The Azerbaijan/Armenia conflict explained

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September 27th, 2020, armed struggles broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan. October 10th a ceasefire was ratified by the two countries in the capital of Moscow. Though, despite the proclaimed cease fire, the situation has since relapsed into conflict. As the fights have resumed since. Actually, what underlying causes drive this conflict? To explain we need to step back in time.

Let us first cover the current situation. Azerbaijan and Armenia are neighbouring countries, both located east of Turkey, in a region commonly known as South Caucasus (sometimes also called Transcaucasus). On the following map, you can see a region highlighted in red, named Nagorno Karabakh. It is this region that sparked the crisis between these two countries.

For the international community, Nagorno Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan. However, Armenia controls the territory as well as the surrounding part of it, linking it to Armenia. Moreover, the region has declared itself as an independent state since 1991, under the name of the Artsakh republic. Although it is not recognized by any ONU members except Armenia.

Now you wonder what makes this region special: is there oil, minerals? Is Nagorno Karabakh a strategic location? Or do Azerbaijanis, for the Muslim majority, not appreciate the presence of a Christian majority in Armenia?

Well, simply put, no, no, no and ... No. The mountainous region is devoid of natural resources, nor is it of any strategic relevance geographically speaking; no river goes through it, there are no lakes... In short, the common border between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not any more of a problem maker, as no major commercial route exists between the two countries. Another relevant detail could be added: as already said before, Azerbaijan is a country with a Muslim majority, where freedom of religion is allegedly guaranteed since it is a laic state. The reason for this dispute is different. To understand it, one has to study the history of these two countries.

Flashback #1: The collapse of the Soviet Bloc

1988: USSR gradually dismantles itself. Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were at that time part of the Soviet republics (under the control of the USSR). Political movements started growing in those countries, and some regions began to question their belonging to the dominant state. One of those, Nagorno Karabakh, part of Azerbaijan, organised a referendum for self-determination which aimed at becoming an independent republic. At this point a large part of Nargono Karabakh’s population was and had been of Armenian nationality for centuries. The azeri, a people of azerbaijani culture, also had lived in the region for centuries. Following the referendum, a majority expressed a desire towards independence. As Azerbaijan did not agree to this secession, a war began between this country and Nagorno Karabakh, which was backed by Armenia. The rivalry will last until 1994, when a ceasefire - but no peace-treaty - is signed. The war will result in a staggering number of 30,000 dead and 1,000,000 displaced civilians. Tensions are then far from being appeased by the ceasefire for several reasons:

On the first hand, at the end of the war, the Armenian military line lies between Nagorno Karabakh and other parts of Azerbaijan. According to the latter, since 1994, Armenia has occupied Nagorno Karabakh and another part of Azerbaijan in order to link the region to Armenia.

On the other hand, in 1991, Nagorno Karabakh declared itself an independent state, the Artsakh republic. In fact, the Artsakh is a client state of Armenia, where the prime minister often travels to, where banks belong to the Armenian government, and money, language and population are Armenian. This situation obviously irritates Azerbaijan, which considers part of its territory under Armenian occupation.
Nagorno Karabakh is not the only region to contest its attachment to another country. In Georgia, located in the North of both countries, two provinces are claiming independence: South Ossetia and Abkhazia. You may have noticed that part of Azerbaijan has no common border with the country it belongs to: it is Nakhichevan, previously also populated partly by an Armenian community.

You begin to wonder who drew up those highly contentious borders... We will cover it next.

The time machine brings us back to the 1920s. The USSR invades the South Caucasus. Joseph Stalin, at this time people’s commissar, decides to divide the region into several countries. Nagorno Karabakh is at this time attributed to Azerbaijan. This strategy aims at dividing to better conquer, having Armenian population scattered in both countries. Also it can be considered a political gift towards Azerbaijan which yields already a lot of oil, and provides it in large parts to the USSR. At the time, no one dared criticise the choice of dividing territories, which does not follow any people or ethnic distribution, nor the fact that Nagorno Karabakh is essentially populated by Armenian. The silence lasted until 1988, when the Eastern bloc declined and the referendum for the independence of Nagorno Karabakh was held.

**Flashback #2: what about before 1920?**

The region is dominated partly by Czarist Russia and on another part by the Ottoman Empire from the 19th century. The russian colonisation sparks a major historical controversy between Armenian and Azerbaijani. Throughout the 19th century, Russian Czars supported the migration of Armenian from northern Iran to Karabakh and eastern Azerbaijan. Those regions are then made up of numerous Muslim khanats (a sort of kingdom). For the Russian Empire, the Armenian migration serves the purpose of a buffer between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijanis therefore claim that the controversial region of Nagorno Karabakh was Armenized at that time, while the Armenians maintain that the Muslim (and therefore Azeri) presence in Nagorno Karabakh only became apparent with the formation of these independent Muslim khanats.

The early rivalries between the two communities happened in 1905 and 1907, as well as during the short-lived independence of both countries from 1918 to 1920. The key motivation that lies behind the second conflict are three regions: Nakhichevan, Zangezur and Nagorno Karabakh. Stalin settled the affair in 1921, giving Nakhichevan and Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan and Zangezur to Armenia.

We cannot talk about this period without mentioning the Armenian genocide, organised by
the Ottoman Empire. Taking place from 1915 to 1916, where an estimated 1.2 millions to 1.5 millions died. To this day, the genocide is only recognized as such by about thirty countries around the world. No historical ties with the current conflict do you say? Well indeed. Turkey is to this day the descendant of the Ottoman Empire, although borders have changed since then. Nowadays, Turkey forbid the use of the term genocide to refer to the massacre committed against armenians from 1915 to 1916 and this partly explains the hate between the turkish and armenian nations, while allowing for friendly relationse between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

During this time, Azeri massacres also took place. On the 30th of March to the 2nd of April 1918, between 12,000 and 20,000 individuals, mostly Azeri, were killed at Bakou. The russian Bolsheviks and the armenian political movement “Armenian Revolutionary Federation” are held guilty of those massacres, qualified by Azerbaidjani as a genocide.

Both people have already clashed violently during the russian domination.

Flashback #3: and before the Russians?

The region has been ruled by several Empires and different Civilizations, such as mongols, or the Othoman Empire. It would be long and useless to list them all, but it is important to know that the Caucasus has always been composed of a mosaic of people, ethnicities and different civilizations at all times.

We can divide into three big groups:
The Caucasian group (Georgians and Chechens) The Indo-Europeans group (Armenians, Russians, Iranians)
The Turkish group (Azeris, Kumyks...) Historians theorised that Armenians established their first state at the beginning of the 6th century BC. They would have moved from Europe to Asia Minor during the 2nd millennium before our era. The origin of the Azeris is controversial: some historians think they came from Turkish peoples, given that the Azeri language is similar to Turkish, for others they came from Iranian peoples.

Historical controversies between Armenians and Azerbaidjani go back to the antic period. According to Armenians, Nagorno Karabakh was a part of the first armenian state founded in the 6th century BC. But Azerbaidjani claim that Nagorno Karabakh belonged to Caucasian Albania, founded at the end of the 4th century BC and considered to be the ancestor of Azerbaijan.

So, history does explain part of the Azerbaidjani/Armenian conflict, but other contemporary factors have to be taken into account.

The mutual hate and fear between this two countries

The cultural factor has a predominant place in this conflict. Azerbaijan is accused of harbouring a strong hatred towards Armenians. The inhabitants of Nagorno Karabakh, mainly Armenians nowadays, are afraid of this anti-Armenians feeling. According to Laurent Leylekian, an Asia Minor and southern Caucasus specialist, in the Nakhichevan region mentioned above, Azerbaijan is accused of chasing Armenians away from this territory, which was at the beginning of the twentieth century mainly populated by Armenians. Today, Armenians are no longer present in Nakhichevan. In Nagorno Karabakh, Armenians fear the same scenario might reoccur if Azerbaijan is to take control over the region.

Azerbaijan is also accused by some historians of destroying the armenian cultural heritage in its territory. The country has always refused investigations willing to verify these statements and establish the truth, and blamess Armenia of doing the same thing with Azerbaijan culture on its territory.

In this context, the political factor is also important. Periodic fighting has taken place between Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1994, but the fighting in 2020 is the most violent since 1994. According to France 24, a French media, they have been revived by the Azeri president Aliyev, for the strategic purpose of pleasing his allies. Aliyev yearns to galvanize Azerbaijan’s nationalism, driving attention away from the fact that he is currently involved in numerous corruption scandals. So it is an internal element which sparked seamlessly never-ending fights between the two countries.

As soon as he came in power in 2018, Armenian Prime Minister Pachinan said he wanted to discuss the Nagorno Karabakh case in a non-violent way, but he doesn't want to cede the entire region to Azerbaijan, not only for fear of disappearance the culture, but also because the current population is mainly armenian. However, still according to France 24, the Azeri president was also hoping to establish an agreement on the border region. But negotiations are still not moving forward, as neither country wants to give in on its positions. Which explains the resumption of the fighting.

This article is not intended to take sides (may they be political, historical or cultural). Like the majority of conflicts, the victims are civilians from both sides. Armenians have been massacred in what is not internationally recognised as a genocide, although which is close to the definition. They have also been victims of population displacement, and cultural erasing.
Nevertheless, we shouldn’t forget that wars have also caused the displacement of Azeri populations, such as during confrontations between Azerbaijani and Armenians in 1905, when Azerbaijani had been displaced to Zangezur, or during the 1988-1994 war, when 197,000 Azerbaidjani of Nagorno Karabakh took refuge in Azerbaijan. During this same war, yet another massacre happened in the city of Khojaly on February 26th 1992, where Armenian troops killed unarmed civilians and several fighters. Human Rights Watch estimated the number of deaths between 5000 and 10,000, and qualifies the massacre as “the biggest massacre related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict”. At the end of the war in 1994, when Armenian troops controlled the Nagorno Karabakh and part of the surroundings, all the Azeri and Kurdish populations that were living there were deported.

The rivalry between the two Caucasian countries is therefore not based on natural resources or religion, but on ethnic problems that date back more than a century. What is at stake in the border region of Nagorno-Karabakh is purely cultural. Both sides are not giving up on their positions, and the international community is having a lot of difficulties when it comes to reconciling both sides: in the meantime, a more urgent matter is at stake: how many civilians will die due during this conflict?
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