

An Elusive Peace in the Black Garden: Understanding the 'Frozen' Nature of the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict

Anisa Gasper

In the summer of 2016 at least 30 soldiers were killed as fighting broke out along the militarized borders that separate the unrecognised, separatist region of Nagorno Karabakh from Azerbaijan. Although seasonal violence along this fault line is not abnormal, and each summer sees the occasional exchange of fire, prisoners and subsequent 'derogatory diatribes'¹ traded by officials, this recent outburst marked the biggest escalation since fighting officially ended in 1994. Moreover, it drew attention to the fact that although the longest conflict between two post-Soviet republics remains 'frozen', it continues to destabilize Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh and by extent the wider Caucasus region.²

This paper explores the reasons behind the 'frozen' status of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, in order to determine which factors, interests, and motivations have prevented it from being peacefully resolved. It will be argued that although the Nagorno Karabakh conflict has in the past been framed as involving ancient religious or ethnic hatreds that make peace impossible, this does not actually offer a satisfying explanation as to its current status. Instead, the argument will be made that the conflict remains 'frozen' because internal resistance overcomes any external pressure towards the adoption of a comprehensive and mutually satisfying peace plan. This is in part because its endurance helps justify and sustain domestic political realities in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, no parties to the conflict are willing to compromise on a peace solution, and the passing of time has further entrenched their positions. Finally, regional and international actors derive a certain strategic

¹ Mansur Mirovalev, 'Here's Why a "Frozen" Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has Gotten Hot', in *The Los Angeles Times*, 19 April 2016, [online](#). (Here and subsequently, all online resources were last accessed on 8 October 2008.)

² Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York University Press, 2013), p. 4.

stability from the conflict remaining 'frozen', and fear the unpredictability that a change to the status quo could bring, resulting in a recalibration of power in the region, interrupted access to oil, and setting a precedent regarding secession. This combination of internal resistance and insufficient external pressure ensures that regional peace remains elusive.

Like other conflicts in the Caucasus, the separatist struggle of the Nagorno Karabakh region has its roots in the Soviet legacy of strategically assigning titular nationalities to its various republics, while also situating ethnic enclaves within them.³ This *divide-et-impera* strategy was employed within its multi-ethnic borders in an effort to counter the emergence of unified ethnic nationalisms, and ensured compliance with the centre.⁴ The autonomous region of Nagorno Karabkh, with a majority Armenian population, was awarded to the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) by Joseph Stalin in 1921, and increasingly became a rallying cry for Armenian nationalism as the Soviet centre's control weakened during the late 1980s.⁵ The framing of the Karabakh conflict as one of an ongoing Armenian national struggle against Turkic oppression and genocide carried sufficient echoes of Ottoman behaviour in 1915 to help fan the flame.⁶ The initial request by the local Soviet to the USSR federal government to be transferred to the Armenian SSR was turned down, since the main authorities did not wish to set a dangerous precedent regarding ethnic secession at a time when their leadership was weakening.⁷ Finally, after years of forced deportations and escalating violence on both sides, the newly independent nations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the unrecognised territory of Nagorno Karabakh, went to war in 1991. Although a Russian-brokered cease-fire brought a formal end to hostilities in 1994 after 3

³ Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society* (Routledge, 2008), pp. 5, 238.

⁴ Levon Chorbajian, Patrick Donabedian & Claude Mutafian, *The Caucasian Knot: The History and Geopolitics of Nagorno-Karabagh* (Zed Books, 1994), p. 24.

⁵ Tamara Dragazde, 'Azerbaijanis', in Graham Smith, *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union* (Longman, 1991), p. 175.

⁶ E.M. Herzig, 'Armenians' in Smith, *The Nationalities Question*, p. 152; David Rieff, 'Case Study in Ethnic Strife', in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76 (1997), p. 123; Shireen T. Hunter, 'The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of the Transcaucasian States' in Gary K. Bertsch, Cassady B. Craft, Scott A. Jones & Michael Beck, *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (Routledge, 2000), p. 30; Svante E. Cornell, 'Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective', in *World Politics*, Vol. 54 (2002), p. 269.

⁷ Herzig, 'Armenians', p. 152; de Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 61.

years of open warfare, the conflict has not seen a peaceful resolution, and remains 'frozen'; as time passes, peace appears more elusive, with increasingly entrenched views expressed by all concerned. The conflict has resulted in mass displacement and large refugee populations on all sides, and the *de facto* (yet entirely unrecognised) independence of Karabakh which also acquired about 14% of Azerbaijani territory as a buffer zone around it.⁸ In addition, after years of economic blockades by both Azerbaijan and Turkey, land-locked Armenia was left with a crippled economy and remains almost entirely dependent on Russia and its diaspora.⁹ In fact, the current endurance of the conflict has been described as 'a slow suicide pact'¹⁰, in which both states increasingly hurt themselves in the long-run in order to get the upper hand in the short run.

While it has been argued that the conflict remains 'frozen' due to the irreconcilability of Armenians and Azerbaijanis after a century-long history marked by religious and ethnic hatred¹¹, this explanation is lacking in two areas.¹² First of all, it seems to purposely ignore the relatively peaceful co-existence and even inter-marriage between the two populations during most of the last century; nor does it explain their current coexistence in neighbouring Georgia. It either oversimplifies this complex and multi-faceted conflict by framing it as Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan fighting a religiously motivated war, or as two ethnic groups at each other's throats since the beginning of time.¹³ In fact, quite the

⁸ E.M. Herzig, *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia* (Pinter, 1999), p. 68.

⁹ Mary Kaldor, 'Oil and Conflict: The Case of Nagorno Karabakh' in Eadem, Terry Lynn Karl & Yahia Said, *Oil Wars* (Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 178-179.

¹⁰ De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 4.

¹¹ Another example can be found in recent CNN and Guardian articles reporting on the conflict, with claims of Nagorno Karabakh being 'a flashpoint for ethnic and religious tensions', with a 'long and bloody history going back to before Christ'. Simon Tisdal, 'Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict is a Reminder of Europe's Instability', in *The Guardian*, 3 April 2016), [online](#).

¹² A.N. Yamskov, 'Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh', in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 20 (1991), pp. 631-660; Arie Vaserman & Rami Ginat, 'National, Territorial or Religious Conflict? The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh', in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 17(1994), p. 357; Rieff, 'Case Study in Ethnic Strife', pp. 128-129; De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 9.

¹³ Hratch Tchilingirian, 'Religious Discourse on the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh', in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1998), unpaginated, accessible [online](#); Anar Valiyev, 'Azerbaijan: Islam In a Post-Soviet Republic', in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2005), pp. 1-13; Shahla

opposite is true, and apart from brief intervals at the start of the twentieth century, Armenia and Azerbaijan had been at peace in the years prior to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict erupting, and the ethnic groups had lived closely integrated throughout both Soviet republics.¹⁴ Moreover, while this explanation may account for the endurance of the conflict, it does not convincingly explain the 'freeze'. One might even ask why two such rivals would accept anything less than the other's complete surrender or annihilation, and cease fighting when that goal has not yet been achieved. Instead, it appears that a more comprehensive explanation is needed, regarding the resistance to a peaceful settlement.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are marked by an internal struggle among political elites, through which hardliners sufficiently limit their leaders' political space for compromise regarding a settlement in Karabakh.¹⁵ This is coupled with a lack of popular participation in politics owing to the authoritarian nature of both states, leaving leaders entirely dependent on political support within their own ranks, and thus with limited room for manoeuvre regarding negotiating a conclusion to the conflict.¹⁶ In Armenia especially, the 'war established networks (...) would dominate state structures post-war',¹⁷ resulting in the overthrow of President Ter Petrosian when he was perceived to be making overly conciliatory overtures regarding a settlement, and his subsequent replacement with Robert Karochian, the former President of Karabakh.¹⁸ Similarly, Serge Sarkisian, until recently the Armenian President and ex-Minister of Defence, hails from within the Karabakh independence movement.

This presence of Karabakh Armenians in the highest levels of power has ensured the enduring adoption of a hardline stance,

Sultanova, 'National Identity, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Revival of Islam in Azerbaijan', in *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation* (2011), unpaginated, available [online](#).

¹⁴ Dragadze, 'Azerbaijanis', p. 168; De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Licinia Simão, 'The Problematic Role of EU Democracy Promotion in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh', in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 45 (2012), pp. 193-200; Nina Caspersen, 'Regimes and Peace Processes: Democratic (Non)development in Armenia and Azerbaijan and its Impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict', in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 45 (2012), pp. 131-139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 132

¹⁷ Kaldor, 'Oil and Conflict', p. 163.

¹⁸ Herzog, *The New Caucasus*, p. 70; De Waal, *Black Garden*, pp. 270-271.

resulting in manifest unwillingness to compromise. Correspondingly, although the war brought increased stability and the consolidation of executive power in Azerbaijan, it has resulted in a system of elite patronage and corruption.¹⁹ The conflict is used as both a rallying cry in times of societal unrest and as a means to justify authoritarian policies and suppress government opposition.²⁰ Whenever leaders seem to be close to negotiating a peace deal, more radical elements undermine and subsequently derail this process.²¹ An example of this can be found in President Aliyev's near relinquishing of Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia at Key West in 2001, and his subsequent turnaround after consulting with more radical advisers.²²

Likewise, as time passes, the parties have become more entrenched in their views. Armenia and Azerbaijan are both relatively new independent nations, and have constructed much of their respective national identities around narratives of victimhood and suffering caused by the other side. Their recent histories offer countless examples of these grievances, such as deportations, ethnic cleansing, intentional starvation, and violence, most visibly embodied by the large refugee populations that live within their borders. These enduring narratives, together with the complete lack of diplomatic relations, mean that there is no trust between the nations, and little space in which to foster a peace movement.

Quite similarly, after years of isolation, Karabakh has become hardened in its separatist stance, and has acquired a somewhat outsized confidence as a result of its previous military conquests.²³ Together with the proliferation of weapons after the conflict, this has resulted in a highly militarized and paranoid society, lacking in democratic credentials and entirely dependent on both its diaspora and Armenia for aid.²⁴ It has even been argued that this 'unconditional' provision of assistance for the duration of the conflict, has resulted in elites developing vested economic interests

¹⁹ Kaldor, 'Oil and Conflict', p. 165; Caspersen, 'Regimes and Peace Processes', p. 134.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 137.

²¹ Kaldor, 'Oil and Conflict', p. 167; Caspersen, 'Regimes and Peace Processes', p. 136.

²² De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 5.

²³ Herzig, *The New Caucasus*, p. 73.

²⁴ Kaldor, 'Oil and Conflict', p. 178.

in retaining the status quo.²⁵

Moreover, in order for the conflict to be successfully resolved, a peace deal is needed which satisfies all parties concerned. This poses a conceivable challenge, bearing in mind the perhaps incompatible tension between the territorial integrity of the Azerbaijani state on the one hand, and the right to self-determination by the Karabakh Armenians on the other hand. Over the past decades, numerous unsuccessful attempts at peace agreements have been made, which covered diverse combinations of exchanging captured Azerbaijani territory for certain degrees of autonomy for Karabakh within Azerbaijan.²⁶ However, Karabakh sees anything other than *de jure* independence from Azerbaijan as entailing the genocide of the Karabakh Armenians, and thus feels it is fighting for its right to survive.²⁷ In turn, Azerbaijan refuses to accept even a slight dilution of its territorial integrity, especially considering the fact that it already lost a considerable swathe in the war. Likewise, disagreement exists as to the timeframe of a future solution: would it be gradually phased, or rather occur simultaneously.²⁸ Therefore, the nature of a future peace deal remains problematic, with neither side appearing willing to compromise on their fundamental principles.

Besides there being little agreement regarding the nature of the peace, the process itself has offered little incentive to move away from the status quo. Although international actors are quick to condemn the violent flare-ups, a certain fatigue has set in around the peace process. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group overseeing the negotiations is currently chaired by France, Russia and the United States, and is thus further encumbered by the increasingly strained Russia-West relationship, which reached a new low after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Moreover, the lack of peacekeepers on the ground (unsurprisingly, Russia's offer to provide such troops has repeatedly been rebuffed²⁹) and the absence of concrete enforcement mechanisms have

²⁵ Herzig, *The New Caucasus*, pp. 72-73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69. Also, Edward Walker, 'No War, No Peace in the Caucasus', in Bertsch et al., *Crossroads and Conflict*, pp. 174-175; Alec Rasizade, 'Azerbaijan's Prospects in Nagorno-Karabakh with the End of Oil Boom', in *Iran & The Caucasus*, Vol. 15, No. 1-2 (2011), p. 306; De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 274.

²⁷ Chorbaijian, Donabedian & Mutafian, *The Caucasian Knot*, p. 41.

²⁸ Herzig, *The New Caucasus*, p. 71; Walker, 'No War, No Peace', p. 184; Rasizade, 'Azerbaijan's Prospects', p. 308.

²⁹ De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 265.

additionally hampered the process. To further complicate matters, Azerbaijan refuses to negotiate directly with the Karabakh authorities, arguing that this would grant them legitimacy in their claims; or alternatively that in this case the often overlooked Karabakh Azerbaijanis must also be granted a place at the table.³⁰ Instead, Azerbaijan has designated Armenia as the opposition party to conduct negotiations with.³¹ These negotiations have comprised mostly of opaque talks between the two presidents, and are not open to the public (in an effort to 'protect them from raised expectations', according to then-President Kocharian³²), meaning the leaders will not be held accountable for the talks' failure.

In the absence of local incentives for resolving the conflict, external pressure is needed to provide sufficient impetus towards ending the war. However, this is not the case in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, as regional and international actors derive a certain strategic stability from the conflict remaining 'frozen', and fear the unpredictability that a change to the status quo could bring. This is mostly related to the regional balance of power, the wish to maintain a favourable business environment and continued access to oil, and finally to avoid setting dangerous precedents regarding secession. Although most external players are interested in avoiding further violence and deterring outright warfare, there has been no consistent or unified approach to resolving the conflict. It is therefore necessary to review the interests of the main regional and international actors: namely Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and Great Britain, to ascertain the multifaceted motivations at play.

Russia derives clear benefits from its neighbours being in disorder, like Georgia, or dependent on Russia for aid, like Armenia, and thus has little interest in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Having strong, cooperating and independent states along its border would negatively impact Russia's power in the region. Since Russia's regional prominence is a main tenet of its identity as a Great Power, Moscow seeks deliberately to play an active role in its post-Soviet sphere of influence.³³ The Karabakh conflict provided Russia with the opportunity to establish a military base in Armenia, as well as station troops on both Armenian and

³⁰ Herzig, *The New Caucasus*, p. 70.

³¹ Walker, 'No War, No Peace', p. 169.

³² De Waal, *Black Garden*, pp. 7-8.

³³ Ruth Deyermond, 'The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-first Century Russian Foreign Policy', in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (2016), pp. 957-984.

Azerbaijani territory.³⁴ While Russia is Armenia's strongest ally, Baku has in recent years recognized the need to appease its powerful neighbour, and thus offers Russia oil concessions.³⁵ Likewise, Russia has been able to sell arms to both parties as long as the conflict endures. Nagorno Karabakh's enduring instability additionally provides Moscow with a bargaining chip against the West, owing to the conflict's geographical proximity to oil pipelines in which Western companies have a major stake.

For Washington, the main regional priority has consisted of containing both Russian and Iranian influence, while also maintaining stability in the Transcaucasus, as this is conducive to business.³⁶ Accordingly, the United States prioritizes continued access to oil and natural gas in Azerbaijan over enforcing any specific solution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, although it does continue to promote international peace initiatives and chair the OSCE Minsk Group. At the same time, Washington has a significantly powerful Armenian diaspora to answer to, and provides Armenia with essential humanitarian aid, while also insisting on the integrity of borders.

Regarding other external actors, although NATO-member Turkey has grown closer to Russia in recent years, previously it walked a tight line between satisfactorily antagonizing Armenia, and appearing to behave in a restrained manner to avoid alienating the West and provoking Russia.³⁷ This mostly resulted in verbal threats towards Armenia and a sealing of the border, combined with expressions of support of Azerbaijan, without any decisive regional plays to underlie it. Istanbul maintains a non-negotiable foreign policy stance in both its hostile treatment of Armenia, as well as its objection to separatism. In turn, Iran has mostly been concerned with balancing US-backed Turkey's regional influence. Tehran maintained crucial trade with Armenia during the war, while also operating refugee camps on Azerbaijani territory. However, it remains concerned with the disruptive potential of Azerbaijani refugees on its own conservative society, and would therefore not wish for the conflict to flare-up again.

It has been said that Azerbaijan uses its considerable oil

³⁴ Chorbaijian, Donabedian & Mutafian, *The Caucasian Knot*, p. 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁶ De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 264; Chorbaijian, Donabedian & Mutafian, *The Caucasian Knot*, p. 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

reserves to court the West, and this is recognisably the case for Great Britain, since British Petroleum has developed considerable infrastructure in Azerbaijan, and plays a leading role in the further exploration of its oil fields.³⁸ Britain is also Azerbaijan's second biggest trade partner, and their close ties can perhaps best be evidenced in London's establishment of an embassy in Azerbaijan in 1992, but not in Armenia until 1995, as well as its ardent insistence that Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan.

This mix of regional alliances, military bases, arms deals, access to oil, future pipelines and balancing concerns, results in the absence of a concerted international effort to press for peace. Above all, secession would set an unwelcome international precedent, and although certain players might sympathize more with Armenia, all continue to agree that Nagorno Karabakh remains a part of Azerbaijan. It thus appears that respect for territorial integrity continues to outweigh the right to national self-determination. Moreover, most external players have more pressing entanglements to focus on, such as Afghanistan and Syria, and therefore the resolution of this conflict is not a foreign policy priority.³⁹ However, whenever the conflict seems to be on the verge of escalating into active violence and would thereby threaten the stability of the region (and as such the access to oil), international condemnation is swift and unanimous.

It can be argued that there exists inadequate external pressure (or provision of incentives) to break the internal resistance to ending the stalemate, and thus every spring sees violent border skirmishes and mutual accusations of breaking the 1994 cease-fire. Additionally, common misconceptions related to the origins/nature of the conflict continue to colour the way it is perceived internationally, leading to fatigue regarding its supposed irreconcilability. However, as time passes, the conditions of the cease-fire seem increasingly hard to maintain, and actors should concentrate on attaining a durable peace agreement, in order to resolve this conflict. The security of the South Caucasus, and by extension the surrounding regions themselves, depends on it.

³⁸ De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 4; Rasizade, 'Azerbaijan's Prospects', p. 311.

³⁹ De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 317.