

Nagorno-Karabakh: The Frozen Conflict Awakens

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Introduction

The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region was one of the bloodiest struggles to emerge from the weakening of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the eventual breakup of the Soviet empire. The failure to resolve the conflict to this day is a key element in the instability of the southern Caucasus. At the peak of the conflict – 1988-1994 – some 25,000 people were killed and more than one million people were uprooted from their homes: 350,000 Armenians fled from Azerbaijan to Armenia, 185,000 Azeris fled from Armenia to Azerbaijan, and some half a million Azeris were expelled from their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh and nearby areas, which all fell under Armenian control.¹ Over the past two decades the conflict has generally been considered frozen, although this description obscures the several incidents between the sides since the 1994 ceasefire and ignores the plight of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced as a result of the conflict.

While there were some incidents involving casualties in previous years, 2014 was a year of marked deterioration, with dozens of casualties on both sides.² In November 2014, an Armenian helicopter was downed by the Azeris (who claimed the helicopter was on a mission to attack Azeri troops near the border with Nagorno-Karabakh), an incident viewed as one of the most serious since the 1994 ceasefire.³ The trend continued into January 2015, and there is serious cause for concern that the deterioration will result in renewed war. Furthermore, Russia, which for years benefited from the dormancy in which there was neither war nor peace and strengthened its

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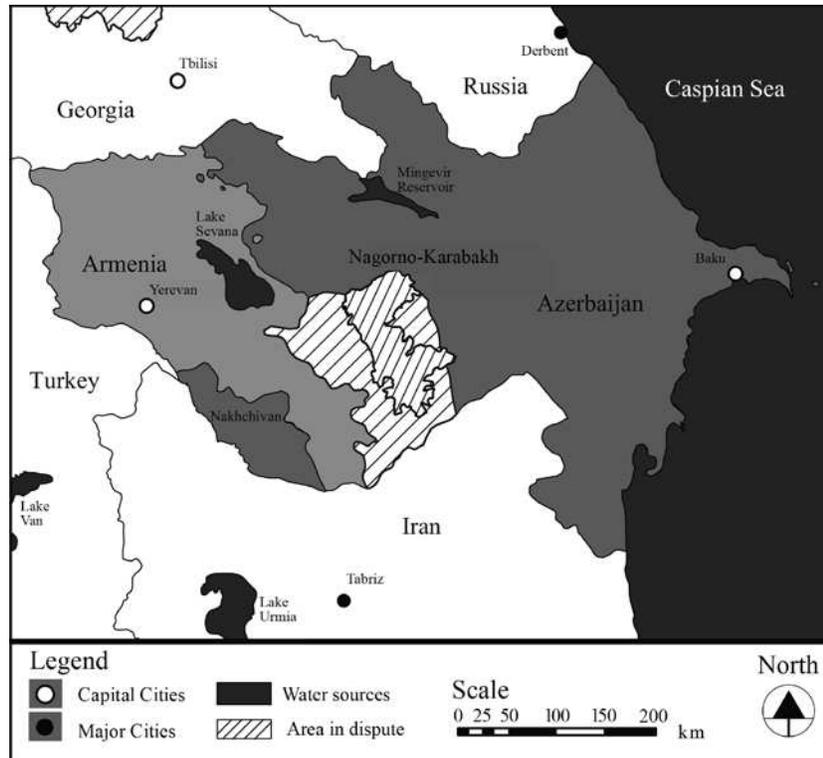
own status there, may now be interested in escalation so that it can deploy its own peacekeeping troops in the region.⁴

Contrary to the common assumption, the conflict is not just over the Nagorno-Karabakh region but also over nearby areas. Armenian forces control seven regions in addition to Nagorno-Karabakh, amounting to some 14 percent of Azerbaijani territory.⁵ In fact, over time it has become evident that a resolution over the regions near Nagorno-Karabakh is at least as difficult to attain – if not more so – than one over Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Apparently the Armenians are not willing to concede control of some of these regions because they view having a land bridge to Armenia as critical, and many of the displaced Azeris are from these areas. Furthermore, the regions in the Nagorno-Karabakh area controlled by Armenia are rundown and covered with landmines.⁶

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh concerns Azerbaijan, an important Israeli ally in the struggle against Iran,⁷ and therefore merits Israel's close monitoring of the issue. On a more specific level, the following article has two goals. First, it discusses the elements that have kept the conflict from being resolved despite the passage of time, elements that might awaken the conflict once again. Second, the article seeks to draw conclusions about the failure of the negotiations, which could have relevance for other conflicts, specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Background

In 1921, Joseph Stalin, then the Commissar of Nationalities, decided that Nagorno-Karabakh would be an autonomous region within Azerbaijan rather than part of Armenia.⁸ At the time, the population was 94 percent Armenian. Throughout the Soviet rule the Armenians tried to protest the 1921 decision, and in 1988, with Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the Armenian demand for a change in Nagorno-Karabakh's status intensified. The Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia announced their desire for unification. Inter alia, the Armenian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh protested the decreased Armenian majority in the region and their economic situation: in 1988, as the conflict broke out, Armenians accounted for only 75 percent of the population,⁹ and the region lagged behind the rest of Armenia during the Soviet era (although it was no more backward than other regions in Azerbaijan). This awakening stirred up Azeri nationalist sentiments and led to violence and ethnic cleansing on both sides.



Despite Soviet and other mediation attempts, the crisis worsened from 1988 until the 1994 ceasefire. In 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence, but to this day not even Armenia has officially recognized its independence. While the Soviets at first supported the Azeri demand to maintain the status quo, after the breakup of the USSR the Russians began supporting Armenia. In 1989, the Azeris besieged the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia itself, and in 1991 the Turks joined the siege, causing Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia heavy losses. Armenia provided ongoing economic support to the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and although denied by Armenia, its troops participated in the violent struggle with Azerbaijan.¹⁰ Despite local Azeri successes, in 1993 the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh began conquering important Azeri strongholds outside the region, and to this day Armenia controls 14 percent of Soviet Azerbaijan.

Negotiations to Resolve the Conflict

Savante Cornell classifies the proposals for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into two types. The dominant approach consists of proposals that try to maintain the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in the 1991 borders, while attempting to provide the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh with the greatest possible freedom of self-determination. Within this type of resolution, i.e., the united state option (albeit most likely, a federal or confederal solution), there is the gradual approach (preferred by Azerbaijan and that includes gradual steps, while leaving determination of the legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh to the end) and there is the package deal approach (preferred by Armenia, which involves first resolving the fundamental issues of contention and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh while leaving the resolution of the technical details to a later stage). The second, less prevalent type of solution is more revolutionary and consists of land swaps that would result in Nagorno-Karabakh having a land bridge to Armenia and connecting the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan.¹¹ While negotiations started out with discussions on realizing the united state option, they hit a dead end, whereupon they turned to the land swap option. However, the latter was considered too far reaching, and talks resumed on the one-state option, with an attempt to present a model of a gradual package deal acceptable to both sides.

At the 1996 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conference in Lisbon, several guiding principles for negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan were drafted: maintaining the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, stipulating a legal status to Nagorno-Karabakh that would allow a high degree of self-rule, and providing security guarantees to the region's residents. Due to Armenian opposition, these principles were formulated only as a declaration by the chairmen. In 1997, the chairmen of the OSCE Minsk Group¹² suggested a proposal based on the gradual resolution of the conflict. The first stage of the proposal involved the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the areas near Nagorno-Karabakh, the return of the displaced persons, the end to the economic siege of Armenia, and the stationing of peacekeeping forces. The second stage involved discussion of the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The perceived agreement to the proposal by Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian forced his resignation, given the internal opposition in Armenia.¹³ In 1998, the Minsk Group proposed a confederation of two equal partners; Azerbaijan's vehement rejection of

the idea led to a dead end in the discussions and to an increase in Russia's independent mediation efforts.

In 1999, following discussions between the leaders of the nations (some conducted through the direct mediation of the United States), a breakthrough appeared imminent. Apparently at the core of the development was the possibility that Armenia would transfer land to create a land bridge between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan exclave, and in exchange Azerbaijan would agree to concessions in Nagorno-Karabakh and to a connection of the region to Armenia (including the necessary land bridge).¹⁴ From the Azerbaijani point of view, the advantage of this plan was that it connected the isolated Nakhchivan region to the rest of Azerbaijan and gained a land bridge to the Turkish border. The agreement would have cut Armenia off from Iran, which had consistently supported the Armenian side: this was an advantage to Azerbaijan that Armenia viewed with suspicion. In any event, hopes were dashed when 50 armed men entered the Armenian parliament building on October 27, 1999, and killed the Prime Minister, speaker of the parliament, and five other members of parliament.¹⁵ The incident led to a hardening of the Armenian position. Many point an accusing finger at Russia for the incident in the Armenian parliament, because Russia had little interest in a resolution that involved land swaps, as this would have decreased its own influence in the region. To add insult to the Russians' perceived injury, the negotiations had been shepherded by the United States.

In 2001, in talks held under US auspices in Key West, representing the height of US involvement to date, the sides arrived at an agreement – according to the mediators – on more than 80-90 percent of the issues.¹⁶ Subsequently, in the context of the fifteen Madrid principles formulated by the Minsk Group in 2007, an attempt was made to consolidate an agreement involving the gradual withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan; the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh would enjoy a temporary status; and in the distant future there would be a referendum to determine the final status.¹⁷ The last round of talks was held in October 2014 in Paris, the result of a joint US-French effort to strengthen the negotiating mechanism of the Minsk Group after Putin attempted to mediate directly between the sides in Sochi in August 2014.¹⁸

One of the thorniest problems in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is that it seems as if neighboring states and some of the mediators – each motivated by its respective interests – are benefiting from the prolongation of the conflict as long as it is remains at low intensity.¹⁹ Although Russia is

one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, it took its own initiative, thereby undermining other initiatives of the group of which it is itself a member.²⁰ In fact, it seems that Russia seeks to prevent any agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh unless it plays the role of mediator and unless the deal preserves Russia's dominant status in the region.²¹

Almost all rounds of talks have been carried out through the Minsk Group or through Russia and the United States; there is little independent direct contact between the leaders. Thomas de Waal claims that Armenia and Azerbaijan prefer the limited mechanism of the Minsk Group because it leaves both feeling in control of the process as long as it is done through this framework.²² But the mechanism has several weaknesses, such as the fact that the group meets only periodically rather than intensively; that those conducting the talks are usually mid-level functionaries with much turnover; that among the three chairs – Russia, the United States, and France – there are disagreements on many issues; and that France is represented rather than the European Union, contributing to the limited function assumed by the EU for resolving this conflict.²³ Some are also opposed to what is called “constructive vagueness” in the principles established by the Minsk Group. Thus, for example, Welt claims that this creates the impression of agreement when, in fact, critical differences between Azerbaijan and Armenia remain firmly in place.²⁴

Both sides most likely err in thinking that time is on their side. Azerbaijan is exploiting its oil revenues to arm itself in a way that should negotiations fail it can seize control of Nagorno-Karabakh by military means. At the same time, chances are slim it could actually do so out of concern about a response by Russia, which also has bases in Armenia, and because it is doubtful that the international community would accept such an attack on Armenia, partly because of the strength of the Armenian diaspora in the United States and France. Similarly, in case of renewed warfare, the important Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline would be within Armenian artillery range.²⁵ The Armenians think that as time passes, Nagorno-Karabakh's status as an independent entity becomes a fact on the ground, and take heart from Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence that garnered support from many states. Nonetheless, Armenia suffers greatly from the ramifications of the economic siege imposed on it by Azerbaijan and Turkey, and from the fact that it is not a partner in important regional projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project, nearing completion and expected to open in 2015.²⁶ Moreover, Armenia

suffers from a severe negative migration problem, rooted partly in the repercussions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: about one quarter of the Armenian population has left the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁷ Finally, the longer the conflict lasts, the more the displaced persons have trouble returning home and communities have a more difficult time reintegrating, so that the situation is gradually coming to resemble what has happened over the years in Cyprus.²⁸

Similar to other conflicts, both sides deny facts that serve as evidence for the longstanding presence of the other side in the region. For example, the Armenians cast the Azeri mosques left in Yerevan and Nagorno-Karabakh as Persian, and while it is more difficult for the Azeris to deny the presence of the Armenian majority in the region, they claim that this population group is in fact Albanian.²⁹ For the Armenians, the victory over Azerbaijan allowed “a heroic reassessment of a national history filled with episodes of defeat, loss of territory and statehood,”³⁰ partly because the Armenians view the Azeris as Turks.³¹ Indeed, the existing linkage between the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the historic Turkish-Armenian conflict makes it difficult to reach a resolution.³² In this context, the rigid stance (even in comparison to that of the Armenians in Armenia) of wide segments of the Armenian diaspora on the resolution of the conflict and the support coming from this diaspora to Nagorno-Karabakh is of particular importance.³³ On the other hand, Behlul Ozkan notes that Azerbaijan is undergoing a process of “Armenianization” and there is use of the rhetoric of genocide regarding the massacre that took place in Khojaly.³⁴

One of the problems in preparing public opinion in both nations for a resolution of the conflict is the fact that the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan prefer to keep what is said during talks under very close wraps and provide no public indication of their willingness to compromise on certain issues. There are even indications that at least with regard to Azerbaijan, the previous president, Heydar Aliyev, consulted with his close advisors only in the late stages of the talks, and that this too made it difficult to lay the foundation for the acceptance of concessions by Azerbaijan in the negotiations with the other side. Instead of encouraging a complex narrative and preparing the public for compromises, the authorities in both countries are encouraging a simplistic nationalistic narrative that speaks

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of high chances of victory should there be a renewal of hostilities.³⁵ De Waal claims that the mediators barely make public reference to the talks and the difficulties encountered in them, thereby failing to place the blame on the leaders.³⁶ There are also relatively few indirect negotiations (Track 2), in part because both nations are currently under authoritarian rule and are suspicious of the involvement of civil society organizations financed by the West. Azerbaijan is particularly suspicious about unofficial talks, and government authorities have harassed and arrested activists involved in such contacts.³⁷

In recent years, Nagorno-Karabakh residents have themselves not been involved in any talks. Armenia claims that it can represent the local Armenian population, in part because President Serzh Sargsyan and the previous President have close ties to the region,³⁸ while Azerbaijan is worried that involving representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh will turn the talks into negotiations of two against one. It is obvious, though, that Nagorno-Karabakh residents are increasingly worried that decision makers in Yerevan do not represent them sufficiently. For example, it is clear that Nagorno-Karabakh residents are not willing to accept the presence of peacekeeping forces, saying that only they can defend themselves and warning of a repeat of a Srebrenica massacre scenario if such forces are stationed there.³⁹

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Conclusion

It seems that while there is already agreement on a general framework for a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, there is – at least on the Azeri side – a sense that there is no partner on the Armenian side.⁴⁰ From the Azeri perspective, the solution is to increase their bargaining power through military buildup. The concern, of course, is that significant Azeri force buildup will lead to further deterioration, not necessarily intentional, and to renewed warfare. It may be that the escalation of 2014 is evidence of this trend.

The fact that the situation has the elements of an intra-state ethnic conflict (between the Armenians and Azeris in Azerbaijan) as well as elements of an inter-state conflict (between Armenia and Azerbaijan and as part of the conflict between Armenia and Turkey),⁴¹

makes it complex and difficult to resolve. In this sense, it is similar to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has aspects of an ethnic conflict over territory that was once Mandatory Palestine and is also an inter-state conflict – between Israel and the future Palestinian state and between Israel and the Arab states. While it is clear that at times the sides themselves have had little or no desire to resolve the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the interests of the external players – especially Russia – have often made it difficult to reach an agreement. This is perhaps a warning to those who seek to involve Russia further in the conflict between Israel and its neighbors.

In terms of general lessons that may be drawn from the negotiations to resolve the conflict, an effort that has yet to bear fruit, it can be argued that while a certain degree of secrecy is a requisite component in conflict resolution, too much secrecy can be harmful as it does not allow the public to prepare for accepting an agreement. This is especially true on the Armenian side, where compromises run into greater opposition than on the Azeri side. Moreover, although it seems that identity-related elements and the Armenian demand for solutions that would strengthen the sense of security of the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh would justify thinking outside the box, it is evident that the idea of land swaps was perhaps a stretch, which required the recourse to previous ideas (albeit with new emphases). It would thus seem that on the one hand there is a trade-off between the attempt to back out of a dead end in negotiations by presenting innovative ideas, and on the other hand, staying within the realm of solutions that have been accepted in principle by the partners to the conflict and the external players so as not to totally undermine the legitimacy of a possible agreement.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh contains many elements present in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a nation that experienced genocide, a strong diaspora, refugees, settlements, the need for security arrangements, and unilateral steps of statehood declaration. Therefore, if and when there is a breakthrough in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, learning how the sides overcome some of these issues on the road to an agreement will be intriguing.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involves Azerbaijan, an important Israeli ally. From the Azerbaijani perspective, returning the land conquered by Armenian forces is the number one priority in terms of its security and foreign affairs policy.⁴² Israel and Azerbaijan maintain a close relationship, formulated first and foremost as a response to both parties' concerns about Iran. However, despite the close relations between the two, Azerbaijan

has yet – since diplomatic relations were established in 1992 – to open an embassy in Israel, in part out of concern that this would keep Muslim nations from supporting its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in international forums. Moreover, a renewed flare-up of the conflict might make Azerbaijan even warier of a simultaneous confrontation with Iran and cause it to step back from its relationship with Israel. The relationship with Israel was important to the Azeri military buildup, involving in part the supply of Israeli UAVs, as preparation for renewed fighting, but it might become less significant when fighting starts, because it is doubtful Israel would provide Azerbaijan with direct assistance in such a confrontation. Moreover, if the conflict is rekindled and the result is increased Russian influence on Azerbaijan, it will mean a decrease in Azerbaijan’s ability to act independently, a fact that could also have a harmful effect on relations with Israel.

Notes

- 1 Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 285.
- 2 David M. Herszenhorn, “Clashes Intensify Between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Disputed Land,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2015.
- 3 Huseyn Aliyev, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process after the Helicopter Incident,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 10, 2014.
- 4 Felicity Capon, “Russia ‘Arming Armenia and Azerbaijan’ as Hostilities Increase,” *Newsweek*, February 17, 2015.
- 5 The Azeris claim that it is closer to 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s territory, but de Waal insists that number is exaggerated. For more, see Emily van Buskirk, “Nagorno Karabagh: Is a Solution Imminent?” Event Report, Belfer Center Caspian Studies Program, September 18, 2000.
- 6 Thomas de Waal, “Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process,” *Survival* 52, no. 4 (2010): 173.
- 7 For more on Israeli-Azeri relations, see Gallia Lindenstrauss, “Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship,” *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 4 (2015): 69-79, http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan17_4ENG_7_Lindenstrauss.pdf.
- 8 Contrary to the common claim whereby Stalin’s objective was to divide and conquer, de Waal suggests that the primary goal was to divide the nation into economically sustainable regions. See de Waal, *Black Garden*, pp. 130-31.
- 9 Herzig, “The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia,” *Chatham House Papers* (1999): 66.
- 10 Herzig, “The New Caucasus,” p. 67.

- 11 Savante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2011), pp. 139-40.
- 12 The permanent members of the Minsk group are Armenia, Azerbaijan, United States, Russia, France, Belarus, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Sweden, and Finland. On a rotating basis the states who form the OSCE Troika are also members. The group got its name following the 1992 (failed) attempt to convene a peace summit in Minsk.
- 13 Stephan H. Astourian, "From Ter-Petrosian to Kocharian: Leadership Change in Armenia," *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Paper* (2000): 1-2.
- 14 Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 128.
- 15 Robert Coalson and Harry Tamrazian, "Ten Years Later, Deadly Shooting in Armenian Parliament Still Echoes," *Radio Free Europe*, October 27, 2009.
- 16 Thomas Ambrosio, "Unfreezing the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict? Evaluating Peacemaking Efforts under the Obama Administration," *Ethnopolitics* 10, no. 1 (2011): 99.
- 17 De Waal, *The Caucasus*, p. 129.
- 18 Liz Fuller and Richard Giragosian, "Azerbaijan Moderates Stance at Paris Karabakh Talks," *Radio Free Europe*, October 30, 2014.
- 19 Timur Saitov and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "The Ongoing Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: Can Iran Succeed Where 'the Minsk Group' Failed?" *Iran Pulse* No. 59, July 17, 2013, <http://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/246-iran-pulse-59-17july2013>.
- 20 Kamer Kasim, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Regional Implications and the Peace Process," *Caucasus International* 2, no. 1 (2012): 99.
- 21 Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, p. 157.
- 22 De Waal, "Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process," pp. 163-64.
- 23 Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, pp. 157-59.
- 24 Cory Welt, "To Link or not to Link: Turkey-Armenia Normalization and the Karabakh Conflict," *Caucasus International* 2, no. 1 (2012): 60.
- 25 Behlul Ozkan, "Who Gains from the 'No War No Peace' Situation? A Critical Analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *Geopolitics*, 13, no. 3 (2008): 591.
- 26 Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, pp. 153-55.
- 27 De Waal, *The Caucasus*, p. 127.
- 28 Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Pockets of Instability: What Links Kosovo, Cyprus and Nagorno-Karabakh," *INSS Insight* No. 46, February 24, 2008, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=1884>.
- 29 De Waal, *The Caucasus*, p. 107.
- 30 Emphasis added. The citation is from Lincina Simao, "Engaging Civil Society in Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: What Role for the EU and its Neighbourhood Policy?" MICROCON Policy Working Paper (2010): 4.

- 31 Umut Uzer, "Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics: A Case Study for Nationalism, Realism and Ethnic Conflict," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2012): 247.
- 32 Ambrosio, "Unfreezing the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," pp. 108-9.
- 33 Khachig Toloyan, "The Armenian Diaspora and Karabakh Conflict Since 1988," in *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers of Peace-Wreckers*, eds. Hazel Smith and Paul Stares (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007), pp. 119-25.
- 34 Ozkan, "A Critical Analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," p. 591. According to Azeri sources, in the Khojaly massacre on February 26, 1992, 613 Azeris were killed by Armenian troops and Russian forces.
- 35 De Waal, *The Caucasus*, pp. 100, 128-29.
- 36 De Waal, "Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process," p. 175.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69.
- 38 Robert Kocharyan, the previous President of Armenia, was President in Nagorno-Karabakh before becoming the Armenian President, and President Serzh Sargsyan was born in Nagorno-Karabakh and played a central role in the fighting there.
- 39 De Waal, "Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process," pp. 168, 172.
- 40 Cornell even draws a direct comparison between the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azeri frustration on the one hand, and the Israeli feelings after the Camp David summit in 2000, on the other. See Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, p. 160.
- 41 Uzer, "Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics," p. 250.
- 42 Ali Unal, "Azeri Envoy Baghirov: Liberation of Our Lands from Armenian Invasion Top Priority," *Daily Sabah*, February 23, 2015.