

A Karabakh Azeri perspective

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Peace talks to resolve the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh have been under way for more than a decade with virtually no tangible progress. Locked in a wearisome 'no war, no peace' situation, both Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the Karabakh Armenian authorities, have effectively adopted 'wait and see' approaches. The Karabakh Azeris stand out as the most obvious losers from the protraction of the current status quo. Many Karabakh Azeris believe the status quo harms their interests by increasingly depriving them of the opportunity to influence decisions directly affecting them and diminishing their chances of returning to their homeland.

Problems of definition

In Azerbaijan the term 'Karabakh Azeris' used to refer to the population of the wider historical Karabakh region, which included the area of Nagorny Karabakh along with the Lachin and Kelbajar districts (together forming what Azeris refer to as 'upland' or 'mountainous Karabakh') and the adjacent lowland territories ('lowland Karabakh'). Unlike Armenians, Azeris historically did not differentiate between the lowland and mountainous parts and perceived Karabakh as a single geographical, economic and cultural space, where they have always been politically and demographically dominant. For this reason, many Azeris believe the creation of the autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh in 1923 within 'artificial' (i.e. previously non-existent) borders, was aimed at securing an Armenian majority region within Azerbaijan as part of the Soviet/Russian policy of divide and rule. Thus Armenians were perceived as a major tool for keeping Azerbaijan under constant control.

Official Azerbaijani policy now defines the Karabakh Azeri community as the Azeri population of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), which according to the 1989 population census constituted 21.5 per cent of the population of the NKAO (approximately 40,000 people). By this definition, the Karabakh Azeris constitute a small part of the 600,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the occupied territories.

However, this official definition is rather ambiguous because Azerbaijan itself rescinded the autonomous status of Nagorny Karabakh in late 1991 (in retaliation for the self-proclamation of the Armenian 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic') and changed the administrative division of the territory, allocating some parts of the former NKAO to the adjacent Kelbajar, Aghdam and Terter districts. Azeris living in these adjacent districts no longer fell within the official definition of the Karabakh Azeri community, which was reduced to virtually the population of Shusha, where over 70 per cent of the Azeris of NKAO lived before the conflict.



Most importantly, this definition excludes the population of Lachin (approximately 60,000 people), even though throughout the negotiations the issue of the future status of Lachin has been inextricably linked with the future status of Nagorny Karabakh.

Political marginalization

At a domestic level, the problems of the Karabakh Azeri community are indivisible from the wider IDP community of Azerbaijan of which it is part. Azerbaijan has one of the world's largest per capita IDP populations in the world, yet the influence of the IDPs on Azerbaijani politics is minimal. This situation stems from their poor organization, as well as their socio-economic conditions and the political restraints placed on them by the state. For example, in all elections since 1995 IDP voting and registration has not been transparent to monitoring, throwing into question the validity and accuracy of elections among these communities. The authorities have also kept significant parts of the IDP community living in temporary shelters and refugee camps in virtual segregation from the rest of the population. Access to these camps by the opposition, media representatives and civil rights activists has been severely restricted.

IDPs have been further deprived of institutions of self-governance. To date the only governing structures the IDPs possess are appointed 'executive authorities in exile', which function only nominally and deal mostly with the distribution of social allowances. The Azerbaijani authorities have also effectively denied the Karabakh Azeris the right to elect a community leader to represent them in the negotiations. Instead, the presidential appointee heading the Shusha 'Executive Authority in Exile', Nizami Bahmanov, has played this role since 1992.

This context, combined with growing frustration over the lack of progress in negotiations and feelings of abandonment, creates favourable conditions for radicalism and calls for a military solution. Such trends are reinforced by the dominant nationalist discourses portraying the conflict in terms of an Armenian-perpetrated 'genocide' against the Azeris, aimed at

territorial expansion and the creation of a 'Greater Armenia'. In a sense, Azerbaijani society is experiencing trends in public consciousness – similar to those experienced earlier in Armenian society – stemming from a 'defeat complex', unachieved national aspirations and the perceived 'victimization' of the nation.

Of those few non-governmental organizations existing to represent IDP interests the most prominent is the Karabakh Liberation Organization (KLO), which criticizes the "capitulatory" position of the government, "double standards" of the international organizations and calls for a military solution to the conflict. However, the KLO's popular slogan, "No Azerbaijan without Karabakh!" conveys the concern of many Azerbaijanis that the loss of Karabakh signifies the disintegration of the country and the disappearance of the Azeri nation as a whole. Even though the Karabakh Azeri community is weak and disorganized, it has the potential to become a powerful destabilizing force in Azerbaijan tomorrow if its interests are ignored today.

Marginalization from the peace process

Karabakh Azeris (along with the Karabakh Armenians) were recognized as constituting an "interested party" to the conflict in 1992 under the Minsk Group mandate, which mentions "elected and other representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh". However, in practice, the Karabakh Azeri community has been largely dissociated from the negotiations, mostly because of the respective policies of Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as the international organizations. Whether referring to an intrastate or interstate conflict, both Armenian and Azerbaijani approaches ignore the existence of a separate Karabakh Azeri community and therefore overlook the inter-communal dimension of the conflict between the Armenians and Azeris of Karabakh.

As the Karabakh Azeris could not participate in direct talks, their interests have been largely ignored throughout the negotiation process. The so-called 'land for peace' approach or one of its variants, the '5+1+1' formula often referred to during the negotiations, envisages the return of five occupied Azerbaijani territories adjacent to Nagorny Karabakh and then the

Two children, displaced from Karabakh, play in an abandoned oil field in Baku.

Source: Panos/Heidi Bradner

conditional return of Kelbajar and Lachin. The fact that the Armenian side is using the occupied territories outside Nagorny Karabakh as a bargaining chip to secure concessions on Nagorny Karabakh's independence or its unification with Armenia directly jeopardizes the interests of the Karabakh Azeri community.

Safe and dignified return

The primary concern of the Karabakh Azeris is a safe and dignified return to their homeland. As far as they are concerned, any peace document signed between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents should include provisions on the future status of the Karabakh Azeris within Nagorny Karabakh, and hence the future status of Shusha and Lachin. Shusha is the cornerstone of the Karabakh Azeris' identity and existence, and their attitude to any peace proposal depends directly on how this proposal allows them to return there in safety and dignity. Shusha was the only one of the five provinces in the former NKAO with an overwhelming Azeri majority (91 per cent) before the conflict and also has a great symbolic meaning for the Azeris, being a historical centre of Karabakh and home to many prominent Azeri cultural figures.

Whereas the Azerbaijan government currently seems to be mostly preoccupied with the return of the Azerbaijani provinces adjacent to Nagorny Karabakh, the Karabakh Azeris cannot envisage the return of adjacent territories without the return of Shusha. Throughout the negotiations the Armenian side has tried to link the return of the Karabakh Azeris to Shusha with the issue of return of Armenians to other parts of Azerbaijan outside of Nagorny Karabakh. However, the Karabakh Azeris believe such a formulation is false and a pretext for denying their right to return, because the question of repatriation of Armenian refugees from parts of Azerbaijan outside of Nagorny Karabakh should be dealt with in parallel with the recognition of a similar right for Azeri refugees from Armenia.

One of the gravest concerns of the Karabakh Azeri community today is active resettlement of the occupied territories by the Armenian authorities. Thus, according to the 'official' programme adopted by the Karabakh Armenian authorities, the population of Nagorny Karabakh would be increased twofold from under 150,000 in early 1990s to 300,000 by 2010. These illegal resettlements and *fait accompli* mindset may significantly complicate the peace process and in the long term may become a major obstacle to conflict resolution.

Not a "new minority"

The Armenian side constantly refers to the Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination, which they want to realize in the form of secession. Azerbaijan

always counters with the principles of territorial integrity and inviolability of the international borders. However, this alleged self-determination versus territorial integrity dispute surprisingly overlooks the fact that the Karabakh Azeris also have the right to self-determination; moreover, the rights to self-determination of either Karabakh Armenians or Karabakh Azeris do not necessarily imply a right to secession.

The Karabakh Azeris are determined not to accept a solution putting them in an inferior position in relation to their Karabakh Armenian counterparts. The Karabakh Armenians have repeatedly declared that they do not want to be treated as a minority within Azerbaijan, arguing for non-hierarchical relationships between the Azerbaijani state and the Karabakh Armenian authorities. Similarly, the Karabakh Azeris do not want a settlement that makes them a 'new minority' within an Armenian-dominated Nagorny Karabakh. Many Karabakh Azeris would not return to their homes in Karabakh if placed under the jurisdiction of their former foes and not provided with parallel security guarantees and a degree of self-government similar to those provided for the Karabakh Armenians.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the dominant discourses in both Armenian and Azeri societies and media have largely ignored the problems and concerns of the opposite side. The solution to the conflict requires fundamental shifts in the approaches and policies adopted by both Armenian and Azerbaijani parties to the conflict. It requires a new look at the traditional notions of sovereignty, self-determination, national and ethnic borders and majority-minority relationships. In this regard, the European experience, particularly the potential of the integrative model of the European Union, can be very useful to consider.

There is no doubt that the solution lies in co-existence and cooperation both between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as between the Karabakh Armenians and the Karabakh Azeris. Further progress in the negotiations requires more active participation by both Armenian and Azeri representatives of Nagorny Karabakh. The international community should help promote civil initiatives involving direct contacts not only between Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives but also between Karabakh Armenians and Azeris. The existence of the Karabakh problem is also a serious impediment to the development of democracy in both Azerbaijan and Armenia. At the same time, decisions on painful compromises need to be made by strong, democratic and legitimate governments.