented as the social, cultural and territorial predecessor of contemporary Azerbaijan, thus refuting Armenian claims to Karabagh.⁶

The roots of this historiography goes back to the Soviet policy of 'nativization' (*korenizatsiia*), whereby the construction of 'national histories' in the Soviet republics was part of the official state 'teaching' that national identity is inseparable from the given territory of a national republic. In line with this policy, the 'official history' of the majority ethnic populations and that of their republics became virtually interchangeable.⁷ In accord with the Soviet state's political operational code, 'one republic—one culture', 'Azerbaijani historians produced histories of "Azerbaijan" in the medieval period based not on the historical facts of a prior national state but on the assumption that the genealogy of the present-day Azerbaijani republic could be traced in terms of putative ethnic-territorial continuity' (Saroyan, 1997: 141, cf. Dudwick, 1990; Hunter 1993; Nadein-Raevski, 1992). Hence, the once prosperous Armenian community in Baku and Armenian culture in Karabagh are not covered in the official history of Azerbaijan.⁸ In turn, the history of Azerbaijanis who lived in Armenia as the majority population at the turn of the century of what is Armenia today is not part of the official history of Armenia.

While the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijanis is a matter of academic debate, most scholars agree that Azerbaijan, as a national entity, emerged after 1918.⁹

In the context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, the ‘Albanian connection’ has become a politicized issue of irredentism. Azerbaijani historians, by establishing a connection between present Azerbaijanis and Caucasian Albanians, in addition to providing a common national history, sustain the idea of ethnic continuity and presence in Karabagh and ‘demonstrate’ that Karabagh Armenians are relatively recent immigrants to the region and thus a ‘non-indigenous’ people living on ancient Azerbaijani lands.¹⁰

As for historians in Armenia, they have been engaged in refuting Azeri historical claims, especially since the intensification of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict in the late 1980s, using evidence from pre-historic periods, primary medieval sources and modern scholarship on the region (cf. Donabedian, 1994). However, Karabagh Armenians living on the land, rather than in history books, point to hundreds of ancient monuments, ruins of religious buildings, churches and monasteries as ‘living witnesses’ to Armenian presence in Karabagh. Devoid of scholasticism, one middle-aged Karabagh farmer living near the 13th-century Monastery of Gandzasar said: ‘This monastery kept us Armenian, the writings on these walls made us know who we are. There is a *khachkar* (cross-stone), the size of a car, on top of this mountain; our ancestors placed it there to indicate that this is Armenian land’.¹¹ Kapuscinski calls these *khachkars* ‘symbols of Armenian existence, or else boundary markers, ... signposts. You can find [them] in the most inaccessible places’.¹² Nevertheless, Karabagh Armenians’ own selective telling of the past barely mentions that there were Azeris in Karabagh up to this century. If pressed for acknowledgement, they point out that most Azeris were transient residents living in one place in the summer for grazing cattle and another place in the winter.

Between the 11th and the 13th centuries, major demographic changes took place in Karabagh and the region in general, as a result of Turkish and Mongolian invasions. The emerging Turks from Central Asia—having conquered Iran and founded the Seljuk Turkish dynasty—invaded the region and devastated much of Armenia and Karabagh, especially its lowlands. By the mid-11th century, the Armenian kingdom was also destroyed.

In Siwnik—the mountainous territory in the south-east of today’s Armenia—and Karabagh feudal principalities known as *Meliks* (‘princes’ in Arabic) survived for about 300 years and became a safe haven for thousands of Armenians who sought the protection of the native lords. These melikdoms were established by Jehan-Shah, chief of Turkomans, in the mid-15th century as part of a strategy of creating a row of tiny buffer territories along the northern frontiers of his domain.

The granting of autonomy to the remnants of the local Armenian nobility was designed to take advantage of their natural willingness to defend their patrimonies by restoring to them the personal advantages they had formerly possessed over their lands (Hewsen, 1972, p 297).

Within 50 years, however, Karabagh came under Persian Safavid rule. The Safavids created a series of hereditary Khanates—which extended from the

Caspian Sea to the Ottoman frontiers—whose rulers were Muslims, responsible for protecting Persia from the neighbouring Ottoman Empire, Georgia and Russia.

Among the various Khanates established in the region, the melikdoms of Karabagh were the only 'truly autonomous [ones] while under Persian suzerainty (Hewsen, 1972, p 297). Indeed, when the Safavid rule ended in 1722, the new Nadir Shah continued to recognize the autonomy of the meliks and reaffirmed their rights, which had been granted by Shah Abbas, in gratitude for their assistance in his campaign against the Ottomans in 1743. The 'reward' also included the Shah's removal of a number of Turkish tribes from Karabagh to Iran. However, upon Nader Shah's death, these tribes returned to Karabagh and Panah Khan, the leader of the Javanshir tribe, expanded his domain and established a separate khanate for his tribe. This lasted until 1806 (cf. Bournoutian, 1994, p 17). The rule of the meliks lasted until 1813 when Karabagh came under Russian rule (Hewsen, 1972, p 298).

While providing a strategic buffer for their overlords, the five melikdoms of Karabagh preserved a social structure that withstood threats of destruction by perennial conquerors for centuries. The meliks were the governors, judges (their decrees had the effect of law in their domain) and commanders-in-chief of their infantries which consisted of one to two thousand men.

As for their personal characteristics:

The meliks possessed a code of honour similar to that of the nobility caste in other parts of the world. Proud of their descent and jealous of their honour, they were war-like and quick to take offence. Brave, hospitable, crude, devoted to their country in their own rough ways; at times cruel, they betray the same characteristics which appear in the naxarars [feudal lords] of ancient and medieval Armenia... Reduced by circumstances to little better than mountain chieftains, the meliks demonstrated in every way, however humbly, their descent from the grandees of the old Armenia.

... The mountain and oft-swollen streams made travel difficult and no trade routes crossed the plateau. It was a world of its own, cut off and shut away and well suited to the preservation of old traditions and the survival of ancient houses (Hewsen, 1972, p 299).

In the context of the modern conflict, Karabagh leaders still refer to their meliks as the pioneers of the Armenian emancipatory movement, known for their military training and continuous political struggle for autonomy and national renaissance.¹³

At the beginning of the 19th century, the expansionist tsarist Russia annexed Georgia and eventually conquered all of the Transcaucasus. Karabagh became part of the Russian empire in 1805. It was included in the territorial boundaries of the Muslim province, as stipulated by a treaty between Ibrahim Khan of Karabagh and the Russian empire, whereby the Khan was recognized as governor of the region in exchange for his becoming a Russian vassal. The Russian annexation of Karabagh was officially recognized by Persia in the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813 (Bournoutian, 1994, p 18).

The boundaries and administrative arrangements of Karabagh were to change

again. Eventually, it became part of the Elizavetpol Province, which later became Azerbaijan. Finally, in the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, the Persians completely ceded Karabagh, together with Yerevan and Nakhichevan, to the Russians (cf. Nissman, 1987, pp 13–15). These administrative and political changes in the name of colonial interests introduced disruption in economic life of the region and had lasting implications for the future.¹⁴

In the following decades, subsequent re-drawing of borders and administrative changes were made by the Tsarist Russians in the Transcaucasus,¹⁵ and by 1880 the divisions in the region were set and remained unchanged until the Bolshevik Revolution, which brought yet another geopolitical evolution to Transcaucasia.

The modern period

In 1918, each of the three large nationalities of the Transcaucasus (Georgians, Armenians and Azeris) took advantage of the chaos created by the 1917 revolution and declared a short-lived independence.¹⁶

Since the status of Karabagh was unclear at this juncture, Karabagh Armenians took matters into their own hands and formed the First Assembly of Karabagh Armenians, in August 1918, and elected a People's Government. Although this 'government' rejected Turkish rule over Karabagh, by September 15 the Turks had already taken over Baku and had the region under their control (Riddell, 1993, p 153). Armenian demands for 'independence' ended with a Turkish military solution whereby an estimated 15–20,000 Armenians were killed in the city of Shushi, the then capital of Karabagh.¹⁷ The Armenians submitted to the Turks and 5000 Turkish soldiers entered Shushi. Fearing for their very existence, the Armenians of Karabagh sought military assistance from Armenians outside their borders. However, the newly declared Republic of Armenia was too weak to provide any assistance. Neither could General Antranik, a guerrilla fighter and military leader in the region, provide any solution. By that time, the First World War had ended with Turkey surrendering to the Allies (Swietochowski, 1985, p 143).

Then came a brief British occupation of the region. The Armenians relied on Britain and the Western Allies to find a lasting solution to the territorial problem of Karabagh;¹⁸ but Britain, driven by its own strategic considerations *vis-à-vis* Turkey, and with an eye on the petroleum reserves in Baku, gave full support to Azerbaijan leaving the fate of the Armenians in Karabagh in the hands of their 'enemies'.

At the beginning of 1920 a full-scale war broke out between the newly formed republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabagh. As the war was in progress the Red Army moved into Baku, then Armenia, in April and November, respectively. By the end of 1920 the Bolsheviks had taken over Transcaucasia completely. By the spring of 1921 all three republics were conquered by the Red Army and sovietized.

The Baku Soviet in Azerbaijan issued a declaration in which it announced that

Karabagh, together with Nakhichevan and Zangezur, were to be part of the Armenian Republic.¹⁹ The decree, while initially supported by Stalin, was never put into effect. It was, in fact, Stalin himself who insisted that Karabagh should become part of Azerbaijan, as a sign of 'good will' towards Turkey (Lane, 1992, p 214; Kazemzadeh, 1951, pp 11–19). The formalization of Azerbaijani control over Karabagh came at the treaties of Moscow and Kars signed, respectively, in March and October 1921.

Nagorno Karabagh was ceded to Azerbaijan despite the fact that its population was well over 90% Armenian and desired union with Armenia. The strategic importance of the mountainous enclave was immense: 'Karabagh formed a link or a barrier (depending on who controlled it) between the Muslims of Eastern Transcaucasia and Turkey' (Swietochowski, 1985, p 143). Thus, the decision to make Nagorno Karabagh part of Azerbaijan SSR was motivated by several factors. The Bolsheviks were interested in forming recognized borders with their neighbours as a way of consolidating their revolution. They did this first with their southern neighbour by granting concessions that Turkey wanted, namely, territorial concessions which would weaken Armenia and strengthen their ethnic kin, the Azerbaijanis. With such configurations, the Bolsheviks hoped it would be easier to expand their revolution into Turkey and other Muslim territories. The decision to grant Nagorno Karabagh to Azerbaijan was also part of a divide-and-rule strategy the Bolshevik leadership put into operation through their new empire. It was a way of implanting troublesome and dissident populations within minority republics and pitting ethnic groups against each other, thereby undermining the possibility of minority nationalities working together against the central government.

Once Nagorno Karabagh was handed to Azerbaijan, Baku redrew its boundaries. The northern Shahumyan district and western territories which linked Nagorno Karabagh with Armenia were made part of Azerbaijan proper (i.e. placing them outside the Autonomous Oblast), creating the 'island' enclave within western Azerbaijan.

The protests of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabagh at the time did not change the situation; neither did the long years of Soviet rule bring any relief to the problem of Nagorno Karabagh. In fact, throughout the Soviet period, burning territorial disputes were ignored in the name of Soviet internationalism.²⁰ A Karabagh intellectual provides a perspective:

Internationalism was a Communist veil, a false ideology, because in actuality, internationalism was leading to the destruction of nations. Internationalism considered national particularities as secondary—for example, the mother tongue of the nation was considered secondary. Internationalism was cutting the national roots of people. The emphasis was put on the unity of the workers, whether German, Russian, Turk or else. It seems to me that one of the reasons of the collapse [of the USSR] was the wrong approach to the nationalities issues. The USSR was destroyed first ideologically, then administratively and economically.²¹

In reality, ethnicity and/or religion remained strong forces for group identification.

Soviet authorities dealt with complaints about difficult standards of living in the regions by either minor reforms or forceful measures (Merridale & Ward, 1991, p 209). Nagorno Karabagh suffered the consequences of a dual burden: the impact of Stalinist policies and the pressures of Azerbaijani national self-consciousness, often fuelled by pan-Turkist ideology.

Since Sovietization, the Armenian majority of Nagorno Karabagh never reconciled itself to Azeri rule. They complained to the central authorities in Moscow, Baku and Yerevan about the increasing economic, social and cultural difficulties in their enclave, but to no avail. Even during the very repressive 1930s, there were instances of non-violent resistance and protest. With the Khrushchev thaw in the 1950s and 1960s protests, in the form of letters and petitions to Moscow, increased.

One of the most significant turning-points in the struggle of Karabagh Armenians, which would later become the basis of the 'Karabagh movement' in the late 1980s, is the so-called 'letter of the 13' occasioned by the Soviet system's 'Five-Year Plan' in 1965.

This campaign has received little attention in recent studies of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, specially in the West. The issues raised in the letter constitute the fundamental grievances of the Armenian population in Karabagh. It is also significant that in the late 1980s the points discussed in the 1965 letter were still the key grievances referred to by Armenian activists and, to a large extent, constitute the basis of current mistrust between Stepanakert and Baku.

A detailed examination of the grievances, argumentation and overall appeal of the 1965 'movement' reveals that the basic premises of the Karabaghis to explain their situation has remained largely unchanged, with one important exception: instead of the Soviet Union, the appeal is directed to the international community.

In the summer of 1965, a group of 13 Armenian intellectuals, artists and professionals,²² all members of the Communist Party, studied the Five-Year Plan and its provisions for Nagorno Karabagh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and compared it with that of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic. As the group scrutinized the document, 'a wide range of horrible discriminations', discrepancies and unfair development measures were observed in all aspects of economic, political, cultural and social life in Karabagh, especially in the agricultural sector, NKAO's largest income source.

Having failed to effectuate changes with local authorities, the authors of the letter decided to present the grievances of Karabagh Armenians to the highest level of leadership in the USSR: the Presidium of the Central Committee of the USSR, headed by the General Secretary of the Party Central Committee, Leonid Brezhnev, the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, Aleksei Kosygin, and the Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium, Anastas Mikoyan.²³ The NKAO and Azerbaijan SSR Communist Party leaders were not aware that

such a letter was being sent to Moscow. It was kept within a very close circle of intellectuals and sympathetic local party officials.

'Patience has its limits', explained Maxim Hovanessian, one of the signatories of the letter (who was also an activist in the 1988 'movement'), 'in as much as we are patient and able to carry burdens, there comes a time when you cannot go on anymore. In human life nothing is limitless'. The gradual decline of the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabagh was the most alarming factor: 'The policies were such that eventually the best of Karabagh was leaving Karabagh. A nation is led by intellectuals and our best intellectuals were leaving Karabagh', stresses Hovanessian. By comparison, 'Karabagh could have been like Nakhichevan [where the Armenian population gradually and drastically declined], but we turned out to be more stubborn'. Once again, history is sought to explain differences: 'Our historical biography is different from Nakhichevan. For many years we had our statehood in the form of Melikdoms (principalities). True it was very conditional statehood, but we had a state—each Melik had his army, his land, his people and subjects'.²⁴

The 13-page letter starts with an introduction mentioning the economic, cultural, scientific and technical developments throughout the Soviet Union, and poses a rhetorical question to the Soviet leadership: 'One doesn't know why Nagorno Karabagh is an exception [to all this]?' Then it goes on enumerating a long list of objective problems facing the Armenians in Karabagh. They point out discriminatory policies and express concern about negative developments in the economy and infrastructure; transportation, depopulation; decline of culture; lack of political leadership and territorial claims.²⁵

Finally, the letter concludes that the crux of 'all these problems' rests on the policies of the authorities in Baku:

Republican leaders, at each public event do not fail to drum the idea that Nagorno Karabagh is an indivisible part of Azerbaijan.

... Azerbaijani leaders look at Karabagh as a place populated with foreigners. Do they think that a black dot on the map is enough for a nation to be divided, a nation with a millennial history, psychology and fate. And this under socialist conditions, under the banner of Leninist nationalities policy? (Ulubabian, 1994, p 215).

As for territorial claims of the Armenians, the letter reminds the Soviet leaders that:

Armenians make 85 percent of Nagorno Karabagh's population. They have been living on this land since time immemorial. And the land belongs to whomever lives on it. This truth was well understood by those who, in 1920, gave Nagorno Karabagh to the newly created Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. But later Nagorno Karabagh reunion with Armenia was broken by the weak hand of Stalin.

They argue that for 45 years, 'having been cut off from the main part of their nation', Karabagh Armenians had been deprived of major possibilities of economic and cultural growth. They conclude with an appeal to Soviet internationalism:

It is the internationalist duty of the Azerbaijani people, its Party organization and government to respect the rights of Karabagh Armenians: to return Nagorno Karabagh to Armenia. This is the decades-long longing of Karabagh workers. Ask each one of them (not the so called 'leaders') and you will hear only request and plea for reunification.

While initially Moscow responded cautiously about the Armenian demands, eventually the 'case of the 13' was closed after months of inquiries, investigations and intimidation. Tighter controls were established in NAKO and the slightest suspicion of dissent was dealt with immediately and severely. Nevertheless,

Generally, [Karabagh Armenians'] national spirit (*azgayin voki*) never declined. The methods of the struggle changed, there were different waves,... social movements are like waves, they go through stages of ascent and descent depending on the political conditions of a given time. During the Brezhnev era conditions were very tight. But despite everything, the Armenian spirit was living in us. It was always a point of reference for us. It's true that people were being persecuted for this. For example, a young man was fired from his job because he had recited a poem about Mt. Ararat at a gathering. It had reached to such strange conditions. The spirit was there, under the ash, but we were living the sparks.²⁶

The 'sparks' re-ignited a movement when Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* provided an opportunity. Armenians—as the rest of the Soviet Union—believed and hoped that the time had come for fundamental changes. Thus, the year 1988 marked the beginning of a new phase in the continuing struggle in and for Karabagh.

The 'lessons of history' are an important theme in contemporary Armenian political discourse. Hence, past objective factors affecting the collective life of the Armenians in NAKO contribute to the construction of their subjective perceptions. While they were viewed and treated as a 'minority' (nationality) in Azerbaijan by the republican authorities Armenians, as the majority in an administrative sub-unit of the USSR, deferred from this view and perceived themselves as citizens with 'constitutional right' for at least cultural autonomy, if not full autonomy.

Whether intentional or byproduct of state policies, the alarm of 'depopulation' and 'cultural extinction' was real. When the components that define a group—economic, cultural, social plausibility structures—are threatened, group efforts are mobilized to protect or strengthen them. Starting from the 1920s, Azerbaijan's 'Karabagh policy' hinged on keeping the lid tight on territorial claims and eventually neutralize demands by instituting various administrative policies affecting the socio-economic and cultural life of Karabagh Armenians.

The construct that Karabagh Armenians are 'ungrateful foreigners' living in 'Western Azerbaijan'—embedded in Azerbaijani historiography and reinforced through government policies in the Soviet era—continue to have implications in the present, especially in the resolution of the Karabagh conflict since the early 1990s. On one hand Baku claims that Karabagh is an 'indivisible' part of Azerbaijan, on the other hand it views the indigenous Armenian population as

'the others'. Gerard Libaridian, who was involved in the negotiations process as adviser to the president of Armenia, put it more succinctly:

[Azerbaijan's attitude is] a major paradox because if you claimed that these [Armenians] are your citizens you should be able to sit and talk to them rather than treating them as the enemy and giving them absolutely no reason to trust you.²⁷

By 1988, the socio-political processes of the past had brought the minority–majority cleavage between Karabagh Armenians and Azerbaijan to a point where: 'Authority cannot put up with a nation that gets on its nerves; [and] the nation cannot tolerate an authority it has come to hate' (Kapuscinski, 1985, pp 104–5, 113).

The armed conflict

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dispute over Nagorno Karabagh was transformed from a domestic Soviet conflict into an international issue. Besides Russia, a number of countries—including regional players such as Turkey and Iran—and international organizations proposed various unsuccessful initiatives. The most important of these has been the OSCE which, since the summer of 1992, has been actively facilitating negotiations in the form of its 11-state Minsk Group, whose co-chairmanship became a triumvirate of Russia, France and the United States in early 1997.

Since 1991 the war has claimed more than 20,000 lives on both sides, created more than 450,000 refugees in Armenia and 800,000 in Azerbaijan, and destroyed hundreds of villages. The war is not officially over, but a fragile cease-fire since May 1994 has remained in force.

The main difficulty facing attempts to reach a solution to the Nagorno Karabagh conflict has been the friction between the principle of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity on one hand, and the Karabagh Armenians' right to self-determination on the other. The international community's position is that the territorial integrity of the countries of the former Soviet Union should be maintained. However, Karabagh Armenians have argued persistently—in addition to presenting socio-economic and cultural factors—that just as Azerbaijan had the 'legal choice' to secede from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenians too—under the law governing the Soviet Union at the time—had the right to secede from Azerbaijan.²⁸

Currently, neither international law nor the treatment of the Bosnian Serbs' similar claims to a right of secession from an independent Bosnia give much support to the Karabagh Armenians' case. Yerevan has also argued that the recent historical record means that Azerbaijan is unable to guarantee the security of the population of Nagorno Karabagh—especially in view of anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan—requiring that the enclave secure the right to self-determination.

Nagorno Karabagh Armenians maintain that any solution leaving Karabagh within Azerbaijani jurisdiction is unacceptable. Baku is willing to grant a 'high

degree of autonomy' to Karabagh as part of the Azerbaijani state, but considers full independence as an infringement of its sovereignty and hence, of its territorial integrity, while official Baku has not specified what 'high degree of autonomy' means or is (Azerbaijan's new Constitution does not have any provisions for autonomous regions within the republic). Meanwhile, Azeri opposition parties have criticized the solutions proposed so far by the OSCE Minsk Group. Former President Abulfaz Elchibey, in addition to rejecting the OSCE proposal, stated that Nagorno Karabagh should have no more than 'cultural autonomy'. He advocated military action to resolve the Karabagh conflict 'if it proves possible to do so by peaceful means'.²⁹

OSCE negotiations

Since February 1992, in more than a dozen Minsk Group meetings, the two sides have focused without results on drawing up a 'Grand Political Agreement' between the sides. The agenda begins with the most complex and contested issue, which is determining Karabagh's political status in the negotiations.

While the agenda and proposals of the Minsk Group have changed since the May 1995 talks in Moscow, the issues discussed up to that point—which still remain unresolved—could be summarized as follows.

The security of Nagorno Karabagh

The questions involved here include the deployment of international peacekeeping forces; demilitarization; the securing of a permanent land connection between Nagorno Karabagh and Armenia; and the provision of guarantees from the UN, OSCE and possibly the CIS Inter-parliamentary Conference that hostilities will not be resumed. The terms of any guarantees have not yet been specified, but they would include deployment of multinational peacekeeping forces and the creation of monitoring structures in the region.

The Shusha problem

This hilltop area within Nagorno Karabagh—referred to by Armenians as Shushi—in effect gives military control of the enclave to whoever holds it. The Armenians have linked the question of Shusha, which had an Azeri majority before the war, to the issue of refugees, by saying that Azeris can return to their homes in the area if Armenian refugees return to Azerbaijan proper. This seems to be a negotiating gambit, since Armenians are unlikely to want to return to any areas of Azerbaijan outside Nagorno Karabagh.

The Lachin corridor problem

The Lachin corridor is the land passage that connects Nagorno Karabagh with Armenia. Yerevan maintains that Lachin should be discussed irrespective of the

issue of Shusha, but only after the status of Nagorno Karabagh is determined. For its part, Baku insists that there can be direct negotiations with the Karabagh Armenians only after the return of territories, including Lachin and Shusha. Some form of international control of the corridor has been mooted as a possible compromise solution.

The status of Karabagh

Determining Karabagh's final status has been the most problematic issue. While various models have been suggested or proposed, Karabagh Armenians refuse any subordination to Baku and Baku insists on granting the 'highest form of autonomy' only.

So far, there is no consensus on these issues among the parties to the conflict. With regard to the deployment of peacekeeping forces, it is generally agreed that this will take place only after the Grand Political Agreement is signed.

A turning-point in the negotiations process was President Levon Ter-Petrossian's resignation in February 1998, when the proposed 'phased solution'—versus 'package solution'—led to a major political crisis in Armenia. Karabagh Armenians and their allies in Armenia, namely then the Prime Minister Robert Kocharian and Defence Minister Vazgen Sarkissian, argued that:

- (a) The acceptance of the Minsk Group's 'phased solution' plan would increase the prospects for renewed hostilities, by disrupting the current military balance between the Armenian and Azerbaijani forces and failing to require security guarantees from Baku;
- (b) Baku would have no incentive to make concessions to Nagorno Karabagh once Azerbaijani control of the occupied territories is restored and might be tempted to re-start hostilities; and
- (c) Azerbaijan's promise to grant maximal autonomy to Nagorno Karabagh is questionable, given that Azerbaijan is a unitary state.

The supporters of the 'package solution' insisted that all issues pertaining to the resolution of the conflict should be discussed at once without preconditions.

A key problem in the negotiations process has been Baku's refusal to recognize Nagorno Karabagh Armenians as negotiating partners. The prospects for direct talks between Baku has been discussed among the Minsk Group co-chairmen; Armenia has advocated direct talks since the beginning of the conflict; and the Karabagh leadership sees it as the only way for progress in the talks. However, Azerbaijan consistently portrays the conflict in purely bilateral terms between Baku and Yerevan.

More recently, the Azerbaijani leadership has expressed interest in direct talks with Stepanakert, but only if Nagorno Karabagh, first accepts Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and returns the 'occupied territories'. (This is a major shift of policy from 2 years ago when Baku branded the elected leadership of Karabagh a 'band of international terrorists', and called the meeting between the then Karabagh president Robert Kocharian and United Nations Deputy Secretary-

General Aldo Aiello an ‘unprecedented reality’, in a report it issued to the 57th session of OSCE’s Permanent Council.)³⁰

Karabagh Armenians argue that direct talks should start without preconditions and without predetermining the relationship of one side with the other. In the short term, direct talks between Baku and Stepanakert remain highly unlikely; and yet in the long term, no serious progress will be made without full participation of the Karabagh Armenians in determining their status.

The temptation for Azerbaijan is to maintain the cease-fire and accelerate the oil-boom, justifying inaction by prosperity. The difficulty this poses is that each year that passes further solidifies Karabagh Armenians’ *de facto* independent status.

The cease-fire since May 1994 has provided a cooling-off period and has afforded time to strengthen governmental infrastructure in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Karabagh. In addition to the war, these new republics have had to embark on the transition from state-controlled to free market economies and, since independence, the state-building process. Unfortunately, both sides have also used the cease-fire regime to re-arm and replenish their military hardware.

The Karabagh elite

For centuries, in the absence of full independence, Karabagh Armenians’ political, cultural and religious elite have played pivotal role in the process of protecting the rights of their people. This has ranged from negotiations for political, economic and religious rights with a host of foreign rulers to armed struggles to protect their physical existence.

Efforts towards a ‘diplomatic solution’ to Karabagh’s problems is documented in as far back as the 17th century, when the Meliks of Karabagh sought even the assistance of Pope Innocent XI—in a letter dated 19 April 1699,³¹—entertaining the idea of converting to Roman Catholicism in return for the Pope’s assistance.

Known for their military audacity, throughout the centuries a host of Karabagh Armenians have held high positions in the military and administrative apparatus of ruling empires, including the Tsarist Russian empire. In the late 18th century, the five Meliks of Karabagh³² even received foreign recognition of their sovereign status when, through a charter of Tsar Paul (1796–1801) dated 2 June 1799, they accepted the suzerainty of Imperial Russia (Hewsen, 1975–76, pp 240n).

One of the most notable descendent of a Melik house was Stepan Shaumyan, who was a leading Armenian Bolshevik until his death in 1918 and one of the Baku Commissars.³³ In the Soviet period, a number of Karabagh natives had held high political and military positions. Most notable among them is a ‘two-times hero of the USSR’ Marshal Hovhanes Baghramian. (A monument in his honour was recently erected in Stepanakert.)

Currently, there are two groups of political and cultural elite in Karabagh (an economic elite has not yet emerged as a significant force due to the economic implications of the existing conflict):

- (a) Intellectuals, artists, and writers who were activists in the Soviet era in pursuit of union with Armenia and were the initiators of the 'Karabagh Movement' in the late 1980s. This group has nurtured a new cadre of intellectuals through various institutions, such as the Writers' Union of Karabagh, the 'Munk' ('We') intellectual club, the Journalists' Union of Karabagh and the Karabagh State University.
- (b) A new military and political elite that emerged after Karabagh's declaration of independence, mostly comprised of individuals who were involved in the armed struggle with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and currently hold important government positions.³⁴

While the first group is comprised of older, more ideological and history-conscious individuals, the new elite is mostly younger, shrewd and more experienced in international affairs.

As far as the Karabaghis are concerned, the most significant achievements of the ruling political and military elite has been the establishment of *de facto* independence since 1991—reinforced by the 1993–94 'military victories' and subsequent maintenance of well-disciplined armed forces—and the building-up of constituent elements of statehood. These achievements have also accorded legitimacy and power to the Karabagh leadership. Indeed, given the centrality of the conflict in the everyday life of Karabaghis, the ongoing military tension, and the perceived eventuality of resumption of armed conflict with Azerbaijan, there is an ideological and political uniformity in Karabagh. For example, other than the nominal presence of two political parties—the Communists and the Dashnaks—political disagreements are virtually non-existent, especially in foreign policy, among the elite and the various political and civic organisations. The essential elements of this ideological and practical 'doctrine' are: (a) the inviolability of Karabagh's right to self-determination; (b) the unacceptability of vertical relationship with Azerbaijan; (c) physical security of the population of Karabagh; (d) permanent land, political and security link with the Republic of Armenia; and (e) that the problem of Karabagh is a problem of the entire Armenian nation—it concerns not only the population of Nagorno Karabagh, but the Republic of Armenia and the Diaspora.

Finally, in recent years, the influence of the local elite has extended beyond Karabagh: in the Republic of Armenia, the President and the Interior Minister are Karabaghis, the Defence Minister is a veteran of the war and Karabagh natives hold high government positions;³⁵ and in the Diaspora, the Karabagh leadership enjoys unwavering and full political and economic support.

Currently, several key issues preoccupy Karabagh's foreign and domestic affairs, as discussed below.

Recognition

While *de facto* independent, the non-recognition of Karabagh's 'statehood' or independence by other states remains a major foreign affairs challenge of the

leadership.³⁶ The problem of recognition is also a contending issue in the negotiations process, whereby Azerbaijan's refusal to recognize Karabagh as a side to the conflict has hampered the talks.

Despite the obvious implications of non-recognition for example lack of foreign and normal inter-state relations—Karabagh has progressively enjoyed unofficial and semi-official recognition, especially in the last 3 years. While still facing diplomatic difficulties, Karabagh's foreign policy evolves around two main tracks:

- (a) In the short term, it involves efforts toward full recognition as a side to the conflict and toward direct talks with Baku. Already, as implied by the OSCE Minsk Group proposal in November 1998 and the invitation of the Council of Europe for hearings on the conflict, Karabagh is clearly recognized as a side and a legitimate entity for negotiations by the international community.
- (b) In the long term, it involves efforts toward recognition of statehood or a 'special status'—similar, for example, to Liechtenstein, San-Marino or Andora (based on a special agreement with Azerbaijan and with international guarantees)—by other states. Towards this end, the Karabagh leadership has developed close contacts with 'sympathetic states' who might possibly provide limited or full recognition. The establishment of such contacts have been possible with the support and lobbying efforts of the Armenian Diaspora, especially in the Middle East, Europe, South and North America. Currently, Karabagh has unofficial representation ('Information Offices') in Moscow, Washington and Paris. It has received the most vocal support from Middle Eastern countries. For example, the Lebanese Parliament Speaker, Nabih Berri, has stated that Lebanon would recognize the Nagorno Karabagh Republic as an independent state if the population votes for independence in a UN sponsored referendum.³⁷

In the words of the Speaker of the enclave's National Assembly, Oleg Yesayan, 'The Nagorno Karabagh Republic is now a sovereign entity with all power attributes, such as permanent population, a certain territory, legitimate and democratic authorities able to build relations with other countries.'³⁸ On the 10th anniversary of the 'Karabagh Movement', President Arkady Ghokassian underlined that 'independence had not been granted to Karabagh by international institutions but gained in bloody battles'. He assured that Karabagh's leaders would spare no efforts to defend the country's independence.³⁹

Security

Military strength and security issues predominate Karabagh's internal and external affairs. As characterized by Karabagh's defence minister, the current post-war situation in the region is 'a cold war between Azerbaijan and Karabagh'.⁴⁰ The balance of military power has been a significant factor in the maintenance of the fragile cease-fire since May 1994. The cease-fire regime has

provided respite to the warring sides, but it has also been a period of rearming and vigorous military training. As reported by the mass media, about \$1 billion-worth of arms were transferred from Russia to Armenia in 1994–96. As for Azerbaijan, in addition to purchases of weapons from Russia and Ukraine, Azerbaijani Air Force Chief Ramiz Rizayev told journalists in Turkey, in April 1998, that ‘Azerbaijan is considering purchasing F-16 fighters manufactured in Turkey under US licence’.⁴¹

The Karabagh leadership believes that Azerbaijan will eventually resolve the conflict militarily. This ‘threat’, whether perceived or real, has made military strength and combat readiness top priorities in Karabagh. The defence establishment in Karabagh argues that the high combat readiness of the Karabagh army is an important safeguard against renewed fighting with Azerbaijan. Indeed, the two key elements to Karabagh’s survival as a quasi-independent state are the militarization of society in 1992 and the financial and logistical assistance provided by Armenia and the Diaspora.

Former Russian Security Council secretary, Aleksandr Lebed, has assessed Karabagh’s army as probably ‘the most professional in the entire CIS’,⁴² which has not only deterred Azerbaijan from restoring control over the enclave by force, but also successfully occupied swathes of Azerbaijani territory surrounding the enclave, which form an effective security zone and protect Karabagh’s sole land link with the outside world via Armenia.

The Karabagh leadership has stated repeatedly that the ultimate guarantor of the security of Karabagh Armenians is Karabagh’s strong army. However, the maintenance of a large armed force is a very high price for an enclave with limited natural and economic resources.

Economy

In addition to the hardships caused by the economic transition that all former Soviet republics experience, the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict has created its own dynamics and difficulties for Karabagh’s economy. Coupled with the Azerbaijani blockade, the military situation takes a major toll on the enclave’s economic development. For example, since all male citizens between the ages of 17 and 45 are drafted for a 3-year military service,⁴³ a sufficient labour force is virtually non-existent in Karabagh. Currently, agriculture remains the primary economic sector while other sectors remain either underutilized or underdeveloped.

In April 1995, the government in Stepanakert estimated that the war has caused \$2.5 billion damage to its economy and infrastructure. Karabagh’s economy remains meagre, and it relies heavily on Yerevan for financial assistance. Reportedly, its state budget for 1997 was \$20 million, \$13 million of which came from Armenia in the form of long-term credit, to cover basic needs such as social welfare, education and health.

As opposed to microeconomics, the Armenian Diaspora’s assistance has been primarily in Karabagh’s infrastructure, such as the building of roads and water

supply systems. In this regard, one of the most notable projects is the construction of the Goris–Lachin–Stepanakert highway. In September of this year, President Kocharian and Karabagh officials attended the opening of the 55-km highway (85% of the project). The almost \$9 million cost was entirely financed by the Armenian Diaspora.

In addition to the economy, a number of social problems—for example, orphans, widows, the elderly—exist in Karabagh which require short- and long-term solutions. While the government has instituted various social welfare programmes, the establishment of an adequate socio-economic infrastructure will depend on the resolution of the conflict.

Regional players and Karabagh

Over the last decade, Karabagh's 'foreign affairs' have developed along the lines of the developments in the former Soviet space in general and the Caucasus in particular. The role and policies of the three major players of the region—Russia, Iran and Turkey—have significant implications on the present situation and the future geostrategic makeup of the region. While international efforts to resolve the Karabagh conflict are under way, it is generally believed—at least by the Karabagh leadership—that the three powers in the region and their relationship with each other, as well as the region itself, will ultimately decide the 'final outcome' of the Karabagh conflict.

Russia

After Armenia, Russia is the second most important country for Nagorno Karabagh for several key reasons:

- (a) As the successor state of the Soviet Union, the political and military presence and networks that Karabagh Armenians had developed, particularly in Moscow, continue to provide substantial support, especially military, at this critical juncture in Karabagh's struggle. Many Armenian natives of Karabagh had established themselves in Moscow and other parts of Russia, especially after the Azeri suppressions in 1960s and 1970s, and have subsequently risen to prominent positions. (Among them are Yuri Parsekhov, an international law expert and legal counsel on international affairs to the Karabagh leadership, and Arkady Vartanian, international legal expert and Chairman of the Russian-Armenian Initiatives.)
- (b) Since the beginning of the conflict, Russia has been the first and key player in the negotiations process (the May 1994 cease-fire was brokered by Russia). Due to their historical experience, Karabagh Armenians view Russia, despite its weaknesses and the growing US influence in the region, as the most important regional power in the present and the foreseeable future.
- (c) Karabagh provides an important political lever to Russia *vis-à-vis* Azerbai-

jan's stated 'pro-western' stance and the multinational efforts to exploit the Caspian in particular, and Russian's overall geostrategic interest in the Caucasus in general.

- (d) Russia has been and is the largest arms provider to both Karabagh (whether directly or through Armenia) and Azerbaijan.⁴⁴
- (e) The close relations between Russia and the Republic of Armenia, reinforced with a host of landmark treaties, directly or indirectly protect Karabagh's interests. Most notable among these agreements is Armenia's August 1997 treaty with Russia on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance, in which Moscow committed itself to the defence of Armenia should it be attacked by a third party. Russia, as the key regional security player, has proved a valuable historical ally for Armenians.

While official Moscow has employed unpredictable political influence on both the Armenians and the Azeris—depending on its own changing geopolitical and strategic interests in the South Caucasus—Karabagh Armenians have enjoyed consistent support in the wider Russian political circles, ranging from Duma deputies, to prominent political figures and organizations, to Russian media outlets.

In February 1998, 30 Russian State Duma deputies participated in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the campaign for Nagorno Karabagh's unification with Armenia, in Stepanakert. The visit stirred a statement by Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadii Tarasov rejecting Azerbaijan's objections to the participation of the Russian deputies and pointing that the visit had been private, not official.⁴⁵

During these same celebrations in Stepanakert, Lieutenant General Alexander Lebed, in a gesture of full support, stated at a public meeting: 'Ten years ago the people of Karabagh resolutely and clearly declared they will not be anyone's slaves. They declared to live independently, and according to their own laws'.⁴⁶

Previously, in a letter addressed to the OSCE Minsk co-chairmen in July 1997, Lebed considered the higher consideration given to the principle of territorial integrity and the subordination of the Armenians of Karabagh to Azerbaijan as 'impractical'. He warned that if such a solution is imposed, 'There's going to be much blood, but no peace'. Finally, referring to history and citing Chechnya's example, Lebed wrote:

In 1921 the Caucasian Bureau of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) sacrificed the fate of the Karabagh people in the interests of 'the world revolution'. Yielding to a temptation to impose your [Minsk Group] will on the Armenian people in a similar way, you will achieve only one thing — the resumption of large-scale hostilities.⁴⁷

As for the Russian government, similar with the recent case of its Abkhazia policies—when President Yeltsin and the Russian Foreign Ministry disagreed over the continued presence of a Russian peacekeeping force along the border between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia—the Yeltsin administration's Karabagh policy has not been always consistent. For instance, Acting Deputy Prime

Minister of Russia Ivan Rybkin, during a visit to Yerevan to attend President Kocharian's inauguration stated: 'The people of Nagorno Karabagh must find its self-determination, and everybody should pay due regard to thatchoi ce'.⁴⁸ A few weeks later at the start of the CIS summit in Moscow, President Yeltsin bluntly told the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan: 'You should sit down and sign a document and take away your problems'.⁴⁹

In January 1998 a group of pro-Armenian Moscow intellectuals met to revive the 'Karabagh Committee of the Russian Intelligentsia'. As explained by the group, 'the exacerbation of the situation around Nagorno Karabagh' necessitated the move. An article by a member of the Committee, Kirill Alekseevskii, clarified its position on the policy debate in Armenia. He criticizes President Ter-Petrossian's discourse on Karabagh, stating that 'the main thing is that the people be led by a person related to them by blood and spirit. A person who would not disguise his ugly thoughts by nice words... Ter-Petrossian's long article [published in November 1997]is but a call on the Armenians to betray Nagorno Karabagh.'⁵⁰

As for other newspaper commentators, a 30 June article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* listed the reasons why the author considers that Nagorno Karabagh qualifies for UN membership. The article pointed out that the December 1991 referendum on independence from Azerbaijan took place in accordance with existing Soviet legislation. It also stated that, as a non-UN member, Karabagh is deprived of the opportunity to defend itself by diplomatic, as opposed to military, means. An article published by the same author in the same paper in January 1998 similarly called for the 'decolonization' of Karabagh and for the creation of a permanent security corridor linking the enclave with Armenia. That article argued that only international recognition could provide adequate security for the Karabagh population.⁵¹

The Karabagh Armenians, through their contacts in various Russian power circles, especially the military, have successfully manoeuvred among the rival forces in Moscow and elsewhere, which have resulted in favourable support for Karabagh's interests. Forexamp le, despite Russian's declared intentions to stop arming the Armenians, a convoy of six trucks belonging to the Group of Russian Troops in the Caucasus, was detained on 28 January 1998 at the Georgian–Armenian frontier. The trucks were loaded with ammunition and weapons and were headed for Armenia on orders from the Commander of the Group of Russian Forces in the CaucasusL ieutenant-General Viktor Kazantsev. They were forced to turn back.⁵²

Iran

Armenian–Iranian relations are increasingly cemented by numerous bilateral agreements. Iran's economic presence in Armenia (especially in energy, industry and consumer goods) and by extension in Karabagh is particularly strong. Although Iran maintains a relatively neutral stance on the conflict, its economic

ties with Armenia aggravate Baku, as they undermine the effect of the Azerbaijani blockade.

Since the beginning of the conflict Iran has attempted to mediate on several occasions, but without success. Two Iranian-brokered cease-fires in Nagorno Karabagh in the spring of 1992 were violated almost immediately after they were signed. Meanwhile Armenia has called for Iran's mediation in the Karabagh dispute on several occasions (most recently in January 1998).

The Karabagh leadership views Iran as an important regional player. As stated by Karabagh President Arkady Ghoukassian:

All these territories were once a part of Persia, and only [later] were joined to Russia. Iran has significantly more moral, political, historical, and geographic rights for participation in resolution [of the conflict], than Turkey. Yet the negotiations are held within the framework of OSCE, and Iran is not [a] member. This, along with a range of other reasons, keeps Teheran on a distance from participating in the peace process. In general we believe that Iran has a right to apply [*sic*] for the mediator's role.⁵³

Both former President Rafsanjani and current President Khatami of Iran have expressed desire and willingness to assist in the settlement of the conflict. President Khatami has stated that 'the region is in need of reconstruction and development, something which requires collective efforts', that Iran 'believes in cooperation based on mutual respect, and that regional states should beware not to let the region be turned into alien powers 'zone of influence'.

Iranian leaders have stated that the Karabagh crisis should be settled fairly and peacefully and 'without any interference from outside'.⁵⁴ They hope that resolving the Karabagh conflict would facilitate further development of Iran's collaboration with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

During an April 1997 visit to Baku, Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati told journalists that 'the liberation of Azerbaijani territories currently occupied by Karabagh Armenian forces should take place without the intervention of external powers'. He urged that 'the Transcaucasian countries should join forces to prevent the increase of US influence in the region'.⁵⁵ A few months later, in October 1997, Iran once again expressed readiness to help resolve the conflict, while in Baku, Iran's First Vice-President Hassan Habibi, referring to peaceful coexistence as the centrepiece of Iran's foreign policy, announced Iran's readiness to help resolve the Karabagh conflict. He added that Iran and Azerbaijan, on the strength of common culture, history and religion, can expand their cooperation in the region.⁵⁶ Iran warned that the 'intrusion of a military contingent', even a peacekeeping force, in the region of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict will only destabilize the situation.⁵⁷

In the last 2 years, direct (although unofficial) economic relations have been established between Karabagh and Iran. Today one could find shops in Karabagh full of mostly Iranian goods. Large trucks with Iranian licence plates could be seen on a regular basis driving back from Karabagh with loads of mostly scrap metal and building materials.

Turkey

So far normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey remains hostage to Turkey's expectation that no diplomatic relations would be established until the Karabagh conflict is resolved. This has kept Baku happy in return for which Turkey expects to benefit from the Azeri oil transit.

As stated by successive Turkish governments, President Suleyman Demirel has proclaimed 'fullid entity' of the positions of Turkey and Azerbaijan over the 'regulation of the Karabagh conflict as well as the regional instability'. He stated that 'Turkey and Azerbaijan are two states but they are one nation: they are twin states'.⁵⁸ He has warned that 'If Armenia is wise enough, it will free the occupied territories soon'.⁵⁹ Earlier in June, State Minister Refaiddin Sahin had stated that even Turkey's setting-up of economic relations with Armenia was out of question until the Nagorno Karabagh conflict is solved.⁶⁰

A more radical proposal has been suggested by Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit suggesting that southern Armenia, the territory between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan be given to Azerbaijan in return for Karabagh since this would enhance the establishment of 'communications between Turkey, the Caucasus and Central Asia'.⁶¹

The Karabagh elite and the leadership view Turkey's political role and military participation in the conflict within the wider historical context of Armenian-Turkish relations. As explained by President Arkady Ghoukassian, 'Karabagh is only a part of the "Armenian Question" (*Hay Tad*) and that the issues of the [1915] Genocide and Karabagh are the same, with one difference: Armenians still live in Karabagh today, and no longer in Turkey'.⁶²

On April 22 of this year, the Nagorno Karabagh parliament adopted a resolution condemning the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. When asked why so late, a senior deputy explained that it would have been adopted 6 years ago had the former Armenian authorities not prevented them from doing so. As to the implications of the resolution on Turkish-Armenian relations, he stated that 'Time has showed that the more concessions we make on this issue the more demands we get'.⁶³

Karabagh Armenians point out that Turkey's economic and military assistance to Azerbaijan negates Ankara's stated efforts for regional peace. On the other hand, Turkey's political and military double standard *vis-à-vis* Cyprus presents another problem for the Karabaghis. During his address to the UN General Assembly in September of this year Prime Minister Yilmaz, while referring only to the 'heightened tensions' in Cyprus, 'called for an urgent settlement of the Nagorno Karabagh dispute' and called for 'the termination of the Armenian occupation of Azeri territory'.

Conclusion

In the last 10 years, the Karabagh elite has played pivotal role in transforming a 'domestic' problem in the Caucasus into an international issue. They have

turned the early years of political activism and 'freedom fighting' into serious diplomacy and a combat-ready, disciplined army. Today, the 'Nagorno Karabagh Republic' has acquired basic state attributes and functions effectively as *de facto* independent state. It has a president, a government, a parliament, an efficient army, and secure transportation links with the outside world.⁶⁴ Having learned the 'lessons of their history' (as they state it), Karabaghis believe that ultimately they—not the international community—are the guarantors of their independence and security. While this presents a colossal challenge to the Karabagh leadership, since 1991 they have been fairly successful in finding a place for themselves in the evolving and complex geostrategic architecture of the region.

Notes and references

1. For forced population shifts in the North Caucasus—for example the Kalmyks, Karachai, Chechen, Ingush and Balkars—see Karachai 1958, p 47.
2. According to 1989 Soviet census, there were 145,000 (78.4%) Armenians and 40,000 (21.6%) Azeris in Nagorno Karabagh; see 'Nationality Composition by Union Republics', *Soviet Union: Political Affairs* (Joint Publication Research Service) JPRS-UPA-90-066 (December 4, 1990). For a detailed demographic analysis of the population of Karabagh between 1913 and 1979, see Luchterhandt, 1993, Vol. 31, pp 75–78.
3. Strabo (1st century BC), *Geography*, compiled and translated by F. Lasserre (Paris, 1960), book XI, chapter 14: 4; an early 7th-century Armenian world atlas published in French by A. Soukry, *Géographie de Moïse de Corène* (Venice, 1881), cited in Donabedian, 1994, pp 87n.
4. According to a 10th–11th-century historian of Albania: 'Urnayr, King of Albania... was reborn through St Gregory the Illuminator [the patron saint of the Armenians]... he converted the Albanians... After his [Gregory's] death the Albanians asked for the young Gregoris [his son] to be their catholicos, for our king Urnayr has asked St Gregory to consecrate him bishop of his country—not by necessity or because the Armenians are senior to the Albanians; they decided to submit voluntarily, summoned the worthy heir of St Gregory, and were well pleased.' Dasxuranci, 1961, pp 7–8.
5. See E. Hasan-Dchalalians, *Histoire de l'Aghovanië* in M. F. Brosset, *Collection d'Historiens Arméniens*, Vol. 2. (St Petersburg, 1874–76).
6. J. Zeynaloglu, *A Concise History of Azerbaijan*, trans. Ferhad P. Abasov (Winthrop, MA 1997); I. Aliev, *Mountainous Karabagh: history, facts, and events* (Baku, 1989) [in Russian]; F. Mamedova, *Political History and Historical Geography of Caucasian Albania* (Baku, 1986); Z. Bunyatov, *Azerbaijan from the Seventh to the Ninth Centuries* (Baku, 1974); K. Aliev, *Caucasian Albania from the First Century BC to the First Century AD* (Baku, 1974). In recent years, references to Armenians in primary historical sources in the new editions of early chronicles on Karabagh have been deleted or altered, for example 18th century Mirza Jamal Javanshir's *Tarikh-e Qarabagh*; see *Garabaghnamälär* (Baku, 1989), pp 108, 111, 112, and others, cited in Bournoutian, 1994, p 37n.
7. The 'nativization' policy was intended to promote national cultures, increase the number of natives in the republican party structures, higher education, etc. See, Goldenberg, 1994, pp 41–43; Saroyan, 1997, pp 141–143.
8. Baku's Armenian architects are 'assimilated' into the broader Russian and European architectural category and Armenian architectural monuments in Baku are not discussed at all. See Sh. S. Fatullayev, *Gradostroitel'stvo i arkhitektura Azerbaidzhana XIX-nachala XX veka* (Leningrad: Stroiizdat, 1986) cited in Saroyan, 1997, p 162n. In a recent presentation of cultural life in Shusha (Karabagh) there is no mention of Armenian cultural institutions, *Azerbaijan International*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1998), pp 52–54.
9. Cf. Atabaki, 1993, p 25; Hunter, 1993, p 230; Gachechiladze, 1996; Kazemzadeh, 1951; Swietochowski, 1990, p 45. The debate as to how to name the Azerbaijanis goes back to the late 19th century, the population of Azerbaijan, formerly known as 'Türk' or 'Transcaucasian Tatar' was formally reidentified as 'Azerbaijani' in 1937. Cf. Azerbaijani historian Suleiman Alliarov, 'Bizim sorghu', in *Azerbaijan* 7, 1988, p 176, cited in Saroyan, 1997, p 161n.
10. Cf. Dudwick, 1990; Nadei-Raevski, 1992, p 115; Saroyan, 1997, pp 125ff. Modern Azerbaijani authors omit references to Armenians who inhabited Karabagh before the Turkic invasions of the region. For example, the new Azeri edition of the 19th-century chronicler Mirza Jamal Javanshir's *Tarikh-e Qarabagh*

- has deleted the statement that ‘in ancient times [Karabagh] was populated by Armenians and other non-Muslims’, and most other references to the Armenian presence in Karabagh. For a detailed discussion see Bournoutian, 1994, pp 37n.
11. Interview in Vank (Martakert), 28 August 1995.
 12. Kapuscinski, 1995, p 43. For a discussion of *khachkars* as ‘political symbols’ see Michael Kimmelman, ‘When art becomes a metaphor of identity’, *New York Times*, 9 September 1998.
 13. Israel Ori, anative eof Karabagh and oneof theno table diplomats of theera , struggled for Armenian liberation through diplomacy. His efforts doomed to failure. Others who tried ‘diplomatic solutions’we re CatholicosE ssayi Hasan-Jalalian and Bishop Minas of Karaabakh; see Walker, 1991, p 79; Nalbandian, 1963, pp 21–22.
 14. Perhaps one ‘positive’ aspect of Russian control of the region was the end of the traditional economy of the Charatala with the Ottoman Empire, which was primarily the trade of Armenian and Georgian slaves who had been captured during raids, cf. Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* (London, 1994), p 40.
 15. Armenians complained in 1849 about their hard conditions and treatment, and as ar esult, the Erevan Province was created. Other changes were made in 1862, 1867, 1868 and 1875. An interesting editorial written in 1889 by Avedis Araskhanyants, entitled ‘Territorial Issues in Transcaucasia’ [in Armenian] gives details about the specific problemsr esulting in these changes and their impact on the lives of the ordinary people; see *Murç*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 1889, pp 1289–1295.
 16. On thee mergencean d demise of he Transcaucasian Federation, see Swietochowski, 1985, pp 73–75.
 17. In a 1922 memo, Churchill writes: ‘Thed etails of atrocities committed by theT urks in the Caucasus during the winterof 1920 when the fifty thousand Armenians had perished and the appalling deportations of Greeks from Trebizoned and Samsun districts which had occurred in the autumn of 1921, were now for the first time reaching Europe’, Churchill, 1929, pp 416–417. In 1905 there were other massacres in Baku: seeTutae ff, 1942, p 61; Swietochowski, 1985, pp 39–40.
 18. For a discussion of the indifference of the Allies at the Paris Peace Conference toward Armenians and the inability of the League of Nations to do anything, see Churchill, 1929, pp 406–408, where he wrote, ‘History will search in vain for the word “Armenia”’.
 19. The declaration was published in *Pravda* and Stalin himself called it ‘a historic act of world significance’, *Kommunist*, 2 December 1920, No. 2. Earlier, on 11 January 1918, a ‘Decree on the Soviet Council of People’s Commissars on Self-Determination andInde pendence for “Turkish Armenia” was signed by Lenin, Stalin and Bonch-Bruevich: see text in Basil Dmytryshyn and Frederick Cox, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East. A documentary record of Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey 1917–1985* (Princeton, NJ, 1987), pp 463–464.
 20. Hunter, 1993, p 250. For a discussion of territorial divisions and problems from the 18th century to Soviet times in the context of Soviet international ideology, see Vladimir A. Kalossov, Olga Glezer and Nikolai Petrov, *Ethno-Territorial Conflicts and Boundaries in the Former Soviet Union* (Durham, UK, 1992); also aP *ravda* editorial on theAll -Union Conferenceon Ideological Workers in *TheC urrent Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol. 24, No. 29 (16 August 1972).
 21. Interview in Stepanakert on 6 September 1995.
 22. Bagrat Ulubabian, Secretary of theO blast Division of theWri ters’ Union [of Azerbaijan SSR]; Sergei Shakarian, President of WorksC ommittee of Stepanakert City Soviet; Lazar Gasparian, editor of ‘Soviet Karabagh’ *Oblast* newspaper; Grigor Stepanian, senior editor at *Oblast* radio; Aram Babayan, director of no. 2 Sovkhozof Stepanakert; Arsen Mukanian, president of ‘Sosi Shahumian’ golkhozan d deputy of Azerbaijan SSR Supreme Council; Gurgen Gabrielian, chief of *Oblast* Culture Committee; Bostan Chanian, poet; Mikael Gorkanian, republican popular actor; Arkady Manucharian, chief of Stepanakert’s no. 59 Construction Committee; Albert Seyranian, director of Stepanakert electric-technical factory; Maxim Avanesian [Hovanessian], senior editor at *Oblast* radio; Sergei Grigorian, chiefe ngineer of no. 59 construction committee.
 23. The text of the letter is found in Ulubabian, 1994, pp 207–215.
 24. Interview in Stepanakert on 6 September 1995.
 25. The historical experience of Nagorno Karabagh Armenians under Azerbaijan SSR rule does not give them any reason to believe that things would be different if they arer eincorporated within the Republic of Azerbaijan. Significant objective factors contribute to this experience; particularly in the socio-economic sphere, the key factors were: (a) between 1913 and 1973 industrial production grew 113-fold in the USSR, about 221-fold in Armenia, about 40-fold in Azerbaijan, but in Nagorno Karabagh only 14.8-fold. For example, between 1945 and 1965, only two factories were established in Nagorno Karabagh; (b) starting in the 1940s, capital investment in Nagorno Karabagh was far below the national average in Azerbaijan SSR. This trend continued until the 1980s. Based on 1986 figures, Baku invested 473 roubles per citizen in Azerbaijan, but only 181 roubles in Nagorno Karabagh; (c) housing and construction were minimal in

- Nagorno Karabagh compared to the national average in Azerbaijan SSR. In the capital, Stepanakert, and in some other towns of Nagorno Karabagh the waiting lists for housing were up to 20 years; (d) means of transportation in the regions of Nagorno Karabagh were poorly developed making communications between its citizens very difficult. The lack of roads and functional inter-regional communications greatly hampered economic development, especially in the small towns and villages of the region. For example, while Nagorno Karabagh has a favourable geographic position with regard to neighbouring Armenia and Georgia, the exchange of goods and trade with them accounted for only 2% of its total 'foreign trade'; (e) under the guise of prevention of 'nationalism' authorities created internal mechanisms for the decline of Armenian culture and identity. For example, on the order of the government in Baku, the teaching of Armenian history was removed from the curriculum of the schools. Armenian culture, language and history was not allowed to be taught even in the only higher-education institution of the region, the Stepanakert Pedagogical Institute; (f) investment in the cultural sector was virtually non-existent, despite the rich cultural heritage of Nagorno Karabagh Armenians (as evidenced by hundreds of architectural monuments, churches and monasteries throughout the region); (g) cultural relations with the neighbouring Armenian SSR were subject to severe restrictions. All contacts required the expressed approval of the government in Baku and permissions were rarely granted. Even requests by theatre groups from Yerevan to perform in Nagorno Karabagh had to be approved by authorities in Baku; (h) official Baku and Azeri historiography persistently presented their own Armenian-Christian culture in Nagorno Karabagh, dating back to medieval times, as 'Albanian' and concealed their Armenian origins; (i) starting in 1936, the public practice of Armenian Christianity was not allowed in Nagorno Karabagh. While in Armenia a number of functioning churches existed throughout the Soviet period, in Nagorno Karabagh not one church was open until 1988. The absence of functioning churches in Karabagh was only partially the result of atheistic policies of the Communist Party. Unlike Baku, where an Armenian diocese and church functioned during the Soviet period, not even a symbolic church was allowed to remain open in Nagorno Karabagh. (cf. Luchterhandt, 1993; Ulubabian, 1994).
26. Interview in Stepanakert on 6 September 1995.
 27. Presentation at a round table conference at Princeton University on 9 May 1998. *Armenian Forum*, Vol.1, No. 2, 1998, p 140.
 28. For a discussion of Karabagh's legal position see Tchilingirian, 1998, pp 71–72.
 29. *RFE-RL Newslines*, 3 November 1997.
 30. *ANIS/Asbarez-on-line*, 16 February 1996.
 31. For the original Armenian text see G. Ezov, *Snosheniya Petra Velikago s Armjanami Dokumenty* (St Petersburg, 1898).
 32. Hasan-Jalalians, Beglarians, Shahnazarians, Israelians and Avanians.
 33. Other prominent descendants of Karabagh Meliks include: Gerasim Melik-Shahnazarian, Mayor of Shushi in 1918, who was regarded as the spokesman of the commercial classes of that city. Aslan Melik-Sahnazarian was chairman of the Karabagh Council, the organization representing the Karabagh Armenians in their struggle for union with the First Armenian Republic. George Melik-Karageozian, a member of the Armenian Populist Party, was Assistant Foreign Minister of the Armenian Republic in 1918 and Minister of Enlightenment the following year.
 34. The 41-year-old President Arkady Ghoukassian, a philologist and former journalist, and the 33-year-old Defence Minister Samuel Babayan, who became commander of the army in 1992, are the key and most influential actors in the political and military affairs of Karabagh.
 35. For a discussion of Robert Kocharian's entry into Armenia's political scene, see Tchilingirian, 1997.
 36. It should be noted, as occasionally indicated by Karabagh officials, that the issue of independence and the issue of recognition by others are not necessarily connected. Former President of Karabagh, Robert Kocharian, said: 'Our independence is a reality—it exists. Our people elect their own leaders. They determine with whom they shall deal and with whom they will not. Whether we are recognized by other countries or not, it is unlikely that the daily lives of the people of Nagorno Karabagh will be affected.' Press conference at the United Nations in New York, *The Armenian Assembly of America*, 2 February 1996.
 37. *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol 1, No. 118, Part I, 16 September 1997.
 38. *Noyan Tapan*, 23 February 1998.
 39. *Noyan Tapan*, 23 February 1998.
 40. *Snark News Agency*, 12 May 1997.
 41. *Azadlyg* (Baku), 4 April 1998. See also references in note 44.
 42. Liz Fuller, 'Karabagh A Quasi-Independent State; South Ossetia's Status unclear', *RFE/RL*, 27 July 1998.
 43. Those who are in high school are allowed to study and are drafted after graduation. In the first year, at 17, they attend special military school, and at the age of 18 join the regular army ranks; so that

- 'international norms are not violated', according to Henrig Abressian, vice-commander of military commissar. About 80% of the recruits have military experience due to the war in Karabagh. The Karabagh military school was founded in 1992. Only those with five or more children are relieved of military service. Recruitment is held twice a year, one in the spring and one in the summer. *Republic of Mountainous Karabagh*, daily, 29 July 1995.
44. cf. *Transitions*, September 1997; *RFE/RL Armenia Report*, 29 August 1998.
 45. *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol 2, No. 38, Part I, 25 February 1998.
 46. *Respublica Armenia*, 23 February 1998. Recently assassinated Russian State Duma deputy Galina Starovoitova, during a meeting with representatives of the Armenian Diaspora in New York, considered the proposals of the international mediators unrealistic. She stated that for Armenians to cede Kelbajar today without any due guarantees of security and a determined status of Nagorno Karabagh would be just like an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. *Noyan Tapan*, 17 December 1997.
 47. *Noyan Tapan*, 15 July 1997.
 48. *Noyan Tapan*, 9 April 1998.
 49. *Reuters*, 29 April 1998.
 50. *RFE/RL Armenia Report*, 31 January 1998.
 51. *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 2, No. 124 Part I, 30 June 1998.
 52. *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol 2, No.19, Part I, 29 January 1998.
 53. *Respublica Armenia*, 4 October 1997.
 54. *Ettelaat*, 4 November 1997; *Azg*, 29 January 1997.
 55. *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol 1, No. 17, Part I, 23 April 1997.
 56. *Ettelaat*, 14 October 1997.
 57. *RFE/RL Newslines* Vol 1, No. 94, Part I, 13 August 1997.
 58. *Armenpress*, 3 April 1998
 59. *Azg*, 4 April 1998.
 60. *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 6 September 1998.
 61. *Al-Wasat* (London), No. 296 (29 September–5 October 1997).
 62. *Azg*, 11 July 1998.
 63. *RFE/RL Armenia Report, Press Review*, 23 April 1998.
 64. *RFE/RL*, 25 September 1998.
 65. For example, Karabagh's automobiles have their own distinctive number plates. The government in Stepanakert has also issued the 'Republic of Nagorno Karabagh' postage stamps. Interestingly, an Armenian-American, in an article about Karabagh's stamps, indicates that several letters with Karabagh stamps were successfully delivered to his address in the United States; see Matthew Karanian, 'Stamp of Approval', in *Armenian International Magazine*, November 1998, pp 44–45.

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