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### Unripe for Peace: Is Escalation Necessary for Peace over Nagorno-Karabakh?

by [Orkhan Ali](#)

*In the chronology of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, many aspects of the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are revealed by military confrontations and undercover negotiations. Territorial integrity and self-determination were, and still are, two heralded principles that determined the position of two warring republics of the South Caucasus over Nagorno-Karabakh after the Soviet demise in 1991. These strikingly divergent positions of Armenia (self-determination) and Azerbaijan (territorial integrity) constrain regional development and its full-scale transformation from military “prosperity” into a mutually beneficial economic relationship. In leaving the explanation of these two terms to historians, this essay explores the cost-benefit analysis of the conflict that brought Armenia and Azerbaijan to the state of a mutual hurting stalemate that led to the ceasefire in 1994. Thus, my analysis will focus on the period from 1991 to 1994, with the aim to discern changes in military escalation. Moreover, the concept of “ripeness” (William Zartman) will be applied to examine the cause before the ceasefire achievement. Finally, the recent developments that put Nagorno-Karabakh on the “unripe” label for resolution will also be discussed in order to estimate how irreversible the conflict is.*

#### Condition for 1994 Ceasefire: Mutual Hurting Stalemate or Third Party?

The ripeness is considered one of the influential conflict resolution theories elaborated by William Zartman in his book, *Ripe for Resolution* (1985). The author argues that, when warring parties realize their military exhaustion and the threat to national security, they tend to seek an alternative policy or a way out (Zartman, 2001, p. 8). This mutual hurting stalemate leads to a sense of urgency and prompts the involved parties to respond immediately if they are willing to lessen

more pain. The mutual hurting stalemate is a moment of choice on rationality and conflict termination, which creates ripeness for negotiations. The core argument of the theory lies in the recognition by both sides of the necessity for changing the present impasse. If neither side has recognized it, the ripe moment for a way out has not occurred and the conflict will continue. In short, two necessary elements are implicit in the moment of ripeness—Timing and “Way Out”. Timing is crucial in an attempt to find a way out, as the conflict can only be resolved when the conditions are ripe. Therefore, even if the most skilled mediators are involved in conflict resolution between parties, their attempts will fail under unripe timing. In the end, timing is a prerequisite for Way Out.

As Zartman clearly emphasizes:

Parties resolve their conflict only when they are ready to do so—when alternative, usually unilateral means of achieving a satisfactory result are blocked and the parties feel they are in an uncomfortable and costly predicament. At that ripe moment, they grab on to proposals that usually have been in the air for a long time and that only now appear attractive. (p. 8)

Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan reached the point of a mutual hurting stalemate in 1994, when the objective ground for ceasefire emerged. By examining the military clashes from each side, this study provides evidence that accommodates the gravity of timing as motivation to search for a way out after a severe conflict escalation.

### **The Black War**

Beginning in 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh shaped the movements around the disputed region. Although the level of violence in and surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh increased steadily, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were mostly engaged in communal violence through livestock destruction, family harassment, hostage taking, looting, and expelling people from their properties by threat. This kind of violence took central stage until 1991. However, from 1991 onwards, the scene over Nagorno-Karabakh changed drastically. The most significant factor in this shift was the disintegration of the USSR, which affected the conflict adversely through ready availability of heavy artillery, tanks, rockets, and other ammunition left over for combatants of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Consequently, the conflict spread and became more lethal. In addition, the participation of well-paid mercenaries on both sides, as well as the Armenian side being aided by the 366th Regiment of the Russian Army, propelled the actions fiercely.

**1991/1992.** During this period, seven major military operations took place in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas. Nonetheless, the intensity of the actions was not severe and the attacks occurred sporadically and chaotically. However, towards the end of this period, what began in 1991 with small-scale skirmishes had turned into a full-scale war. Half of Nagorno-Karabakh (Khojaly, Shusha, Lachin, Khojavend) was seized by Armenian forces, and almost half of it (Agdere) was under Azerbaijani control. The distinguishing feature of the conflict during 1991-1992 was that military confrontation had not reached the level of exhaustion. The war had just started and, although animosity was rising at a blistering pace, it had not reached the ceiling. Hence, here, ripeness of war was a means of “communication” by force between sides. Moreover, the mutual hurting stalemate was immature, let alone the idea of peace.

**1993/1994.** In 1993, the conflict escalated into large-scale operations and started to evolve into an intensive artillery war in the Karabakh region. Armenians recaptured Agdere/Mardakert, lost in 1992. Kelbajar (April), Agdam (July), Fizuli, Jebrazil, Gubadli (August), and Zengilan (October) were occupied and cleared all Azerbaijanis from their lands in a matter of days. Moreover, the Armenian offensive on Kelbajar in April 1993 forced slightly more than a half-million Azerbaijani people to flee from their homes (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1994, p. 14). In contrast, in January 1994, Azerbaijani armed forces carried out a counter offensive on Kelbajar, forcing Armenians to retreat with substantial losses. Still, Armenian forces managed to restore military superiority over the lost territory in February. Although there is a paucity of reliable data on the extent of human casualties, these two offensives resulted in an estimated loss of 4,000-6,000 men from Azerbaijan and 600-800 from Armenia (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1994, p. 84). Despite a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement in February 1994, fighting broke out again in Agdam and Agdere in April and then was pacified in May. Armenian forces were heavily exhausted after uninterrupted military offensives and even captured more areas outside initially claimed Nagorno-Karabakh territory, creating a buffer zone to secure a military advantage. Azerbaijani forces were in a similar position in counter-attacks and it couldn't bear a further operation with limited resources. Supplies were running short and much needed equipment for military operation was constantly breaking up. It wasn't until 1994 when a mutual hurting stalemate became visible on the battlefield. Moreover, average human/territorial casualties were huge compared to previous years. According to Human Rights Watch, since 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resulted in the deaths of an estimated 25,000 soldiers and civilians and the displacement of one million refugees/IDPs (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, p. ix). Nonetheless, the number of people who died and fled their homes during the war period is still disputed.

Still, an examination of events suggests that both sides underwent a mortally deteriorating deadlock. An estimated death toll for 1993-1994 was around 15,000 out of a total estimated at 25,000 and the combined deaths for the period 1988-1992 are estimated at approximately 10,000 (Mooradian & Druckman, 1999, pp. 717-718). The impact of the 1993-1994 military combat shows a dramatic difference between the before-and-after periods for each of the warring parties.

### **Mediation Efforts from 1991 to 1994**

It is worth mentioning that before the OSCE Minsk Group's mediation in 1994, which is ongoing, **six** mediation efforts have been made to negotiate over conflict mitigation or cessation of arms between the parties involved in this conflict. **The first** mediation effort came in September 1991 from Russian President Boris Yeltsin and incumbent president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. However, this duo never got on their feet to fill the leadership vacuum. **The second** mediation was initiated by the southern neighbor, Iran, in February 1992 to bolster its standing as a regional power after the Soviet disintegration and balance Turkey's dominance in the region. However, neither the warring parties nor international organizations supported Iran's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, which led to its collapse in May. **The third** intervention was provided under an international mediation, known as the Minsk Group of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, now OSCE), created in March 1992 in Helsinki, and consisted of 11 members. Until it was reformed as the OSCE in December 1994, the CSCE was unable to make any advance in peacemaking between the parties and limited its efforts to organizing talks-of-no-result in European cities. **The fourth** attempt to mediate the conflict was again made by Nazarbayev in August 1992, and this time, his principle was thwarted with ambiguity by Armenia and Azerbaijan. Therefore, Nazarbayev never achieved his goals in the mediations, leading to their subsequent collapse. **The fifth** and most interesting mediation initiative was not so publicly broadcast. It came from Ankara in March 1993, and it highlighted the necessity of Turkey-Russia cooperation in conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, this joint action was dissolved after the Armenian occupation of Kelbajar and after Yeltsin's proclamation on April 8 of a deployment option of Russian peacekeepers into the region (Kazimirov, 2009, pp. 66-71). **The last mediation** effort was initiated by Russia through Vladimir Kazimirov, the Kremlin's envoy to the Minsk Group, and it lasted from November to December 1994. His shuttle diplomacy between Armenia and Azerbaijan was followed by dysfunction in the period of heavy counter offensives.

All mediation efforts from 1991 to 1994 ended in a fiasco as the interventions were not timely and, at the time, it was unfavorable to the warring sides to move from confrontation to cooperation. In other words, the time was not ripe for mediators to intervene in resolving the differences. Here, timing is construed to be a tacit warning, whether to prevent violence before it escalates or act after the conflict has escalated. Six different mediations were offered to the parties before the major suffering occurred. In addition, military commanders were not persuaded enough to see the advantages of direct negotiations while hostilities were at the highest point. Ruthlessly, weapons prevailed over words and this contributed to the erosion of the mediation's credibility, as well as the weakening of third-party involvement.

### **The Impact of the Ripe Moment and Military Exhaustion**

No matter how sophisticated the behavior of each side involved in the conflict might be, the present study is confined to the rational policy of states. If violence of war generates further loss of life, the parties themselves become motivated to take the lead before mediators' advent. Armenia and Azerbaijan reached that tipping point at war in 1994 when the time to change was inevitable or ripe. Time was running out. Willingness to change, effective communication and, most importantly, the rational policy of Armenia and Azerbaijan prevented the war from spinning out of control. Both Aliyev and Ter-Petrosyan acknowledged that the cost of war would outweigh the benefit if they failed to act on time. The decision to stop blood spilling was a conscious calculation of the two leaders. The former Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, Jirair Libaridian, confessed that the secret personal contacts between high-level officials from Yerevan and Baku led to the peace negotiation in 1994 (Mooradian & Druckman, pp. 723-724). He ruled out the assistance of mediators in this deal and pointed out the "exhaustion of warfare" as an underlying motive to stop skirmishes. This outcome clearly shows that the offensives, rather than the mediation efforts, created the conditions for ceasefire. It is simply known that the mediators were far from reality in proposing truly attractive and convincing settlement measures to both sides before escalation and therefore, the parties were not persuaded to choose the peace track. The ripeness theory suggests that possibility of avoiding a mutually damaging war comes only when the cost of the conflict is mutually perceived as a stalemate. Retrospectively, the war over Nagorno-Karabakh prior to 1993-1994 did not bear a sufficient cost that would motivate both parties to seek a way out. Thus, only when the cost outweighed the potential benefits did the parties rush for a ceasefire without the need for mediators. Interestingly, the parties agreed upon a ceasefire, not a peace agreement. This decision asserts the incompleteness of the process or the still ripe motivation to wage the war in a longer run. Not surprisingly, President Ilham Aliyev repeatedly pointed to the termination of the first round of fighting, not the complete war. This speaks volumes towards the continuation of the then Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev's diplomacy.

Though Armenia and Azerbaijan signed the Bishkek Protocol in May 1994, with the Kremlin's aid to provisionally terminate the war, the legally binding ceasefire agreement was inked on July 27, 1994 by three military chiefs—the Defence Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the commander of the army of Nagorno-Karabakh—and it paved the way for the OSCE to technically start the mission (De Waal, 2010, p. 166). Again, the military, not politics, played a crucial role in bargaining the truce over the disputed territories as a guarantor of protocol provisions. In this vital moment, the seven year-long differences (1988-1994) remained intact and the peace was omitted from the on-time push or occurrence.

However, the relatively stable political atmosphere and gradually manageable economies in both countries did not provide the sense of urgency that would prompt the conflicting parties to resolve the differences. In particular, the signing of the “Contract of the Century” on September 20, 1994 by Azerbaijan and the Consortium of Foreign Oil Companies for joint development and sharing of the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil fields in the Caspian Sea broadened the differences between the parties by giving one side economic leverage to put pressure on the other. This move raised the confidence of Azerbaijan at the negotiating table despite territorial losses. Consequently, the attractiveness of various OSCE Minsk Group proposals to both sides remained without positive feedback, as incentives to narrow down differences are still low, and each side has convincing arguments for zero concessions. There is a prevailing view among Azerbaijanis that Armenia would never retreat from the occupied territories peacefully, given that the blood of their people was spilled for it. It clearly shows that the cost of the conflict is the final determinant of the solution. Yet, that cost is not high today and thus, the parties may not be motivated to resolve the differences under such circumstances. In the current status quo, that cost is still alive, even if it does not hurt everyone equally. Certainly, it is not as burdensome for the elite as it is for civilians; therefore, the elite shows reluctance in challenging the deadlock as it benefits from the political economy of the conflict. And ordinary citizens suffer tremendously from territory loss, refugee influx, and border clashes, as well as from economic blockades and political regimes.

In addition, while many experts call the conflict “frozen,” the contact line news depict a completely different picture when several dozen soldiers die in shooting incidents from both sides. The 2008 border skirmishes were the heaviest fighting since 1994 and caused the death of at least 20 soldiers (BBC News, 2008). The ceasefire violations rose in following years and exchanges of fire occurred even over a broader terrain along the line of contact. It was reported that at least 24 lives were lost in 2010, up from 19 in 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 3). Politicians turned blind eyes on these incidents and no major steps were taken towards the peace process. Even though, after the Russian-Georgian War in August 2008, Moscow took the lead in the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, the last Kazan meeting under the auspices of the Kremlin demonstrated that Armenia and Azerbaijan are still holding firm with no progress to move forward in settling the differences. Instead, military spending for both sides is increasing each year and heavy military build-up supports the belief that armed conflict is the only means for determining a solution. With numerous futile talks and hostile rhetoric upon meeting points, the continuation of peace talks at that pace reinforces a public leaning towards war, and failed negotiations diminish the prospect of a reiteration of two-party talks.

## **Conclusion**

So long as the conflict remains in a “no war, no peace” conundrum, the peace is in jeopardy. Armenia and Azerbaijan, still relying on the military security of the Kremlin and heavily arming with its vast oil revenues, respectively, are clearly not yet ripe for resolution. At this stage of the impasse, neither side perceives the conflict as a mutually hurting stalemate; therefore, no effort to pursue a peaceful settlement would yield a successful outcome. Moreover, no attractive proposal from OSCE Minsk Group is forthcoming, whereby an environment for peace would be possible. The conflict seems irreversible and unripe for resolution with enough determinants (e.g., economic development, geostrategic games, and unwillingness of political elites). Still, the absence of a ripe moment is not an excuse to do nothing. As Zartman (2001) highlights, “it helps us to identify obstacles and suggests ways of handing them and managing the problem until resolution becomes possible” (p. 14). The ripeness in conflict resolution might emerge when both sides, as well as the mediators, develop a mutually enticing opportunity. For this to happen, civil society—the most suffering party of the conflict—should be ripe for political activity in order to demonstrate delicate actions against the government, if negotiations fall apart in the next rounds.

***\*All views expressed here are solely mine, and do not represent the views of my employer.***

**References – please refer to the article on the website for full list of references**

<http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/unripe-for-peace-ripe-for-war-is-escalation-necessary-for-peace-over-nagorno-karabakh/>

# Constructing Reality through Memory of Time and Space: Armenian Refugees

by [Irina Ghaplanyan](#)

Hidden between mountainous ranges the villages along the eastern shoreline of Lake Sevan are mysteriously cozy and yet experience one of the harshest climates in Armenia. Their history is also mysteriously left unknown to those coming from hustling and bustling Yerevan, let alone from abroad. My primary destination in Gegharkunik was Tsapatagh village<sup>[1]</sup> (in Armenian meaning “a seashore neighborhood,” formerly known as Babajan or Kzylkend), which is a refugee village, meaning it was re-populated by Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan during 1988-1989, when the Azeri inhabitants left.

Kolya, the earliest Armenian resident of the village, moved to Tsapatagh from the village of Kushchi, or Khachakap (Dashkesan region), in 1965, when the village was “all Azeri.” He recalls that the village was primarily oriented to farming cattle and that Azeris “didn’t do much with the land.” In answer to my question about how was living with Azeris, Kolya said in Armenian, “normal.” According to him he was the only Armenian living in the village at the time. Most of the villagers today, 414 to be exact (according to the head of the village), came to Tsapatagh in 1988-1989 from Khachakap, as well as other villages in both Dashkesan and Khanlar regions. There were also former residents of Baku.

I found the most interesting enquiries to be about house swapping—every single recollection of whether it was a buy-and-sell agreement or a pure house-swap, was nothing but positive. Perhaps it was because it was done in a very organized manner, and under government control, or perhaps because Armenians subconsciously perceived that leaving their homes was the price they had to pay for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Whatever the reasons are, it was indeed encouraging to hear from former Azerbaijani-Armenians positive recollections of their encounters with Armenian Azeri residents on the exchange of property, a rather sensitive subject.

Yet, these positive recollections did not ease the life of refugees in Armenia. Almost immediately engulfed in the war, the residents of these borderline villages were under direct fire during the four years of military hostilities. The war passed, but life was still in many ways challenging. Although the residents of Tsapatagh and nearby villages experience the magnificence of one of the most beautiful sunsets in Armenia – when the melting red ball of the pomegranate-like sun dips into Lake Sevan turning it into a sea of lava – which perhaps brings nostalgic recollections of the Caspian, the climate and soil are far from those in Khachakap. An elevation of more than 1,500 meters above sea level, sizzling summers, freezing winters, and nearly 20 degree Celsius temperature variations in a single day all make land cultivation a fascinatingly difficult task.

Piruz (“turquoise” in Armenian), a 70 year-old former resident of Khachakap, who lost her son in the war, greets me in all black but with the shiniest and most intensely colored turquoise eyes. “I miss my village. I miss the soil, the fruits, the land...the smells....it was different there,” she said. For Piruz as well as many elderly residents of the village time has stopped... somewhere in the 1980s perhaps. That time and the memory of the other space engulfs you through conversations in a specific dialect, the intensity of recollections, artifacts in those homes like old photos, and the mixed Ottoman and Armenian elements in the construction of the houses (there were a number of homes in neighboring Gill and Artanish villages that had windows and balconies with very distinct Turkic ornamental style).

I also encountered this time-freeze while hiking up a hill in neighboring Gill village, where I came across an Azeri cemetery. Although damaged from war, most of the headstones had engraved names and dates, and even faces of the deceased intact and clearly readable. Two headstones that I came across were dated from 1988 – it was chilling to perceive how close yet so far removed reality was. It was a constructed reality through time and space existing in the minds and living in the memories of the older residents who lived then and now, there and here.

“I miss Baku, I miss the city life, my street, my home,” said Romila, second in charge of Artanish. Her most traumatic yet vivid recollection of the escape from Baku, when the pogroms were already under way, was her encounter with her Azeri neighbor and friend, when she said “I am so sorry for what is happening, I do not even know what to say.” Romila responded, “My prayer will be one – that my son and your son do not use weapons against each other.”

The Armenian refugees of Azerbaijan living in Armenia for almost 24 years hold dear memories of their homes left behind in Azerbaijan, of the land they cultivated there, of their Azeri neighbors. They raise a generation that never encountered Azeris, that was born in independent Armenia, that lives and constructs a different reality without Azerbaijan.

In one of my interviews an Armenian politician noted that, “Armenians are vulnerable not because of our geopolitics, but because we forgive and forget, we do not hold grudges, yet we still survive. I am puzzled how this works.” However, I

consider this not a vulnerability but rather a strength, as dwelling on the positive recollections gives you the power to not just survive but move forward. I left Gegharkunik inspired and more educated on the conscious, or perhaps even subconscious, choices one can make to construct a positive reality and brighter future.

[1] The opportunity to visit the villages was provided by the “Luys” Fund in the framework of the Develop Armenia Project.

## **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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