

Towards peace in the Nagorny Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan through reintegration and cooperation

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Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev before a poster of Heydar Aliyev.

Source: Reuters/Sergei Karpukhin

Elmar Mammadyarov has been Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan since 2004. A graduate of the Kiev State University, the USSR Diplomatic Academy and the Centre for Foreign Policy Development at Brown University, he has previously served in Azerbaijan's diplomatic missions to the United Nations, United States and Italy.

The ongoing armed conflict in and around the Nagorny Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan has resulted in the occupation of almost one-fifth of the territory of Azerbaijan and made approximately one out of every eight persons in the country an internally displaced person or refugee. The Government of Azerbaijan's strategy is aimed at the liberation of all occupied territories, the return of forcibly displaced persons to their places of origin, and the establishment of durable peace and stability in the Nagorny Karabakh region as well as in the entire South Caucasus.

The legal and political constituent for the settlement of the conflict is based on the norms and principles of international law, laid down in the United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884 as well as in the appropriate documents and decisions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The above-mentioned UN Security Council resolutions were adopted in 1993 in response to the occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan and reaffirmed the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the international borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan and all other states in the region.

Although the mediation efforts conducted for over ten years within the framework of the OSCE have not always been consistent and, except for establishment of the ceasefire, have yet to yield results, Azerbaijan continues to be committed to the settlement of the conflict within the OSCE Minsk Group. However, the success of the peace process depends on a similar commitment and constructive approach on the part of Armenia, as well as on the active contribution of all OSCE member states, especially those represented in the Minsk Group and its Co-Chairmen. We are ready to continue negotiations with Armenia in order to eliminate the consequences of its military invasion and occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan.

We are also highly appreciative of the role of other international organizations, particularly the United Nations and the Council of Europe, in formulating and consolidating the general position of the international community. This position is based on respect for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and condemnation of the occupation and notorious ethnic cleansing of its territories, as well as addressing specific issues that, if left unaddressed, may result in serious obstacles to peace negotiations as well as unpredictable consequences. Thus, the UN General Assembly's consideration at its 59th session of the agenda item entitled 'The situation in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan' played a crucial role in attracting attention to the issue of the illegal

transfer of Armenian settlers into the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, as well as in initiating urgent measures for putting this dangerous practice to an end.

This article is written at a time of cautiously positive signs in the drive to find a settlement to the conflict. Azerbaijan has clearly and unequivocally demonstrated its aspiration towards a constructive resolution based on the so-called Prague process and strives to make full use of all political and diplomatic resources available to it.

The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan cannot be a subject of compromise. We will not surrender an inch of our territory to anyone. Azerbaijan does not want war and remains committed to a peaceful resolution. Yet if forced by deliberate actions aimed at the further consolidation of the current status quo of occupation, Azerbaijan will be ready to resort to any other available measures to legitimately restore its territorial integrity. Territorial acquisitions and the practice of ethnic cleansing are incompatible with universal and European values and contradict the principles and ideas of peace, democracy, stability and regional cooperation.

In order to veil its aggressive policy towards Azerbaijan, the Armenian side frequently speculates on the international legal principle of the right of peoples to self-determination. In reality, the practical realization of this right, as stipulated in the relevant international documents, does not involve unilateral secession, but represents a legitimate process carried out in accordance with international and domestic law within precisely identified limits. Obviously, the critical factor in addressing the issue of self-determination with regard to the conflict in question is that all actions aimed at tearing away a part of the territory of Azerbaijan are unconstitutional and accompanied by violation of basic rules of international law, particularly those prohibiting the use of force and the acquisition of territory.

Our approach to the right of self-determination derives from its true value and envisages securing the peaceful coexistence and cooperation of the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of the Nagorny Karabakh region and creating the necessary conditions for the effective realization of their right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, including through the formation of legitimate regional authorities at all levels.

We believe that the legal status of the Nagorny Karabakh region can be worked out only with the fully-fledged and equal participation of the citizens of Azerbaijan of both Azerbaijani and Armenian communities within the framework of a lawful and democratic process. While envisaging the realization

of this perspective in the final stage of the peace process, it is logical that the whole strategy would not become a reality without the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereign rights over all occupied territories and the safe and dignified return of the expelled Azerbaijani population thereto.

Once an agreement is achieved, we will need the international community to help guarantee its implementation through the deployment of multinational peacekeeping forces, support for demining, restoration of communications and rehabilitation of lands, as well as the provision of security guarantees for the population in the Nagorny Karabakh region, including the creation of local police forces in the region for both Azerbaijani and Armenian communities. The Government of Azerbaijan is ready to assist in all possible ways with the infrastructural rebuilding and economic development of the region, including the attraction of investments at the local level.

Special attention in the conflict settlement should be given to the issue of communications in the region. Those who are familiar with the conflict often encounter the notion of 'corridors' or 'unimpeded access'. Azerbaijan suggests a policy of shifting from restricted, antagonistic understandings of the corridor concept to the use of all communications in the region for the mutual benefit of both sides. This approach acquires particular significance with regard to the so-called 'Lachin corridor', which is important for linking both the Armenian population in the Nagorny Karabakh region with Armenia, and Azerbaijan with its Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan through the territory of Armenia. The use of the Lachin road in both directions along the route Aghdam-Khankendi-Shusha-Lachin-Goris-Shahbuz-Nakhichevan (with the possibility of further extension to Turkey) can provide both Azerbaijan and Armenia with guaranteed secure connections. The significance of utilizing the 'Lachin corridor' in such a way goes beyond the practical benefits of direct transport communication between two states. This road could become a 'road of peace' of great political, economic and pan-regional importance.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani war caused enormous damage and suffering to hundreds of thousands of uprooted people deprived of normal living conditions for more than a decade. A long-term solution for them, deriving from their strong desire to return to their homes, can be found only through a lasting settlement of the conflict.