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Possible War over Nagorno-Karabakh or Weapons ‘Fashion Show’?

by [Anna Poghosyan](#)

Two major regional developments — the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and Armenian-Turkish rapprochement — have returned international attention to Nagorno-Karabakh and cultivated a renewed sense of urgency. The war in Georgia had a sobering effect on the regional actors and external powers alike, demonstrating the inherently fragile character of so-called frozen conflicts. During the Russian-Georgian war some believed that Azerbaijan might have been tempted to follow the Georgian example of a quick war with South Ossetia and the frozen conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh would have reactivated.

Since the 1994 ceasefire agreement, formidable defensive fortifications have been erected and expanded along the 110-mile line of contact replete with underground tunnels and minefields (International Crisis Group, 2011). The intensity and the number of cross border shootings and casualties are increasing. The escalating intensity, number of ceasefire violations, and defense budget increases on both sides are particularly worrying, because of the failure to make progress in the once promising peace negotiations mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs.

The latest meeting of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia in Kazan in June 2011 failed to produce any results. During the negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh both sides always mention the necessity of a peaceful resolution, yet each side makes threats of a new war to pressure

its opponent at the negotiating table, while also preparing for the possibility of a full-scale conflict in the event of a complete breakdown in the peace talks. A premeditated offensive by either side is unlikely at this point, but there is a growing risk that the increasing frontline tensions could lead to an accidental war (Giragosian, 2010). Moreover, if there is no breakthrough in the talks, there is a real chance that one side or the other could decide to go on the offensive.

With a rising oil-driven economy and military budget, Azerbaijan feels confident about its diplomatic and military strength (Azerbaijan's annual value of oil exports in 2008 was \$24 billion; due to lower oil prices, this figure is predicted to be \$12 billion in 2009) (International Crisis Group, 2009). Combined with frustration over the talks this confidence is often translated into threats of war. Armenia sometimes also threatens back, and in turn blames the lack of progress on Azerbaijan and its belligerent rhetoric.

The military buildup of the conflicting sides might also evoke a security dilemma. To increase its security one of the conflicting sides starts the military buildup and in turn forces the other side to be engaged in it. This military buildup of the conflicting sides has a vicious circle. Moreover, we can see that neither conflicting side is interested in engaging in renewed war, so this buildup is just for increasing security and showing off.

I would like to draw your attention to a bright example of military showing off: two parades took place in 2011 in both Baku and Yerevan. A military parade is a visual form of subconscious influence that inspires confidence and gives people a sense of security.

On June 26, Azerbaijan held its biggest military parade since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The parade was attended by over 6,000 personnel — about 400 military vehicles, 60 weapons produced in Azerbaijan, 14 local military vehicles, 22 aircrafts, a lot of helicopters, and warships participated. The State Anthem of Azerbaijan was played, and the head of state made a speech before the parade started. President Ilham Aliyev announced that currently the Azerbaijani army is capable of carrying out any military operation, including the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. He added that military spending has been increased 20 times and is now set at \$3.2 billion, 50 percent higher than Armenia's entire budget (Eastern Partnership Community, 2011).

Some months later, on September 21 Armenia's fifth parade was held since its declaration of independence in 1991. The parade was attended by about 4,000 troops and featured 300 pieces of modern military hardware. Most importantly, though, the military demonstration for the first time featured Armenia's offensive arsenal, including modern sophisticated weaponry. At around midday columns of servicemen, as well as tanks, military vehicles, towed artillery systems, and other pieces of modern hardware, paraded past the country's leadership standing on a podium in Yerevan's Republic Square.

Meanwhile, warplanes and helicopter gunships roared overhead with jets spraying the colors of the Armenian tricolor (red, blue, and orange) in the sky to the delight of the public.

Anyone following these two military parades can probably compare them with a fashion show. Moreover, like in fashion shows the commercial agents try to convince the world that their line of clothes are the most fashionable and their models are the most professional — the same picture was demonstrated during the parades in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Furthermore, as done by commercial agents for their stars, during the parades with the help of military forces each side persuaded the other with the powerfulness and professionalism of its army and the best quality of weapons, while simultaneously putting down the other side. Each side believes that its army is superior to that of its rival both technically and qualitatively. That is why numerical or qualitative superiority isn't considered to be enough for comparison, thus the conflicting sides think that their military power should be even higher and this naturally brings forth an arms race and military build-up.

An arms race, escalating front-line clashes, rhetoric, and a virtual breakdown in peace talks are increasing the chance that Armenia and Azerbaijan will go back to war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Is it possible? Who knows? But one thing is obvious — preventing renewed war is urgent. Increased military capabilities on both sides would make a new armed conflict in the South Caucasus far more deadly than the 1991-1994 one that ended with a shaky ceasefire. Neither side would be likely to win easily or quickly. Regional alliances could be formed with the participation of Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Vital oil and gas pipelines near the front lines would be threatened impacting regional stability and security. Another refugee crisis and loss of human lives would be unavoidable. If large-scale hostilities resume, there would be little certainty over their duration, consequences, or outcome. Much would depend on the reaction of the international community, especially Russia and Turkey. Even though both sides have massively invested in their military might and tried to increase their troops, the balance of forces suggests no easy or quick victory. It's obvious that a resumption of hostilities over Nagorno-Karabakh could pose a larger challenge for regional and European security than the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008. The biggest risk is that regional powers, particularly Russia and Turkey, would be pressured to become directly involved, contrary to their larger foreign policy interests.

A resumption of hostilities would seriously undermine energy interests of the U.S. and EU. Both seek to develop the South Caucasus as an alternative source and transit route for energy imports to Europe. A full-scale war would also threaten the Caucasus air corridor that accounts for nearly 70 percent of all NATO's military transport flights to bases in Central Asia as well as the alternative overland supply route to Afghanistan via Azerbaijan.

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National Identity, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Revival of Islam in Azerbaijan

by [Shahla Sultanova](#)

Since the breakdown of the Soviet system in 1991, Islam has become important for filling the vacuum of the ideological and national identity of an independent Azerbaijan. While most Azerbaijanis have remained secular, the practice of Islam has grown significantly in the country in last two decades. Islam has attracted a growing number of worshippers, and the number of mosques had increased rapidly until Azerbaijani government has taken measures in recent years, even brutal ones, to control the religious situation in the country.

Considering that Islam was in stagnation stage three decades ago, as result of negative attitude of communist policy, the question is what made Islam so popular in Azerbaijan where practicing religion had been banned in Soviet times, for 70 years.

The ideological gap after communism, the search of national identity, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are the main factors that caused a flourishing revival of Islam in Azerbaijan. Among those in particular, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is significant and it is worth looking at the related factors that have made religion popular. This paper aims to uncover the role of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the revival of Islam in Azerbaijan.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict influenced the revival of Islam in a meandering way, rather than making its impact obvious. It is one of the intractable conflicts of the post-Soviet area that still remains unsolved despite attempts both by the sides in conflict and the international community to find a solution (Maiese, 2003). The conflict began shortly after Gorbachev announced his reform programs of perestroika and glasnost. The concept of glasnost was openness, transparency, or publicity, and the Communist Party approved the policy at its 27th Party Convention in February 1986. Although the gist of the concept was mostly based on economic reforms, it gradually led to a change towards democracy, and the government had difficulty controlling it. The economic reforms were not popular, while democracy and nationalism were. (Kaufman, 1996). The space for change established by glasnost brought about expressed ethnic disputes as well.

Memories and myths led both Armenians and Azerbaijanis to have doubts about each other and shape a violent attitude. At first, forgotten historical events evolved into legends that justified the superiority of one group over another, stimulated desires for retribution, or sustained group hatred. While on one hand the Armenians of Karabakh remembered the 1915 genocide committed against them, Azerbaijanis on the other hand, who long regarded the Armenians as “troublemakers,” recalled their memories of the February 1905 massacre—the bloody clash between Armenians and Tatars (Azeris) during the oil boom in Baku.

Thus, glasnost created an opportunity for those nations to remember historical memories and fuel tension. The killing of Armenians in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait in February 1988 was perceived as the next “genocide,” reviving memories of the massacres and deportations of 1915 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks (Sunny, 1989).

Among Azerbaijanis, the conflict was evaluated as the war between “Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan,” and the conflict escalated the feelings of national identity among Azerbaijanis. The threat of territorial loss inspired nationalist cohesion, and as a reaction to the disputed fate of Nagorno-Karabakh a nationalist opposition—the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA)—was formed in 1989.

National identity can be based on a variety of factors including language, cultural values, shared history, and physical characteristics—anything that a group of people feels that binds them together and unites them as one people. Of the many traits that can serve as the basis for a national identity, religion is perhaps the most powerful characteristic that can be attached to nationalism.

Although its initial mission was defending territorial integrity, with the religious element never having been significant to its policy, in response to nationalistic sentiment the PFA held a specific approach to Islam. In its conference in 1989, the movement declared its charter, which announced that freedom of expression and religious identity should be respected in the country and that all mosques should be restored and be used by believers. The PFA leader, Abulfaz Elchibey, often mentioned in his speeches the respect of Azerbaijanis for religion (Yunusov, 2004). Some negotiations between the PFA leaders and communist authorities were observed with the participation of the head of the Caucasus Spiritual Board of Muslims, Sheik Haji Allahshukur Pahazade[1].

During the rule of the national democrats (1992-1993), the Law on Freedom of Worship was adopted. All property taken by the Soviets from mosques and religious communities was to be returned. The Soviet authorities accused Azerbaijan of starting a national movement of religious fundamentalists, and Gorbachev's decided to send troops to Baku in January 19, 1990.

More than hundred people were killed by Soviet troops[2]. Numbers of victims vary between 130 and 200[3],[4].

Soviet authorities explained it an attempt to prevent an Islamic threat, which gained sympathy from the West[5]. Religion as a way of mobilizing Azerbaijanis around a nationalist movement made the West reluctant to help Azerbaijan, which resulted in the rejection of Western values and distrust of the West[6].

In the initial stage of conflict, unhelpful about Russia's help in finding a fair solution to the conflict, the Azerbaijanis relied on the United States most of all. Nevertheless, Freedom Supports Act 907a was passed by the United States Congress with the powerful influence of Armenian lobby and Armenia received US aid in the region, while Azerbaijan was left out of U.S aid distribution (Basher, 2008).

U.S. humanitarian assistance to the separatist territory of Nagorno-Karabakh damaged the West's reputation in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis regarded this legislative bill as discriminatory and as a measure that punished the victim (Ismailzade, 2005). US foreign policy towards the conflict stayed in favor of Armenian side until Caspian oil arrangements came on the scene (Basher, 2008).

Skepticism on the fairness of western values within the Azerbaijani public increased while the West showed its interest in oil during the mid-1990s, rather than aiding Azerbaijan in conflict resolution. The West's image was associated with an interest only in money, rather than humanistic values (Cornell 2006).

There were several UN Security Council Resolutions calling for withdrawal of the occupying forces, condemning Armenia in early 1990s. However, Nagorno-Karabakh authorities rejected the resolution declaring that it was biased (Basher 2008). Despite four resolutions recognizing Karabakh as part of the Azerbaijani Republic and non-recognition of Nagorno Karabakh Republic's (NKR) declaration of independence by any state, .Nagorno-Karabakh remained, still remains, dependent on Armenia (Simao, 2010).

At a time when Azerbaijan was neglected by the West, the support of Muslim countries soothed the pain of Azerbaijanis. The Organization of the Islamic Conference was the first, and is so far the only, international body that openly condemned Armenia for aggression over Nagorno-Karabakh. It has called for the immediate and unconditional liberation of the occupied Azeri territories. Thus, the vacuum, whose closure was so important for Azerbaijanis experiencing hard times and seeking support, was filled by "Muslim brothers" (Valiyev, 2005)

However, this support from Muslim countries was not political. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the nationalism movement in Azerbaijan made Iran fearful of a nationalist challenge within its own borders. The nationalistic policy of the PFA was especially intimidating for the Iranian authorities. Fearing that Iranian

Azerbaijanis could demand their annexation to northern Azerbaijan, Iran preferred to support Yerevan in the conflict (Cornell, 2006), (Ismailzade, 2005)

Turkey, however, did not hurry to support Azerbaijan immediately at the beginning of the conflict. Only in 1993 did Turkey actively support Azerbaijan and joined Azerbaijan's embargo of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The help coming from the Muslim world was humanitarian and directly targeted Azerbaijani citizens. In the early 1990s, the conflict established a chaotic situation and frustration in Azerbaijani society. The conflict remained unsolved and gradually the country was losing its western regions to the Armenians. The frustration increased with each loss and the number of refugees and internally displaced persons got higher. Azerbaijan had 800,000 refugees and internally displaced persons, one seventh of the whole population, living in refugee camps (Cornell, 2006)

Starting from the early 1990s, Iran and several Arabic countries sent their humanitarian aid to their Muslims brothers, accompanied with a religious mission and ideology. They launched their activities mostly in extremely poor refugee camps among people displaced by "Christian Armenians." Among those working in refugee camps were Iranian Hizballah, the Imdad Khomeini Committee, and Salafi missionary organizations from Saudi Arabia.(Valiyev, 2008). By 1994, fifteen Arabic charities had opened branches in different parts of the country (Goyushov 2008). Besides distributing humanitarian aid, those missionary groups opened religious schools-madrasas and recruited young people for religious education in their home countries.

The war in Chechnya, where Salafi movement has taken place since the First Chechen War (Cornell, 2006), brought about by Muslims fighting for their freedom from Christian Russia, made the Islamic factor salient. Small groups of Chechens had fought in the ranks of the Azerbaijani army during the course of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and this had strengthened the bond between the Chechen and Azerbaijani people (Kelkitli, 2008). Some Azerbaijanis, mostly from the northern regions, joined Chechen militants in the announced jihad against Russia, while Chechens joined the Azerbaijani side in the fight over Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, media printed reports on the treatment of Chechen guerrillas in Azerbaijani hospitals (Stern, 2005), (Kelkitli, 2008), (Veliyev, 2006) In his visit to Azerbaijan in 1997, Chechen president Aslan Maskhatov met Azerbaijani president Haydar Aliyev and expressed his gratitude to Azerbaijanis for support, as well as offering help with its Nagorno-Karabakh problem (Hunter, 2004).

The Salafi movement, which arrived in Chechnya and had its influential role in the Chechen-Russian war, moved to Azerbaijan in the mid-1990s from the North Caucasus (Valiyev, 2005). Like other missionary groups, they targeted those who were victims of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, providing them with humanitarian aid. However, unlike most missionary groups, the Salafis included Nagorno-Karabakh issues into their preaching, underlining the return of Karabakh as necessary and blaming the government for the failure to defend it (Valiyev, 2005).

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict indirectly played an essential role in fostering an environment for the revival of Islam. From the conflict emerged a nationalist movement that used the Islamic factor to mobilize people and form national identity. I propose it is Islam that stayed at the core of new identities. Islam was successful as a core for people to gather around, and it became partly responsible for the formation of a new identity. Islamic activity seemed to have more success among the population, as its basic values are flexible for self-awareness and forming a national identity. In Azerbaijan, religion served the identity impulse more powerfully and comprehensively than any other repositories of cultural meaning could do. It provided powerful support to individuals to establish and maintain their identities. Religion provided a secure spot for supporting the occurrence of intergroup identity and helped many people construct their sense of self.

Initially for Azerbaijanis, religious identity was not loyalty to one's religion or religious group, but rather an attachment to the nation. However, gradually it shifted from national identity to religious belief, mostly accelerated by missionary groups coming from Islamic countries.

Those missionary groups were attractive to vulnerable citizens living in unexpected poverty caused by the conflict and uncertainty in the country. The moral relief and humanitarian aid provided by missionary groups was especially appealing to those who, besides being extremely poor, were also displaced. Their disillusionment with Russia and the West made them trust and follow those who offered them their helping hands. The main aim of the missionary groups that successfully tapped them was to stir up the religious feelings of Azerbaijanis.

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ABOUT JOURNAL OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The Journal of Conflict Transformation is an independent online publication that provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, policy analysts, starting researchers and bloggers to analyze as well as discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and issues related to it. The purpose of the publication is to contribute to sustainable resolution of the conflict by expanding scholarship on the subject and encouraging diverse perspectives and analysis.

The Journal welcomes contributions from established researchers and is also committed to include the voices of emerging analysts and writers within the peace process. This inter-disciplinary online publication accepts scholarly and analytical articles, as well as reflective writings, that contribute to the better understanding of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and suggestions for improvement of the peace process and positive transformation of inter-societal relations. The articles can analyze the conflict as a whole or any factor that potentially has implication for the conflict and/or its resolution from the perspective of political science, economy, sociology, anthropology, social psychology, collective memory studies, comparative history, ethnic conflict, identity-conflict, conflict resolution, peace studies, mediation and facilitation, conflict transformation and comparative case studies.

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