

# The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in the Context of Muslim-Christian Relations

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The Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, which broke out in 1987, has been one of the most enduring ethno-territorial conflicts in the former Soviet space. In 1988, the conflict escalated into a fully-fledged war, involving Armenians and Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 1994, international mediation de-escalated the war into a fragile status quo. Since then, it has been largely neglected by Western policy-makers, media, and the wider international public. Meanwhile, the conflict remains a key threat to stability stretching from the Caspian to the Black Sea. Historically, its myriad causes included the geopolitical rivalry in the Caucasus between the Christian Orthodox Russian Empire, Muslim Persia and the Ottoman Empire; the development of Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalist movements; the initial temporary rapprochement between Bolshevik atheistic Russia and Ataturk's secularist Turkey; Stalin's nationality policy; the break-up of the USSR; and the resurgence of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethno-religious nationalism. The article provides a historical account of the role of religion in the geopolitics of the Caucasus with particular focus on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It argues that throughout history, the religious factor has played an indirect role in first fomenting and later perpetuating the conflict.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, Islam, Christianity, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia.



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## Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a key component in the arc of instability stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, which has adversely affected the lives of millions of people, as well as the security of major oil and gas supplies to Europe.

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The conflict erupted in 1987 during Gorbachev's liberalization and the political de-centralization of the USSR. At the core of the conflict was the status of Azerbaijan's autonomous *oblast'* (province) of Nagorno-Karabakh, home to an Armenian-majority population. It was triggered initially by the demands of the nationalist Armenian elite of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast'* (NKAO), who wanted to unite the territory with Armenia. Subsequently, the NKAO's Armenian leaders established the self-proclaimed "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" (NKR), which has not been internationally recognized. This act mobilized the Armenian and

Azerbaijani national publics, and the conflict transcended Nagorno-Karabakh and engulfed the republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the large Armenian diaspora. The conflict soon transformed into the bloody war of 1988-94, during which over thirty thousand people lost their lives, over 740,000 people became refugees or were internally displaced, and Armenian troops occupied over 13 per cent of Azerbaijan's sovereign territory<sup>1</sup>.

Since the 1994 ceasefire, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, along with other post-Soviet conflicts – namely Transnistria in Moldova; Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia; Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* in Ukraine – has been termed a 'frozen conflict'. However, unlike the other aforementioned conflicts, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been largely ignored by Western policy-makers and media, presumably due to the absence of an overt Russian involvement<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, during the last two decades, the nature and politics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict changed significantly. The major domestic changes

1 Rezvani, B. (2013) *Ethno-territorial conflict and coexistence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, p.183.

2 This observation is based on the analysis of over 4,000 pieces of news from leading British media outlets and over 30 interviews with British and French diplomats and other policy-makers conducted within the research project 'The Western framing of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: a factor in its resolving, or perpetuation?' January-December 2014, University of Birmingham, UK.

have included Azerbaijan's lengthy period of political stability under late President Heydar Aliyev (in office, 1993-2003) and incumbent President Ilham Aliyev (in office, 2003-present) along with its energy-driven economic prosperity, a stark contrast to economically stagnant Armenia. Other geopolitical factors stem from the growing assertiveness of Russia in its 'near abroad', of Turkey in the Turkic-speaking world, and of Iran in the Middle East. Globally, this era has witnessed the growing rift between the West, on the one side, and Russia, Iran and Turkey, on the other, the rise of Islamism and *jihadism*. As a consequence, the religious-civilizational dimension of international politics as it pertains to the West, Russia, and the major countries of the Muslim world has been amplified

The particular endurance of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is due to the multiple historical, geopolitical, ethno-national and religious factors at play. The article examines its historical evolution through the prism of Christian-Muslim relations. It argues that throughout history, the religious factor has played an indirect role in first fomenting and later perpetuating the conflict.

### ***Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the formation of Russia***

Although it is common practice to equate Russia with Orthodox Christianity and to juxtapose it with Islam, Russia's historical relationship with Islam is complex. Long before the rulers of the first Rus polity, Kievan Rus<sup>3</sup>, officially adopted Christianity in 988, pagan proto-Russians – unlike their counterparts in Western Europe – were involved in commercial and cultural exchanges with the more economically, politically and culturally advanced Muslim peoples from the confessionally pluralistic and Turkic-dominated Judaist Khazar Khaganate (7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Muslim Volga Bulgaria (7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries). Between 1240 and 1480, Rus was directly incorporated within an equally poly-confessional state formation – the Genghizid Golden Horde, the Mongol-Turkic rulers of which adhered to Sunni Islam of Hanafi *madhhab* (juridical school) from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Golden Horde was superseded by the Tatar-dominated Genghizid Kazan Khanate (1402-1552), the official

3 Kievan Rus was a proto-Russian (eastern Slavic) state with the centre in Kiev which existed between the late 9<sup>th</sup> and mid-13<sup>th</sup> centuries in the western part of present day Russia and Ukraine. It was ruled by the Varangian (Viking) dynasty of Ruriks (859-1598).

religion of which was also Sunni Islam of Hanafi *madhhab*.

The Islamised Mongol-Turkic domination over Rus and wider Eurasia gave rise to considerable institutional and cultural similarities between proto-Russian and Muslim Eurasian polities. It also channelled state formation in Russia, as well as in other parts of Eurasia, along the lines of loose poly-ethnic and poly-confessional empires with vaguely determined frontiers compared to the formation of the national sovereign states of France, England, Spain and other polities in post-Westphalian Europe (1648), which had clearly defined borders. It also accounted for considerable inter-ethnic and inter-confessional tolerance and the relative political insignificance of religion, ethnicity and language compared to the dichotomy between nomads and non-nomads. This was quite different from the centrality of religion in contemporary Europe, which witnessed Crusades, the Catholic inquisition and protracted Catholic-Protestant internecine warfare. It is indicative that the economic and political aggrandisement of the Russian Orthodox Church occurred while proto-Russia was part of the Genghizid Empire<sup>4</sup>. It is also worth noting that Orthodox Muscovites' "Asian-ness" was reflected in contemporary Western perceptions of them as being similar to Muslim Tatars<sup>5</sup>.

In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the balance of Eurasian power shifted in favour of Russia, when her Orthodox Christian rulers - tsars - advanced into the territorial domain of the Muslim Genghizid Turkic Khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, Siberia and Nogay. An important underpinning of Russia's eastward expansionism was the Orthodox Christian sacralisation of the Russian state and its rulers, and the portrayal of Moscow as the Third Rome in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453<sup>6</sup>. Since then and until the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was an integral part of Russian statehood. It participated in the ideological framing and civilizational 'justification' of Russian territorial expansion into the Muslim Caucasus, as well as Central Asia. At the same time, Russia's ideological Byzantinization did

4 Yemelianova, G.M. (2017) 'How "Muslim" are Central Asian Muslims? A historical and comparative enquiry', *Central Asian Affairs*, 4, p.250.

5 Schimmelpennick, D. (2010) *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian mind from Peter the Great to the emigration*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2010, p.4.

6 Curanovic, A. (2012) *The religious factor in Russia's foreign policy*. London: Routledge, p.17.

not stop her rulers from instrumentalizing, when it was needed, Russia's structural and cultural affinities with Muslim Asia.

### ***Russia's Expansion in the Caucasus: The Factor of Christianity***

Russia's advance towards the Caucasus began in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>. The advance was driven by her ambition to join the club of the major European, rather than Asian, powers as had been the case with earlier territorial expansion. This shift represented the increased conditioning of Russia's Eastern policy by the European civilizational frame, intertwined with Christianity. Russia's discursive Europeanization was initiated by Peter the Great (1682-1725)<sup>8</sup>, who, along with numerous other pro-Western innovations, in 1721 created the Holy Synod. As the supreme state department in charge of the Orthodox Church, the Holy Synod became directly involved in formulating Russian foreign policy and the promotion of Russia as protector of Orthodox and other Eastern Christians in Eurasia and the Middle East. In 1722, Peter the Great organised the Persian campaign with the aim to create Russia's stronghold in Derbent of present-day Dagestan and Baku.

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Russia's inroads into the Caucasus clashed with the regional ambitions of Shi'a Muslim Persia and the Sunni Ottoman Empire and thus contributed to a series of Russo-Persian and Russo-Ottoman wars throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>9</sup>. Russia's self-promotion as the champion of Eastern Christians was a factor in her relations with Orthodox Christian Georgia, which had been intermittently dominated by its powerful Muslim neighbours, Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and accounted for Russia's relatively peaceful annexation of Georgia in 1801. In 1811 the autocephalous status of the Georgian Orthodox Church was abolished, and until 1917 it was headed by *exarchs* (metropolitan bishops), appointed by the Russian Holy Synod, rather than independent Catholicos-Patriarchs. The Georgian

7 Prior to this, Russian rulers persistently strengthened Russia's influence in the region through their alliances with some Kabarda and Daghestani rulers and the promotion of the Cossack settlements.

8 Peter the Great was a representative of the new Romanov dynasty (1613-1917).

9 Yemelianova, G.M. (2002) *Russia and Islam: a historical survey*. London: Palgrave, pp.52-5.

princes and nobles received Russian titles of princes and noblemen and Tiflis (Tbilisi) was transformed into the bastion of Russian expansionist policy in the Caucasus<sup>10</sup>.

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Muslim Ottoman Turkey and Persia, thereby separating Caucasian Muslims from their co-religionists across the border. In the context of this policy, which was implemented in the period between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917, a large number of Christian Armenians from the frontier areas in Iran and Ottoman Turkey were resettled in the South Caucasus. The legal grounds for this policy were the 1813 Gulistan and 1828 Turkmenchay treaties between Russia and Iran, and the 1829 Adrianople treaty between Russia and Ottoman Turkey. According to the Russo-Iranian treaties, historical Azerbaijan, which was within the political borders of Iran, was divided into the northern part, which was transferred to Russian control, and the southern part, which remained in Iran.

In accordance with the Treaty of Adrianople, Ottoman Turkey recognised Russia's suzerainty over the north-western part of present-day Armenia. Of special relevance to this discussion is the establishment in 1822 of Russian suzerainty over the Muslim khanates of Karabakh, Shirvan, Baki (Baku), Ganja, Quba, Erivan, Nakhchevan, Shaki and Shamakhi<sup>11</sup>. In 1828 Russia granted a six-year tax exemption to Armenian migrants from Persia, who settled on the territory to the north of the Araz River<sup>12</sup>.

The Russian policy led to significant changes in the demographics of the South Caucasus, and Karabakh in particular. Thus, according to official Russian statistics, by 1911 over 40,000 Armenians from Persia and over 84,000 Armenians from the Ottoman Empire were resettled in Russia's

10 On several occasions, however, for geopolitical reasons, St. Petersburg, played down its international Orthodox Christian credentials and sided with Iran or Ottoman Turkey. For example, in 1833 and 1839 it supported Istanbul against the Egyptian Mamluks (Curanovic, *The religious factor*;41).

11 Sattarov, R. 'Islamic revival and Islamic activism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan', in Yemelianova, G.M. (ed.) *Radical Islam in the former Soviet Union*. London: Routledge, p.149.

12 Imranli-Lowe, K. (2015) 'Reconstruction of the "Armenian homeland" notion', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 51(4), p.549.

newly established Armenian *oblast* (from 1828 to 1840), the Elizavetpol (Ganja) *guberniia* (province) and the Borchaly, Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalaki *uezds* (districts) of the Tiflis *guberniia*. The next major influx of Christian Armenian migrants to the South Caucasus took place during the First World War, especially during 1914-1916. During that period, between 350,000 and 500,000 Armenians settled in the region and as a result, its indigenous Armenians were considerably outnumbered by Armenian migrants. It is worth noting that this major increase of the Caucasus' Christian Armenian population occurred alongside the persistent decline of its Muslim population, due to a significant exodus of the region's Shi'a Muslims to Iran and of Sunni Muslims to the Ottoman Empire. As a result, according to official Russian sources, the Armenian population of Karabakh increased from 21 per cent in 1810 to 42 per cent in 1916, while the Muslim population decreased from 79 per cent to 56 per cent<sup>13</sup>.

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St. Petersburg's measures towards the strengthening of the Armenian presence in the region were accompanied by a series of political and administrative reforms which paved the way for the subsequent creation in Karabakh of the separate Armenian-dominated administrative unit of Nagorno-Karabakh. This idea was initially proposed by the Armenian delegates at the conferences on *zemstvo* ('local government') reforms in Transcaucas in 1905-16. In July 1917 it was included into the Russian Interior Ministry's project on the administrative delimitation of the South Caucasus<sup>14</sup>. Other factors which contributed to the rise of ethno-religious tensions in the region included the political, economic and social rivalry between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and their increased national awareness, which emerged in the context of the under-representation of Azerbaijanis in local government and the Baku oil industry boom. Also relevant was a series of outbreaks of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional violence in 1905-1907 and 1918-1920<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.550-1.

<sup>14</sup> Imranli-Lowe, K. (2015) 'The Provisional Government and the Armenian homeland project', *Revolutionary Russia*, 27(22), pp.136,138.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, J. (2013) *Red nations: the nationalities experience in and after the USSR*. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, pp.8-9, 40-1.



### *The Implications of Sovietization and Atheization*

Following the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917, the autonomous status of Nagorno-Karabakh was preserved. However, the end of Tsarist rule – which had been fused with Orthodox Christianity – and the Bolsheviks' ideological atheism and internationalism drastically reduced the role of religion in Moscow's policy in the Caucasus. Furthermore, the Lenin government, which was confronted with civil war, Western intervention and international isolation, opted for the policy of rapprochement with Kemalist Turkey, the secularist successor to the Muslim Ottoman Empire. The friendly relations between the two countries were affirmed by the Moscow Treaty of 16 March 1921 and the Kars treaty of 13 October 1921. These treaties legitimized the new borders of the Turkish republic and the Soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The Treaty of Kars confirmed that Nakhchevan remains 'an autonomous territory under the protectorate of Azerbaijan on the condition that Azerbaijan would not yield its protectorate to

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any third party', while Kars, Kagyzman, Ardahan, Olty, Artvin and parts of Batum and Surmali regions were to be transferred to Turkey<sup>16</sup>. The same logic lay behind the decision of the Bolshevik Caucasian Bureau on 5 July 1921 to retain the Armenian-dominated Nagorno-Karabakh within Sovietized Azerbaijan.<sup>17</sup>

During the Soviet period the combination of the Communist Party's totalitarian control, Stalin's nationality policy, and comprehensive Sovietization ensured political stability, relative societal cohesion and inter-ethnic peace in the region. Moreover, the autonomous status of Nagorno-Karabakh ensured the cultural rights of its Armenian population to such an extent that a number of Armenian villages in the surrounding areas petitioned to be included within the autonomous region.<sup>18</sup> Religion was removed from the public sphere and dissolved within Russian, Azerbaijani, Armenian and other national cultures of the

16 Hasanli, J. (2016) 'Russian-Turkish conference in Moscow and South Caucasus', in Areshev, A., Asker A., et al (eds.) Turkish-Russian academics: a historical study on the Caucasus. Ankara: AVIM, p.165

17 Imranli-Lowe, K. (2015) 'The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the prism of the British media and *The New York Times*, 1988-1994', *Caucasus Survey*, 3(2), p.154.

18 Smith, *Red nations*, p.76.



USSR. At the same time, all those national cultures became depoliticized and subordinate to the supra-national Soviet culture, while the closed nature of the Soviet state and society insulated the Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Nagorno-Karabakh from the religious and nationalist impulses emanating from their ethnic brethren and co-religionists abroad.

### ***Armenian Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Role of the Diaspora***

In the late 1980s, Gorbachev's political, economic and religious liberalisation and decentralisation unleashed the suppressed national and religious sentiments of Karabakh Armenians. The ideological framing of their cultural, political and economic aspirations came largely from outside Karabakh, notably Yerevan and Moscow, as well as the Armenian diaspora in the U.S., France, Lebanon and other parts of the world<sup>19</sup>. It is symptomatic that compared to the largely territory-focused ex-Soviet Armenian ideologists, their counterparts from the external diaspora tended to construe the local and national grievances of Karabakh Armenians against Baku as an element of the broader Armenian-Turkish animosity, related to the mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. They also played a pivotal role in the promotion of a reductionist Christian-Muslim paradigm in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict<sup>20</sup>. The diaspora's intellectual and ideological input was accompanied by its substantial financial support for Karabakh's Armenians to increase the birth rate, with the aim of changing the demographics of the occupied Azerbaijani territories. Various Armenian centers and foundations in the diaspora established scholarship programs for Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia to study in the U.S. and Western Europe<sup>21</sup>.

19 Particularly influential in the formulation of the political programme of Karabakh Armenians were Yerevan-based writer Zoriy Balayan, the Moscow-based Abel Aganbegyan, who was Gorbachev's economic advisor, and historian Sergey Mikoyan. (Cheterian, V.(2011) *War and peace in the Caucasus: Russia's troubled frontier*. London: Hurst & Company, p. 93).

20 Chorbajian, L., Donabedian, P. and Mutafian, C. (eds.) (1994) *The Caucasian knot: the history and geo-politics of Nagorno-Karabakh*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, p.9.

21 O'Beachain, D.(2015) *Armenians on Karabakh and Armenians in Karabakh: politics and perceptions*, an international conference entitled 'The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: current discourses and future perspectives, London, King's College London, 17 February.

## ***Post-Soviet Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict***

### *Russia and Armenia*

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From the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1987, Russia's position towards the conflict parties has been ambiguous. In the early stage of the conflict, i.e. 1987-1989, Moscow followed the Soviet internationalist approach and adhered to the principle of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, denouncing the pro-independence claims of Karabakh Armenians. However, in the 1990s Moscow became increasingly supportive of Yerevan, by providing it with substantial economic and military assistance, as well as moral support<sup>22</sup>. In doing so, it re-introduced elements of the Christian solidarity theme which had been employed by Tsarist Russia. Thus, Russia recognized the 1915 events as a 'genocide'<sup>23</sup> – the issue which has been central to Armenian identity worldwide. In 1995, the special relationship between Russia and Armenia received a boost following Armenia's agreement to host a 4,000-person Russian military base. In 2010 the base's lease was increased from 25 to 49 years, i.e. until 2044<sup>24</sup>. In 2014-2015 the Russo-Armenian military alliance was complemented when Armenia joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). At the societal level, the Russo-Armenian entente has been strengthened by the millions of Armenians living and working in Russia, as well as by the rising discourse regarding the common Christian heritage, which has reflected the increased role of religion in official nation-building narratives in both countries<sup>25</sup>. Of particular significance has been the increased political assertiveness of the Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill (in office 2009-present) and the Armenian Apostolic Church under Catholicos Karekin II (in office 1999-present), and their ecumenical solidarity in the face of rising political Islam, including  *jihadism*.

22 Markedonov, S. (2012) *De-facto obrazovaniia postsovetskogo prostranstva: dvadtsat' let gosudarstvennogo stroitel'stva*. Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, p.129.

23 The 'genocide' of 1915-23 was recognized by 23 countries, including Russia, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Canada and 43 U.S. states. It is not, however, recognized by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Both perceive the events of 1915-23 as inter-communal warfare which lacked official authorization from the Ottoman government. In April 2014, on the eve of the 99<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian 'genocide', the former Prime Minister and current President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan described these events as 'inhumane' and offered condolences to the grandchildren of those who lost their lives. He called for a dialogue between Turkey and Armenia and proposed to set up a historical commission to probe events surrounding the mass killings of Armenians.

24 Aleksandrov, A. (2013) 'Bol'shaia krepost' Zakavkazia'. *Krasnaya Zvezda*. 3 December 2013.

25 Yemelianova, G.M. (2016) The shifting geopolitics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', *Diplomatiya Alemi*, 43, p.150.

### *Russia and Azerbaijan*

As with Armenia, throughout the conflict, Russia's relations with Azerbaijan have fluctuated. After a short period of close engagement in the early years of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the relationship cooled due to Azerbaijan's assertive de-Sovietization, its rapprochement with linguistically and ethnically close Turkey, and its oil-related increased engagement with Western Europe. Under the presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey (in office 1992-3) Azerbaijan underwent an alphabetic (i.e. Cyrillic to Latin script), educational and cultural re-orientation from Russia to Turkey. However, since the ascendance in 1993 of pragmatic president Heydar Aliyev, who in 2003 was succeeded by president Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, complementing its strong links with Turkey by advancing its relations with the U.S., the E.U., and Israel, as well as re-connecting with Russia on cultural, societal, economic and increasingly political levels. Thus, on the one hand, in contrast to Yerevan, Baku refused to allow Russia to retain military bases on its territory, and in 1997 formed together with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, the pro-Europe Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM). Then in 1998, Baku withdrew from the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which it had joined back in 1993. In 2002 it spearheaded the implicitly anti-Russian regional energy project 'Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan'.

On the other side, Russia and Azerbaijan maintained their visa-free regime to facilitate business and labor movement. Russia's cultural presence was ensured by the availability of Russian-language secondary and university education<sup>26</sup>. With the arrival in 2000 of assertive president Vladimir Putin, Russo-Azerbaijani relations have acquired new impetus, expanding to encompass the energy and defence spheres. Moscow, despite previous reservations about the division of the Caspian Sea's reserves, has begun to seek a stronger position in the Caspian Sea energy market which, since the signing in 1994 of the 'Contract of the Century', has been dominated by Western gas and oil companies. There has been a steady rise in business and financial links between the two countries. Most significantly,

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26 Thus, since then the Russian language-based teaching has been in operation at the Baku branch of Moscow State University, Baku State University, Baku Slavic University and some other institutions of higher education.

since 2006 Russia has become one of the main suppliers of heavy weapons to Azerbaijan, along with Israel.

It is worth noting that Moscow has rationalized its growing re-engagement with Azerbaijan through an appeal to Eurasianism, including Russia's Christian-Muslim cultural identity; their two hundred years of common history, including the Soviet identities of their older citizens; the 140,000-plus ethnic Russians living in Azerbaijan and of over 620,000 Azerbaijanis in Russia; as well as the prestigious Soviet credentials of Azerbaijan's charismatic figures – late President Heydar Aliyev and Grand Muftii Pasha-zadeh Gadji Allahshukur (in office, 1980-present) of the Caucasus<sup>27</sup>. The Kremlin has also emphasized Russia's unique in-depth understanding of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict due to her historical involvement in its creation and her subsequent central role in the conflict resolution process.

### ***Nagorno-Karabakh and other Regional Powers***

#### ***The Role of Turkey***

Turkey has been Azerbaijan's main ally throughout the conflict, although it has refrained from direct involvement or military assistance due to its NATO membership and complex relationship with Russia. A special bond between Turkey and Azerbaijan was enshrined in the principle of 'one people-two states', which was

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endorsed by Suleyman Demirel (in office, 1993-2000) and Heydar Aliyev, the charismatic former presidents of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Following the capture of Azerbaijan's Kelbajar region by Armenian forces in April 1993, Turkey closed its border with Armenia. In the 2000s and the early 2010s, Turkey attempted a nuanced approach to Nagorno-Karabakh by separating it from the 'genocide' question<sup>28</sup>. In October 2009 in Zurich, with U.S. mediation, Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols on establishing diplomatic relations and the opening of Turkish-

27 *Vserossiiskaiia perepis' naseleniia 2010 goda*, Available at: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm) (Accessed: 27 September 2017). It is estimated that the actual number of Azerbaijanis in Russia is much higher than the official figures.

28 The normalization process became known as 'football diplomacy' after the visit of Turkey's President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan at the invitation of the Armenian President to attend the football World Cup qualifier match between Armenia and Turkey in September 2008.

Armenian borders. However, the implementation of the Zurich Protocols stalled due to considerable public and political opposition by all concerned. The Armenian government was accused by many Armenians inside the country and especially in the Diaspora of selling out to the 'eternal enemy', while the Turkish government faced dissatisfaction from Baku due to the non-inclusion of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue into the Protocols. The Protocols were de facto annulled in February 2015 when they were recalled from the Armenian parliament by President Serzh Sargsyan (in office, 2008-present).

Given the constitutionally enshrined secularism of both Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as their historical adherence to different strands of Islam (Sunni and Shi'a), the role of religious solidarity in the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance over Nagorno-Karabakh has been superseded by ethno-linguistic and cultural affinities. It should be noted that the pro-Islamic tendencies of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has dominated Turkish politics since 2002, have been conducive to strengthening the religious dimension of Turkey's position on Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as Turkish-Azerbaijani relations more broadly.

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### *The Role of Iran*

Like Turkey, Iran has been concerned about Nagorno-Karabakh, which it regards as part of historical Persia. Other important factors in Iran's position towards the conflict have included the common Shi'a Islamic affiliation of most Iranians and Azerbaijanis, the long common border, and the nearly twenty million Azerbaijanis living in Iran. Since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, Iran has supported the Shi'a Islamic revival among post-Soviet Azerbaijanis, while downplaying their Turkic nationalism. At the same time, Iran has been wary of the secularized ethno-nationalism of the Azerbaijani leadership, its alleged sponsorship of pan-Azerbaijanism leading to its potential territorial claims on the Azerbaijani-populated territory of Iran, and Azerbaijanis' claims to Iranians ruling dynasties. For this reason, Iran, in defiance of the principle of religious solidarity, has chosen to back Christian Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict. In February 1992 Iran became the first Muslim country, besides the republics of Central Asia, to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and to sign a number of agreements on economic cooperation. Throughout the conflict, the open Armenian- Iranian border has provided Armenia with its only land outlet to the outside world.

Azerbaijan reacted to Iran's pro-Armenian stance towards Nagorno-Karabakh and Shi'a proselytism by launching an information war, including a ban on Iranian television in Azerbaijan, regular deportations of Iranian 'spies' from Azerbaijani territory, its uncompromising position on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, and military collaboration with Iran's arch-enemy, Israel. It is worth noting that since the ascendance of pragmatic president Hassan Rouhani in 2013, Azerbaijani-Iranian relations have shown signs of improvement. For example, Baku and Tehran have expressed interest in establishing economic and financial links, including mutual economic investments, development of the North-South transport and energy corridor, and linking the Azerbaijani and Iranian railway systems<sup>29</sup>. A facilitating factor has been Russia's advancing energy cooperation with both Azerbaijan and Iran, as well as her central role in the Astana-based inter-Syrian reconciliation process, which involves Iran and Turkey.

*In its early stage the conflict was widely regarded as an internal Soviet matter with Moscow as its only arbitrator. However, the demise of the USSR in 1991 paved the way for the internationalization of the conflict's mediation within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe*

### ***The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and International Mediators***

In its early stage the conflict was widely regarded as an internal Soviet matter with Moscow as its only arbitrator. However, the demise of the USSR in 1991 paved the way for the internationalization of the conflict's mediation within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE (formerly the Conference on Security and Cooperation, CSCE). The medium for international mediation has been the OSCE Minsk Group, which was established in 1992. Its goal was the convening of a peace conference in Minsk

29 Ismailzade, F. (2016) 'A breakthrough in Iran-Azerbaijan relations?' *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 19 February. Available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13330-a-breakthrough-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations?.html> (Accessed 22 November 2017).

with the participation of all parties involved in the conflict. Since 1997 the co-chairs of the Minsk Group have been Russia, France and the U.S. Since the 1994 ceasefire the OSCE Minsk Group has shaped the format of the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. To the Group's credit, this period has witnessed the initial de-escalation of the conflict and the securing of the post-1994 territorial status quo, as well as some shifts in the negotiation process from absolutist demands towards smaller, practical step-by-step measures. However, more than two decades on, the Minsk Group has failed to achieve any tangible progress in resolving the conflict. Among the reasons for the Group's ineffectiveness have been the insufficient seniority of its co-chairs (ambassadorial rather than ministerial), the increasingly divergent foreign policy trajectories of the U.S., France and Russia, and their asymmetric engagement with the Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas.

*Russia, which has large and comparable Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas - and consequently comparable Armenian and Azerbaijani lobbies in the Russian political and business establishment - has possessed relatively equal political leverage in dealing with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the self-proclaimed "NKR".*

Russia, which has large and comparable Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas – and consequently comparable Armenian and Azerbaijani lobbies in the Russian political and business establishment – has possessed relatively equal political leverage in dealing with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the self-proclaimed “NKR”. Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Russia favored Armenia and evoked the historical Russian-Armenian Christian brotherhood to substantiate her policy. However, over the past seven years, it has also strengthened its engagement with Azerbaijan by emphasizing their common historical and cultural experiences. This change of approach has been part of the wider Russia assertiveness in the Caucasus and other parts of the ‘near abroad’. A contributing factor has been the growing disillusionment of Baku with the position of the West on Nagorno-Karabakh, which it considers as biased towards Christian Armenia, as well as with the West's concerns over the state of human rights in Azerbaijan. In early April 2016, during an outburst of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Moscow asserted its special role as the conflict manager through direct engagement with Baku and Yerevan outside the Minsk Group's format<sup>30</sup>.

30 For a detailed discussion of the violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan in April 2016 and the role of Russia and other international mediators see: Broers, L.(2016) *Nagorny Karabakh conflict defaulting to war.Research Paper*. Russia and Eurasia Programme, London: Chatham House.



By contrast, the U.S. and France have large intellectually and economically powerful Armenian diasporas, of which there are no Azerbaijani equivalents. Academics and journalists from these diasporas have been involved in informing U.S. and French policy-makers and the wider public on the causes and nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the possible settlement options. They have played a significant role in detaching the conflict's from its regional context in favor of its portrayal as part of the 'historical hatred' between Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks, culminating in the Armenian 'genocide' of 1915-23<sup>31</sup>. A potent example of the political influence of the Armenian diaspora in the U.S. was the infamous section 907a of the Congress's Freedom Support Act of 1992, which prohibited all U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan due to its blockade of Armenia,

*Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other Muslim states have been consistent in their support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and denounced Armenia's actions towards Azerbaijan as 'aggression' and 'occupation'*

while ignoring Armenia's blockade of Nakhchivan<sup>32</sup>. During the 2010s, West's deployment of the Christian-Muslim paradigm in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has acquired new momentum in the context of the advancing political and academic discourse on religiously-defined civilizational confrontation. This discourse, fuelled by the rise of ISIS on the one side, and Christian nationalism in the U.S.<sup>33</sup>, on the other, has been appropriated by ideologists and media on both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Outside the format of international mediation, the civilizational dimension has been evident in the position of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)<sup>34</sup>; Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other Muslim states have been consistent in their support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and denounced Armenia's actions towards Azerbaijan as 'aggression' and 'occupation'<sup>35</sup>.

31 See, for example, agenda, proceedings and participants' national and institutional affiliation for the 6<sup>th</sup> All-Armenia Forum 'Armenia-diaspora: mutual trust, unity and responsibility', Yerevan, 18-20 September 2017. Available at: [http://www.mindiaspora.am/ru/HS\\_6\\_hamajoxov](http://www.mindiaspora.am/ru/HS_6_hamajoxov) (Accessed 3 November 2017).

32 Cornell, S.F. (2001) *Small Nations and great powers: A study of ethno-political conflict in the Caucasus*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, pp.368-9.

33 This assessment is based on the author's ethnographic observation and interviews with Armenian and Azerbaijani policy-makers, NGO activists, journalists, academics and members of public, conducted in Yerevan, Baku and Moscow in September-November 2014.

34 Since 2005 Russia has had observer status in the OIC.

35 *Pakistan mission to UN*. Press release no 75/2008. Available at: <http://www.pakun.org/press-releases/2008/03142008-01.php> (Accessed 22 November 2017).

## *Conclusion*

The origins of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial Russian policy towards the creation of a Christian buffer zone along its southern borders with Muslim Persia and Ottoman Turkey. This policy led to the mass resettlement of Christian Armenians from Persia and Turkey on the territory of present-day Armenia, Karabakh and parts of Georgia. In the 1900s, St. Petersburg's administrative delimitation of the Caucasus resulted in the creation of a separate Armenian-dominated administrative unit of Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijani-majority Karabakh, a unit which was preserved after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The ensuing Soviet totalitarianism and supra-national citizenship ensured political and societal stability, and drastically diminished the role of religion in the region. However, the disintegration in 1991 of the USSR and Soviet identity created fertile ground for the rise of ethno-religious nationalism in the region. An aggravating factor has been the involvement of the intellectually and economically influential Armenian diaspora in the Armenian secessionist mobilization. This group has tied the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with the alleged religious and national historical animosity between Armenians and Turks. Between 1988 and 1994, the conflict escalated into a bloody war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

In 1994, as a result of international mediation, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was de-escalated but not resolved, remaining in an unsustainable status quo. Since the ceasefire, the nature and politics of the conflict have undergone considerable changes. It could be argued that at the regional level the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Soviet secular supra-national citizenship has been conducive to the rise of ethno-religious nationalism in both Russia and among the conflict's direct protagonists, thereby contributing to the notable resurgence of pre-Soviet patterns of regional politics, conditioned by religion. Globally, this trend has been echoed by the emergence of civilizational cleavages based on religion, prompted by the rise of radical Islamism embodied by ISIS, the advance of Christian-linked nationalism in the U.S. and some parts of Western Europe, as well as the OIC-led Islamic solidarity. Among the potential implications of these regional and global political and cultural shifts might be the strengthening of the religious factor in the Nagorno-Karabakh ethno-territorial conflict.