

Opinion – The Choice in Nagorno-Karabakh: Ethnic Cleansing or Self-Determination?

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VAHAGN AVEDIAN, SEP 22 2023

The world community has a clear choice in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh: ethnic cleansing or supporting the right of the population for self-determination in an apparent case of remedial secession. Recent developments – a persistent continuation of the same pattern since the beginning of the conflict – have only emphasized the need for an international intervention to stop a complete ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh from its Armenian population. As Azerbaijan's blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, meant to starve out the population and using coercion to subjugate its population, entered its ninth month, Azerbaijan launched a massive attack on September 19, 2023, calling it an "anti-terror operation," a labelling often employed by similar autocratic regimes for violating democratic and human rights. The latter has become a standard procedure as authoritarian governments such as those in Turkey, Russia, Kazakhstan et al., have embarked on a crackdown on critics or violating the rights of a specific target group under their rule.

The covert aim of Azerbaijan's policy can be illustrated in narratives such as the op-ed by Hakan Yavuz, where a biased description of the reality whitewashes any substantial criticism – making Baku to appear as a highly forthcoming actor while Armenians are the stubborn culprit, crying wolf to victimize themselves on false grounds. This narrative deliberately omits the reality on the ground, both in regard to the state of democracy as a prerequisite for honoring and implementing required security measures as well as the assault on the civilian population as reported in the media, but more significantly the blatant violation and defying of international law.

The latter includes rulings by the International Court of Justice and the European Court of Human rights, ordering among others that "The Republic of Azerbaijan shall, pending the final decision in the case and in accordance with its obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions." The language in the aforementioned paragraph in the ICJ order, in respect to "Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination" and unblocking a humanitarian corridor, is quite telling for the rupture of Azerbaijan's responsibility towards the Nagorno-Karabakh population in the first place and the prospects of putting them back under Azerbaijan's suzerainty.

The reality of the policy of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh has reached such evident heights, that the EU representatives have for the first time mentioned it explicitly, albeit in milder "diplomatic" language, to indicate a red line for Brussel's tolerance against Baku's policy. Peter Stano, Lead spokesperson for the external affairs of the EU, was first to mention this in a Tweet condemning Azerbaijan's attack on September 19, 2023, stating that "This shouldn't be pretext to force exodus of the local population," while Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the EU Commission, exhorted in a press release that "Forced displacement of the civilian population through military or other means will be met with a strong response by the EU." "Force exodus" and "forced displacement" are nothing but sugarcoating the term ethnic cleansing.

At the same time, what EU is now warning against is already a reality where one third of Nagorno-Karabakh has been ethnically cleansed from its Armenian population. The assault on September 19 has caused the "evacuation" of several Armenian communities close to the current front-line, depopulating additional portion of Nagorno-Karabakh

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from its native inhabitants. In the meanwhile, Baku announced that they have opened a “humanitarian corridor,” urging the Armenian population via SMS and leaflets to leave the area, preferably through the Lachin corridor. This does not require much of an imagination to realize what such an urging implies, i.e. a one-way ticket: an ethnic cleansing.

Looking ahead into a possible scenario for putting Nagorno-Karabakh under Baku’s suzerainty, the outcome is equally gloomy. For those with the slightest insight into the conflict and the state of affairs in Baku, there is little doubt what the “integration” of the Nagorno-Karabakh population into Azerbaijan means. As Caucasus specialist Thomas de Waal of Carnegie Europe puts it, “We’re probably, unfortunately, seeing a project whereby the Azerbaijanis offer so little to the Karabakh Armenians that most if not all of them will leave.” Hikmet Aliyev, the advisor to Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, stated recently that this is now Azerbaijan’s “internal affair,” warning that any intervention by the UN Security Council would harm the intended “integration” process. This is pretty much a schoolbook example of why an international mechanism was introduced, among others in the term “crimes against humanity,” explicitly intended to ensure that a state cannot commit crimes against its own citizens by alluding to its actions as an “internal affair.”

In practice, disarming the Nagorno-Karabakh population, as the recent ceasefire agreement implies, means that the international community has now taken upon itself the direct responsibility for ensuring the security and the rights of the Nagorno-Karabakh population. Until 2020, this responsibility was implicitly guaranteed by Armenia and since the ceasefire agreement on November 9, 2020, it was supposed to be done by the Russian peacekeepers. Russia, however, has blatantly demonstrated that it is effectively siding with the autocratic regime in Baku, once again using the existential matter of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians as a leverage point against Armenia, a subsequent result of a deterioration of the relations between Yerevan and Moscow. The falling-out between Armenia and Russia is neither new nor surprising as many analysts pointed to the rift between Yerevan and Moscow following the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia. This aspect has now been repeated and emphasized even more clearly since the Azerbaijani assault on September 19, while the Russian contingent continued its inaction, not stopping the attack. This was the continuation of the unwillingness to uphold their responsibility as stated in the November 9 trilateral agreement, to among others guarantee a free and unimpeded movement through the Lachin corridor.

It is easy to single out Russia as the main culprit in allowing the apparent humanitarian disaster in Nagorno-Karabakh as part of their realpolitik calculations in the region. However, one must hold EU and USA equally responsible for allowing the tragedy we are witnessing. It is the wooing of the apparent autocracy in Baku and the impunity for committed crimes and the total ignorance of the ICJ and ECHR orders which has emboldened the Aliyev regime to constantly push the limits of how much violations you can get away with. It is this apparent disparity between condemning Russia’s war against Ukraine while hailing Aliyev as a “reliable partner” which has greenlighted Azerbaijan to push through with its policy of ethnic cleansing to a limit which the representatives for EU can no longer remain silent since it is now happening on their watch. We might not have seen an outright Srebrenica genocide, but the depopulation of a large portion of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and the imminent risk of a “forced exodus,” to use the EU term, of the remaining 120,000 Armenians in the prospect of a “reintegration” into one of the most autocratic and repressive regimes in the world is highly embarrassing for Brussels and Washington.

We simply know too much to say that what is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh was unexpected; on the contrary, the current situation was inevitable and exactly what the expertise have been warning for. In the backdrop of all written analysis, op-eds and reports about the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, it becomes extremely difficult not draw the conclusion that EU and USA simply have decided that an ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh is a collateral damage, a “sacrifice” they are willing to do for the sake of their realpolitik calculations. Sadly, those whose lives and rights are sacrificed on the high table of realpolitik do not have much to say, but hearing the “deep concern” and expression of sadness for the “human tragedy,” actions which should rather qualify for prosecution by the International Criminal Court in Hague.

In an emergency UN Security Council meeting on September 21, the USA stated the need for an “international mission to provide reassurance and confidence to the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh that their rights and security will be protected consistent with Azerbaijan’s public statements.” Considering the available information and

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evaluations of the situation and its probable prospect, what the USA is proposing is violating the very fundamentals of any peace-building, let alone reconciliation process, namely the issue of confidence-building when every single fact contradicts one's wishful assumptions.

The democracies in Europe and USA have an apparent choice: either act, and act resolutely, through OSCE and UN to ensure the lives and the rights of the 120,000 people in Nagorno-Karabakh or write themselves into the history books as the enablers of yet another ethnic cleansing in Europe. The facts lie brazen and there is little doubt among the sincere analysts and politicians about what is going to happen once the remainder of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is not already cleansed from its Armenian population, is put under Azerbaijan's mercy. The other option is honor the right of the population to "write their own future," to quote Secretary Antony Blinken's note at the UN, albeit he was talking about Ukrainian people's rights, not Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians'.

About the author:

Vahagn Avedian, PhD, is a peace and conflict researcher with focus on democracy and human rights. His book, *Knowledge and Acknowledgment in the Politics of Memory of the Armenian Genocide* (Routledge, 2019) includes a discussion about the Karabakh conflict within the context of the Armenian Genocide and its impact and legacy on the region. His forthcoming book, entitled *The Theory of Collective Reconciliation: A Trinity of Recognition, Responsibility and Reparation* (Routledge) explores the process of reconciliation through its components and their mutual dependencies and impacts.