Opening Borders, Preserving Walls: Opportunities to Support the Karabakh Peace Process

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On April 26, 2010, Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin II attended a meeting of world religious leaders in Azerbaijan at the invitation of Azerbaijani Shi'a Muslim leader, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, and also Russian Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill. During his visit Garegin II met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and prayed at what was once the central church and place of worship for Baku's former Armenian community. Together, the religious leaders affirmed their commitment to the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Garegin II further invited Sheikh Pashazade to visit Armenia.

Garegin II's visit crystallized two different areas where more can be done to support the once again stagnating Karabakh peace process. One area is the contribution that mutual visits by Armenians and Azerbaijanis to each other's countries could make to the overall process. The visit of the Catholicos to Baku is a welcome and historic move. Yet mutual visits need to move beyond well-known public figures to become a routine aspect of relations between Armenian and Azerbaijani civil societies and ordinary citizens. A solid web of civil society interaction would serve as a vital support (and cushion) to the vagaries of the formal peace process.

A second area is the role that the preservation of cultural heritage could play in re-building confidence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Abandoned churches and mosques are a feature of the landscape across the region, poignant reminders of the vibrant life of different communities that once existed side by side. Reciprocal moves to open up access to such heritage sites, as Turkey has falteringly begun to do with regard to Armenian sites in Anatolia, could serve an important confidence-building role—and counter the legacy of mutual ethnic expulsion.

Garegin II's visit to Azerbaijan followed earlier precedents in July 2007 of visits to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh by representatives of the Azerbaijani elite, and a mutual visit in July 2009 organized by the Armenian and Azerbaijani ambassadors to Russia, Armen Smbatian and Polad Bulbuloglu. These visits are on one level an important, positive

development challenging the established wisdom that reciprocal visits by Armenians and Azerbaijanis to each other's countries do not and cannot happen.

Yet while the Catholicos's visit to Azerbaijan is indeed extremely welcome and groundbreaking, it is also a reminder that Armenian-Azerbaijani visits in recent years have been almost exclusively the monopoly of political and cultural elites. Such visits that do take place are highly choreographed, stage-managed affairs that do not, as yet, form part of an ongoing process. Their intermittent and therefore unusual and extraordinary character also renders such visits very vulnerable to misrepresentation in societies that have been heavily exposed to negative stereotypes and propaganda about the other side. There is not, as yet, any kind of overall public relations strategy surrounding such visits, seeking to inform skeptical public opinion about what they are trying to achieve and why they are valuable.

More importantly, there are practically no visits at the level of civil society. These used to take place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but in recent years they have declined amid negative media coverage of such visits and harassment and other repercussions for those participating in them. This absence of civil society-level interaction has remained the case even after the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents' "Moscow Declaration" of November 2009, in which they explicitly endorsed confidence-building measures as a pillar of a reinvigorated Karabakh peace process.

While Armenians, as the winning side in the 1991-1994 war, have generally taken a more relaxed view towards visits by Azerbaijanis to Armenia or Karabakh, Azerbaijanis have generally taken a more negative view, rejecting such visits for as long as large swathes of Azerbaijan are under Armenian occupation. Visits by Armenians to Azerbaijan in recent years have been very few and far between, being limited to visits by Armenian professionals in various—usually apolitical—fields, such as wrestling.

It is useful to contrast this situation with Turkish-Armenian dynamics. While myriad problems remain, both Turkish and Armenian societies have opened up sufficiently to allow free movement of each other's citizens across their borders. As Thomas de Waal (2010) notes in a recent paper, "[e]ven if the current Armenian-Turkish Protocols process fails, there is a thick web of civil society interaction which will continue between

Armenians and Turks" (p. 1). The same cannot be said for the Karabakh peace process. If the current round of the Karabakh peace process associated with the "Madrid Principles" fails, there is no cushion of solid civil society ties to ease the fall and allow for regrouping and re-envisioning of the peace process. Only a very small number of individuals have been involved in Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue meetings. While there are many reasons for this state of affairs, the fact that such meetings always have to take place in a third country is undoubtedly an important one.

The cautiousness of elites to allow a more "bottom-up," grass roots-level peace process is understandable. In the tightly controlled, highly polarized and periodically violent contexts of Armenian and Azerbaijani politics, Karabakh remains a wild card. Firmly lodged in national ideologies and capable of eliciting deep emotions on both sides, the Karabakh conflict and prospects for its settlement raise uncomfortable issues for today's elites with their weak democratic credentials. They have consequently exercised a tight monopoly on the peace process, minimizing the role of independent NGOs, other associations, networks and individuals. In Azerbaijan in particular, militant rhetoric suggesting the use of force to resolve the conflict has further narrowed the space for civic initiatives. Although attempts have been made by international peace-building NGOs in the last two years to organize reciprocal civil society-level visits, this remains, hitherto, a closed door. A small number of Azerbaijanis have been able to visit Armenia, and even Karabakh in the case of a few individuals.

Yet the Karabakh peace process has also shown over the years that the presidents cannot do it alone. Societies inculcated with negative propaganda about the other side and encouraged to believe in total victory cannot suddenly be made to swallow bitter pills of compromise. Recent elite-level visits may indicate, then, that the presidents have learned from earlier phases of the peace process, when societal resistance was instrumental in stymieing alleged agreement. It may also be that they are trying to gauge likely popular reactions to different strategies, and/or that they believe they have achieved as much as they can in the Track-I process, and fearing the fallout of another round of failure, are trying to root that progress in wider legitimacy. Whatever the reason, both Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents need to take the plunge and allow a much wider range of visits between Armenians and Azerbaijanis to take place.

Rather than seeing greater civil society interaction as a threat to their power, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaderships need to be encouraged to see such interaction as supportive of their efforts at the negotiating table. The massive highs and lows of expectation and disappointment in the Minsk Group-mediated negotiations, for which the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents carry responsibility, can be attenuated by a steady process of inter-societal contact. While this will narrow the rhetorical space available for assertions that force can be used to resolve the conflict, there are clear strategic advantages for all conflict parties. For both sides, increased contact will create a pool of experience informing each side's choices in the peace process. Misinformation and misperception remain key threats to the Karabakh peace process, and mutually informed strategic calculations at least reduce the risk of unintended escalation.

For Armenians, better acquaintance with Azerbaijan means better acquaintance with an adversary and neighbor undergoing far-reaching social change. No one is clear, as yet, where this change is taking Azerbaijani society, but it would be foolish to ignore the development that is taking place. For Azerbaijanis, civil society-level visits can open a necessary, alternative path to Baku's official definition of the conflict as an inter-state conflict with Armenia. One way or another, Baku needs to find a way to talk to the population living in Nagorno-Karabakh today, which it claims as its own. There is a clear contradiction between seeking to reincorporate this population and discouraging the free movement of Armenians to Azerbaijan. Inclusive dialogue at civil society level is one way to begin to address this dilemma.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis have long deferred bilateral communication to vertical communication with outside powers, according to the false logic that "the solution has to come from outside." It is time to open up the Karabakh peace process, and in doing so, open minds to the benefits of direct, unmediated communication.

Garegin II's visit to the Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator in central Baku also pointed to an important area of possible "win-win" confidence-building measures: collaborative preservation of cultural monuments and heritage. Faltering—and controversial—steps in this direction have been taken in the context of Turkish-Armenian relations, with the 2005-2006 restoration of the Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar island, and subsequently the recent decision to allow

Christian worship there once a year. (Asbarez Armenian News, 2010) Taken on their own, such moves can easily be dismissed as paltry tokenism (and there have certainly been problems from an Armenian perspective with how the Akhtamar restoration was managed and presented). Yet seen as part of a process of acknowledging the past, pushing cognitive barriers and ultimately reviving the notion of a currently defunct community life, they are certainly significant.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani context is different, of course, for several reasons. For one thing, military confrontation remains a live factor. There is also a sometimes aggressively articulated discourse of the return of displaced people, which at times seeks to score political points rather than consider what the return of a displaced community to a multiethnic context really entails. And unlike Turkey, where an Armenian community continues to exist (however precariously), there is no Armenian communal life intact in Azerbaijan, despite a disputed number of ethnic Armenians remaining in the country.

Yet there is a possible reciprocity to moves towards shared control of cultural sites. The intermingled nature of Armenian and Azerbaijani populations prior to the conflict means that each side is in control of cultural and religious monuments of special significance to the other. Just as churches formerly frequented by Armenians stand empty in Azerbaijan, mosques formerly frequented by Azerbaijanis stand empty in Nagorno-Karabakh. There have been regular mutual recriminations over the alleged effacement of cultural heritage, exacerbated of course, by the lack of access and information. When restoration of monuments does take place, it engenders fears that the “national character” of such monuments is being deliberately diluted or worse. Reciprocal moves to share the future of cultural heritage could ease these tensions. Such moves do not need to be initially wide-ranging in order to be significant. Allowing the other side visiting rights and a say in how heritage is curated is enough to begin a meaningful dialogue.

There are also some clear incentives to such an initiative for all parties. For Azerbaijan, rehabilitating the possibility of an Armenian community life is an absolute prerequisite for its agenda of reincorporating Nagorno-Karabakh. Yet creating conditions more conducive to reviving Armenian community life in Azerbaijan should not be tied exclusively to this goal. A disputed number of Armenians continue to live in Azerbaijani society; according to some official sources this population is as high as 20,000,

almost certainly an exaggeration.[1] Whatever the size of the population, however, its mere existence offers an opportunity to shape perceptions over what Armenians can expect in the new Azerbaijan. Human and minority rights groups have in the past expressed concern regarding everyday discrimination for Armenians in Azerbaijan.[2] Leading government officials, however, have asserted a change of policy in this direction, reportedly taking steps to assure freedom from discrimination for ethnic Armenians. Azerbaijan could do well to support highly visible heritage restoration projects with less visible but just as important moves to address everyday obstacles confronting individuals of Armenian ethnicity in Azerbaijan.

For the Armenians of Karabakh, the displacement of Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh hangs as a sword of Damocles over their aspirations to internationally recognized sovereignty. Although Karabakh Armenians can legitimately point out that mass expulsions of Armenians also took place in Azerbaijan (not to mention Azerbaijanis from Armenia), it is a reality—however unfair—that *de facto* states face different criteria. Demonstrating openness on an issue where no strategic advantage stands to be lost could contribute to Karabakh Armenian bargaining power—and provide an entry point to the peace process (broadly understood) other than by proxy representation by presidents of Armenia of Karabakhi origin.

And all sides can learn from the Turkish experience: in the modern era the attempted obliteration of collective identities returns to haunt "successor" societies long after the perpetrators have gone. Initiatives acknowledging shared ownership of and, possibly, ultimately delegating a degree of responsibility in managing cultural heritage can create an important platform, to no strategic cost, for building confidence and, over time, dialogue on other issues. Ultimately such initiatives could serve to begin to bridge the gap between parallel but mutually exclusive narratives of identity that divide and isolate Armenian and Azerbaijani societies both from each other and fuller understandings of their own history. This underlines the fact that any such initiative would have to be guided by the spirit of pragmatism and reciprocity, rather than nationalistic politicization. If the latter wins out, cultural heritage on both sides will stand like the mosque on the seafront in Chania, Crete, and the shells of Greek Orthodox churches dotted across Anatolia: reminders and nothing more that once, things were different.

References

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Footnotes

[1] Most are wives in mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani or Armenian-Russian marriages.

[2] See, for example, Minority Rights Group International, entry for Armenians in Azerbaijan in the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, available at http://www.minorityrights.org/1943/azerbaijan/armenians.html.