
Karabakhis Preside Over an Uneasy Truce

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In the midst of the hotbed of instability that is the Caucasus, most recently exemplified by the hostilities in Dagestan, Paul Harris reports on the uneasy cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The front line between the armies of Azerbaijan and the breakaway state of Nagorno-Karabakh has an air of permanence. The Karabakhi trenches, bunkers and earthworks are well dug and reinforced with concrete posts, wooden palings and empty ammunition boxes. Wire fences and minefields separate the two armies, which observe each other warily through binoculars across a kilometer of no man's land. Almost daily, there are exchanges of sniper fire. Considerable resources in men and materiel have been committed to holding this line. Behind the lines of infantry trenches, a deep moat has been excavated. Area commander Colonel Mofses Hakoupiian claims: "This is our anti-tank defense. It is 179km long and stretches all the way from the Iranian border to Armenia." These formidable front-line defenses, built since 1994, stretch along the entire eastern and northern flank of Nagorno-Karabakh and are home to some of the most committed troops in the Caucasus.

The Caucasus remains a hotbed of instability: a nexus of religion, blood and belonging. Nagorno-Karabakh is the 'mouse that roared' and - against all odds - finally gained its freedom in 1994 after a bitter two-and-a-half-year war with Azerbaijan. The Karabakhis-ethnically Armenian and firm Christians - trace their roots back for two millennia to a land they call Artsakh. In the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Revolutionary Committee of Azerbaijan recognized Nagorno-Karabakh (translated literally as 'mountainous black garden') as part of Christian Armenia in December 1920. However, within a year it was arbitrarily split from Armenia by Moscow and, two years later, accorded the limited status of an autonomous region within Muslim Azerbaijan. On 17 September 1989 the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan passed a new constitutional law affirming the right of the Baku government to institute or abolish autonomous areas. On 1 December that year, Armenia took the decision to unite the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic with the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic, putting Azerbaijan and Armenia head to head on the issue.

A referendum on independence was held in Nagorno-Karabakh on 10 December 1991: 98% of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to split from Azerbaijan and adopt an independent status. "In deciding on a referendum, the people of Artsakh [the ancient name for Nagorno-Karabakh] were compromising to a certain degree for the sake of avoiding bloodshed. If a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan were to start, both of them could be drowned in blood," said local leader Zorri Balayan in his book *Between Hell and Heaven*. However, Azerbaijani forces began an artillery attack on the capital, Stepanakert, that day, and a war ensued which eventually ended with a cease-fire in May 1994. An estimated 22,000 Karabakhis and an unknown number of Azerbaijanis and their allies died in the conflict.

This was a struggle of David against Goliath, as the tiny 4,000 km region of just 150,000 people was pitched against the might of Azerbaijan with a population of seven million. After three years of war Nagorno-Karabakh, having initially lost almost half its territory to the numerically superior Azerbaijani forces, not only drove them out of almost all of its own land but forced a corridor through Azerbaijan to connect the tiny country to ally Armenia and set up a protective buffer zone against any further attack. The Karabakhis occupy 9% of the territory of Azerbaijan, which they

resolutely refuse to give up. As Balayan states: "If we gave this back, then the war would begin again the next day."

That a mountain-based guerrilla army of some 40,000 men (and a few women) with hunting rifles, supplemented by captured weapons, managed to defeat forces armed with MiG fighters, attack helicopters and Grad rocket batteries is a largely untold story of tactics and courage. As Nagorno-Karabakh launched its bid for freedom, Yugoslavia broke up and the Western media focused on the Balkans rather than the Caucasus. Stepanakert was daily targeted by up to 400 missiles and suffered largely unheard of, while Sarajevo held the world in thrall.

During the war the Azerbaijanis were initially supported by Russian 4th Army troops, Turkish trainers and latterly Afghan mujahideen, who referred insultingly to the fighters of Karabakh as 'asphalt fedayeen': fighters newly come down from the mountains to fight for towns and villages. A mujahideen mercenary admitted: "You never realize where the enemy is firing from. Literally from four sides at once. No, it's not like Afghanistan. It's Karabakh." A number of factors brought victory for the Karabakhis: commitment and determination in fighting for their own land; intimate knowledge of the territory they were defending; the support of the Armenians in terms of equipment supplies and assistance with creating a corridor to Armenia; and the capture of arms and munitions from the Azerbaijani forces. At the same time, there is considerable evidence that the Azerbaijani forces were insufficiently motivated and used their own unwilling minorities - like the Kurds - in the front lines.

There is no peace in Nagorno-Karabakh; just an uneasy cease-fire. Military preparation is seen as the key to the survival for the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. The origins of the defending forces lie in the partisans who operated in the country during the late 1980s and 1990 as the Azeris started to clear Karabakhi villages in what has become known as ethnic cleansing. These partisans carried out more than 200 operations, blowing up bridges, sections of railway track and ambushing Azeri columns carrying munitions to the area. According to Balayan: "Almost every one [of the operations] took place in answer to a provocation by the Azerbaijani leadership or the commandant's office of the district under military rule."

The standing army of Nagorno-Karabakh, the NKP, is probably 15,000-20,000-strong (the Defense Ministry declines to confirm figures). All 18-year-old males must serve two years as a conscript; only full time students can defer. Volunteers turn up for duty every day and return home at night. The professional soldiers sign up for 20 years' service; the only grounds for breaking the contract are health failure. All current professional soldiers are veterans of the war with Azerbaijan, with skills forged in battle. During times of tension, the size of the army could double virtually overnight. Without the benefit of the command and control functions the NKP has today, the 'asphalt fedayeen' fielded around 40,000 fighters during the war with Azerbaijan.

Conscripts go to the Defense Ministry Training Division at Ivanovko, formerly known as Khojalu, 10 minutes drive north from the capital. Training of conscripts is based on that of the old Soviet army. There is much emphasis on discipline and adherence to a strictly enforced daily routine. Training and duties are precisely laid down in schedules. Instructions and orders are in Russian, as are most of the textbooks. Much of the first three months is spent on establishing the regime and on basic training, which includes care and use of uniform, drill, training in the use of the standard infantry weapon (the AK-74), first aid, close-quarters combat and skills like learning to throw a knife to kill. Badges and many items of equipment still bear the insignia of the old Soviet army but are gradually being changed. Prime Minister Jirar Pogossian said uniforms are supplied by Armenia, but soon Nagorno-Karabakh will open a military uniform factory.

After three months, conscripts identified as being particularly able are selected for more specialized training. "Within the first two weeks we can assess the abilities of the conscripts," said the commander of the training center. At six months, route marches enter the training schedule, starting with 5km marches carrying 30kg of gear. After six months, those who are particularly keen and able can elect to go to military training college with a view to becoming professional

soldiers. NKP training is a mixture of the traditional - as practiced in the former Soviet Union - along with guerrilla skills. The command structure is said to be based on that of the Armenian army, with which the NKP has close links. Promising soldiers go to Armenia for training at Yerevan's military academy, and there are Armenian 'observers' in the NKP. There are frequent joint training exercises involving the Armenian army and the NKP. There has been no evidence of foreign trainers in the country.

Women are recruited into the NKP, but are restricted to areas like administration and medical services. The commander of the training center says this is not gender discrimination: "Men are simply better at fighting than women." The NKP says it has 'special forces', although not organized as a specific unit - more a loosely knit group of particularly talented fighters that can be pulled together on an ad hoc basis. Most of the weaponry appears to be Russian. There is an unspecified number of T-72 tanks (up to 50-60) which seem well maintained, BMP-1/2 IFVs and truck-borne rocket/ missile systems, including Grad launchers and SA-6s.

Since the 1994 cease-fire, Nagorno-Karabakh has lived in a unique state of limbo. A self-declared independent republic, it remains unrecognized by any other country - even Armenia, which harbors in its capital Yerevan offices guarded by soldiers of Nagorno-Karabakh behind the nameplate of 'The Permanent Representation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in the Republic of Armenia'.

The Karabakhis have steadily developed the apparatus of statehood: government ministries scattered around Stepanakert with neat nameplates in English, Russian and Armenian; passports and entry visas; and a parliament with 33 democratically elected representatives. It seems the only thing the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh does not have is a national airline. The last passenger aircraft to fly into Stepanakert airport was shot down by the Azerbaijanis.

The odd, low-flying helicopter gets through with skilful flying, but the only - vital - connection with the outside world is a seven-hour road journey through the mountains and down into the so-called Lachin Corridor: a 10km wide corridor driven through Azerbaijani territory by the Karabakhis with the support of the Armenian military. All supplies from the outside world come through the corridor and most of the trucks bear the number plates and camouflage of the NKP. It is no secret that the military establishments of the two neighbors are working closely together. It is also clear that the materiel of the Karabakhi military is drawn from, or at least through, Armenia in transporter trucks crawling through the mountains heavily laden with weapons and munitions.

The military co-operation between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh was confirmed to JIR by the Armenian Prime Minister Armin Darbinian. Born in Gyumri in 1965, Darbinian has previously served as minister of finance (1997) and deputy chairman of the Central Bank of Armenia. He told JIR: " Armenia offers Nagorno-Karabakh its total co-operation in political and economic directions" and in the creation of "a free economy and a free market". Asked if this should be taken to include military support, Darbinian said that yes, military support was part of the economic equation: military capability was dependent upon economic realities: "The military is part of the economy ... we have no other choice but to support Karabakh Armenians in their move towards democracy. Political resolution of the conflict will enable us to formulate relations... there is no room for the people of NK to take a step back. The only way is forward... the Karabakhi people made their choice by referendum."

On the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh, specifically the issue of recognition, the Armenian position appears ambivalent. Darbinian sought to clarify this: "The Armenian government and state supports the nation in Nagorno-Karabakh in its movement towards freedom. We recognize their rights to manage their own affairs. ... We have said we do not insist on the joining of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia if Azerbaijan will enter into discussions. We are ready not to insist on the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate state on the condition of peaceful settlement of the conflict."

This position had been clarified to JIR by the prime minister of Nagorno-Karabakh, Jirar Pogossian, who said that the "international community did not understand us when we said we wanted to unite with Armenia ". He confirmed they were willing to enter talks based on the proposals of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), but that this was rejected by Azerbaijan: "We want to be an independent country now that the world will not accept the fact that we wished to be united with Armenia. Because the world does not want us to unite with Armenia, the only option with which we are left is that of independence. To preserve peace we have resorted to independence."

Much is made by both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh of alleged Azerbaijani intransigence. Referring to the Azerbaijani position, Darbinian observed: "Unfortunately, I have to say they did not accept the principles of the Minsk Group of the OSCE based on trying to keep territorial integrity and were not ready to discuss the matter. Our policy is to insist on it [discussions]." Azerbaijan's President Haidar Aliev has asked the Russian, French and US presidents to put pressure on Armenia to break the 'deadlock' over Karabakh. " Armenia's non-constructive position creates serious obstacles to the peace process," Aliev has said.

Darbinian stresses the urgency attached to "the creation of a peaceful region". Armenia was "very active in programs of regional co-operation promoted by the EU [European Union]. We are ready to play an active role. The other side is not ready to discuss matters of mutual co-operation, stopping the sniper war, mutual use of irrigation and so on".

A contentious issue is the placing of Russian missile systems on Armenian territory. Azerbaijan has countered this with a January invitation from senior presidential advisor Vafa Guluzade to the USA or NATO to establish a base on its territory. Guluzade said Azerbaijan needed a base to help protect it from the Russians and Armenians. The USA or NATO would be highly unlikely to take up the Azerbaijani offer, but Turkey, NATO member and ally of Azerbaijan, might feel in a position to establish a base on the Aspheron peninsular. The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* of 23 February 1999 reported that "this process has already acquired an irreversible character". Such a step would introduce a significant change in the regional military balance of power.

Speaking of the S-300 air defense missile system, Darbinian stated: "The Russians are free to locate the S-300 on our territory. This is their business. We are the country which neighbors Turkey, a NATO member. Unfortunately, Turkey does not want to make any constructive relations with my country. They have closed the border, did not accept diplomatic relations, are delivering military equipment to the Azerbaijanis. ... We are for close relations with NATO but cannot accept this conduct from a member state. That is the reason we have invited the Russians to establish a base and install the S-300 missile system." Installation of the system started in December and it is understood to be operational. A squadron of MiG-29 aircraft is also understood to have been delivered.

Despite these deliveries to Armenia, it is probable that Azerbaijan is armed twice as heavily. A report by the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency estimates that Azerbaijan imported arms valued at US\$115 million during the period 1992-96, with Armenia's imports standing at \$60 million.

Regional pressure increases with other developments. Azerbaijan has announced it will present to the International Court in The Hague the issue of the alleged massacre committed against the Azeris of the town of Khojalu during the war in February 1992. At the time, Azerbaijan said 100 people had been killed by the Karabakhis; today, the State Secretary claims more than 600 were killed, 500 injured and 1,275 taken prisoner. The Azeris accuse the Karabakhis of massacre. The Karabakhis say that advance warning was given of the attack and that all civilians who wished to leave were allowed to do so. They further claim that the Azeris later mutilated returned corpses for propaganda purposes.

Armenia is also accused by Azerbaijan of having designs on Nakhichevan. A Defense Ministry spokesman claimed in mid-February that Armenia intended "to annex it". This was denied by Armenia, whose Foreign Ministry believes Azerbaijan is seeking to delay any settlement of the issue on Nagorno-Karabakh in the belief that a future rise in oil prices will result in a firm strategic alliance with the West, which will then insist on a settlement more favorable to the Azeris. There is much disappointment in Yerevan and Stepanakert that OSCE Chairman Gnaud Vollebek's April visit to the region to discuss Nagorno-Karabakh was cancelled at short notice. The OSCE cited the crisis in Kosovo as the reason and dismissed the idea of new proposals.

Azerbaijan hopes for US support as it holds the oil card. Taking into account its warm relations with Turkey, this would put pressure on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Such an alliance would, however, bring the USA and Russia head to head in the Caucasus, which Russia regards as its own sphere of influence. It is one thing for the USA to alienate Russia over the Balkans; it would be another in its own backyard.

Many analysts see declining Russian influence in the Caucasus as a recurrent factor in destabilizing events: the March attack on the market-place in North Ossetia, which left more than 50 people dead; last year's attacks on Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze; and last October's attempted military coup in Kutasi. All are discerned by some observers as indicative of general malaise in the region. The government in Georgia believes Russia is incapable of assisting with its internal security problems in terms of the rebuilding of Georgia's security forces and the re-establishment of control over its troubled regions, including large tracts of bandit-ridden southern Georgia, where ethnic Armenians are clamoring for union with Armenia or independence. Then there is the increasingly lawless Adjara region, from where gun-running threatens to destabilize other countries in the region. According to one senior diplomat in the region: "This is the staging post for weapons and supplies to all the dissident factions in the region." Abkhazia is also increasingly unstable and conducts its affairs as an independent nation state. A little further afield, Chechnya is beyond the pale.

At some stage it will be necessary to run an oil pipeline through the region. The choices are uninviting. The USA will not support a route north through Chechnya or south through Iran (instability in Chechnya and Abkhazia has blocked both north-south rail routes through the region). The Azerbaijanis will not go west through Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia. Running the pipeline north through south Georgia might appear the best, if ultimately unpredictable, option. If the Armenians of south Georgia join with Armenia proper, a bridge might be forged across national boundaries right up to the Black Sea, destroying Azerbaijan's hopes for its oil bonanza. The USA prefers the Georgia option, seeing it as a regional anchor of stability. Shevardnadze has said he intends to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States defense agreement and seems to look favorably upon NATO as the best guarantor for Georgian independence. That will not enthrall Russia, and the West has not shown any interest in peacekeeping in the Caucasus. It is likely that much will depend on the willingness - and the ability - of the Russian military to maintain a balance of power and interests in the region.

That nobody dare recognize the tiny mountain state of Nagorno-Karabakh is understandable against this disturbed regional background; at least another dozen Nagorno-Karabakhs wait in the wings, eager to make their own bids for independence and recognition. Nobody - Russia, the USA, the EU or the OSCE - wants to see the Caucasus scattered with warring city states and rendered even more unstable.