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Rethinking the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Identity, Politics, Scholarship

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Abstract

This article builds on the author's research concerning the role of collective memory in identity-based conflicts, as well as his practical work as the co-director of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and as a trainer and facilitator with various Azerbaijani-Armenian dialogue initiatives. It is not a comprehensive study of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but presents a general overview of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, what has contributed to its failure, and which areas require major rethinking of conventional approaches. The discussion does not intend to present readers with a set of conclusions, but to provide suggestions for further critical research.

Keywords

Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, identity conflict

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What makes the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict¹ intractable? Why did 15 years of negotiation fail to produce any results? What is the state of research and scholarship on this conflict? Is there adequate literature available to understand and resolve the conflict? Can a better understanding of the conflict lead to the development of a more efficient peace process?

This article attempts to answer these questions by analyzing the major factors contributing to the continuation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. It assesses whether the current peace process adequately addresses these factors and suggests ways to make the peace process more effective.

Until now, the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) peace process has been limited to official negotiations between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the return or exchange of territories. In other words, the process has been focused on interests. In recent years, however, Rothman and Olson (2001), among other scholars, have argued that such an interest-based approach “can be an appropriate method of resolution in conflicts where resources and interests are the *only* issues at stake.” Furthermore, Rothman and Olson established that when conflict involves identity-based issues, such as conflicting perceptions of history, “negotiated settlements have only rarely been able to end wars effectively. ...Bargaining over those issues [interests] without prior and adequate attention first to identity issues has the effect of further polarizing the parties” (Kelman 1995).

This article argues that the political process itself has been mismanaged. There are a large number of stakeholders whose interests require lasting peace, yet these interests are rarely understood and articulated, and their potential for resolving the conflict is underutilized. In addition to politics, there are other factors that influence the conflict. Specifically, the conflict has a strong

¹ In this article, the author discusses not only the conflict over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also the dynamics of the larger clash between the Azerbaijani and Armenian societies. The term ‘Armenian-Azerbaijani’ conflict is employed when referring to this broader dynamic and the term ‘Nagorno-Karabakh conflict’ is used when referring specifically to the territorial issue.

identity component that manifests itself in deep mutual mistrust rooted in hostile historical memories. The identity needs of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, however, are neglected in the current official Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. The policymakers and negotiators hardly even acknowledge the presence of such a factor. The road to resolution, however, requires them to address the underlying identity fears along with the interests of the parties involved. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is intractable not because its root causes cannot be resolved, but rather because they have hardly been understood or articulated, let alone addressed.

This article is divided into three parts; the first presents the structure of the argument and the conflict. The second part examines Armenian and Azerbaijani identities and their roles in the conflict, asserting that it is largely an identity-based conflict rooted in deep mistrust and animosity between the two societies. Here, we examine the relationship between the most commonly held historical narratives in present-day Armenian and Azerbaijani societies and identify those elements of collective memory that contribute to the continuation of the conflict. After exploring the role of historical memory in the conflict, both on the political and societal level, this section offers suggestions for addressing the underlying identity needs.

The third part examines the political process. It questions whether the current peace process, limited to the political level, is the most efficient format for resolving the conflict. It argues that this protracted conflict has many dimensions other than political and that its resolution requires a comprehensive long-term strategy aimed at improving the relations between the two societies, where the official negotiations alone are inadequate. A stakeholder analysis shows that improved relations and a sustainable peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis would better serve most of the actors' interests. It stands to reason that any long-term, comprehensive peace process would have to be designed in accordance with the interests of the major stakeholders. An analysis of stakeholder

interests helps to identify the actors who are genuinely concerned with a sustainable peace and can serve to locate resources and supporters during the implementation of the peace process. Moreover, political analysis can expose obstacles to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including its potential spoilers, as well as outline ways for limiting their influence or transforming them into actors interested in peace.

The fourth and final part examines the main trends in existing scholarship and literature on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and its resolution. This part does not represent an in depth review of literature, but rather an attempt to group together the major themes as well as point out the areas that need further research. The scholarship on this conflict is divided into goal-oriented and process-oriented approaches. The goal-oriented writings, constituting the bulk of the scholarship, are divided into three major trends based on their preferred final solution to the status of NK.

Writers who focus on the process of conflict resolution rather than the outcome represent a new and growing trend in the literature. This trend, if developed, can transform the thinking about resolutions to the NK conflict and generate the knowledge necessary to achieve a breakthrough. In the conclusion, the article outlines a few key areas in which the scholarship on this conflict, as well as the political process, needs to be developed to find a lasting solution.

Structure of the Conflict

From 1918 until 1920, independent Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a war over Nagorno-Karabakh (*Artsakh* in the Armenian language) that weakened both and made them easy targets for the advancing Red Army. After the Sovietization of the Caucasus, the NK territory was transferred back and forth between Armenia and Azerbaijan several times. In 1923, Stalin, as part of his ‘divide and rule’ policy, placed the overwhelmingly Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh in

Azerbaijan, creating dissatisfaction among Armenians. He also gave the NK autonomous status, thus dissatisfying the Azerbaijanis. By some accounts, Stalin personally drew the Nagorno-Karabakh's borders "so as to leave a narrow strip of land separating it physically from Armenia" (Walker 1991).

With some exceptions,² Armenian-Azerbaijani relations were calm during the Soviet period. The recent phase of the conflict over what was then called the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), a small region of 1,699 sq mi (4,400 sq km) with a population of 186,100 (based on the Soviet census of 1989), began in 1987 when Gorbachev's glasnost created some room for popular expressions of grievances. Armenians in Armenia and in NKAO organized rallies that gathered hundreds of thousands of people demanding the unification of Armenia and NKAO. In February 1988, the soviet (parliament) of the NKAO passed a resolution by a vote of 110-17 requesting secession from the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and its incorporation into the Armenian SSR (Libaridian 1988). The move provoked Azerbaijan to revoke Nagorno-Karabakh's autonomous status.

Both sides accused each other of beginning the violence. The Soviet leadership proved incapable or unwilling to manage the crisis. By violently repressing some peaceful demonstrations, such as the one in Baku on 20 January 1990, it contributed to further radicalizing the conflicting parties. By the time the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the crisis had transformed into a full-scale war between independent Azerbaijan and its autonomous entity, Nagorno-Karabakh, the latter enjoying the full support of independent Armenia, including direct involvement of the Armenian army. In 1994, after three years of fighting, a ceasefire brokered by the Russian government was established, leaving most of Nagorno-Karabakh proper and the surrounding Azerbaijani territories

² In 1964 2,500 Karabakh Armenians sent a petition to Khrushchev with a detailed description of discrimination that they were facing at the hands of the Azerbaijani government and asked for re-incorporation of autonomy into the Armenian SSR. Their petition was ignored.

under Armenian control. As a result of the war, casualties amounted to 25,000-30,000, with 250,000-350,000 refugees from Azerbaijan in Armenia, and 750,000-1,000,000 refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and occupied Azerbaijani territories in Azerbaijan (Moradian and Druckman 1999; www.hrw.org)

Structure of the Peace Process

The Nagorno-Karabakh peace process has been largely limited to official negotiations. Track 2 work and civil society involvement have been extremely limited. The conflict resolution process is also remarkable for the absence of comprehensive scholarship on the topic. The political process is well developed, the parties are actively involved in negotiations and there is never a shortage of international mediators. However, Crocker, Hampson and Aall (2004) characterize this conflict as a “captive–intractable” conflict that “suffers from too much attention from the wrong quarters. ...[It] is fueled ... by entities that are not direct parties to the conflict [but who] make it possible for it to continue.” Attempts to mediate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict began soon after the onset of the war in 1991 with the failed Russian-Kazakstani peace plan. In 1992, Iran tried to broker a ceasefire. The same year, the Conference for Cooperation and Security in Europe (CSCE), later the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE), established the Minsk Group to work directly with the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents. Russia, despite being the chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, pursued an independent path, unilaterally brokering a ceasefire in 1994 (Croissant 1998) and using this opportunity to assert its influence over the region. Armenians accepted the Russian offer because Russia was their close and powerful ally; Azerbaijan accepted it because Russia was the only country that had enough leverage to pressure Armenians to stop their offensive.

Despite the success in brokering a ceasefire, the Russians proved incapable or unwilling to mediate a permanent peace agreement and, by many allegations, became the main obstacle to the

resolution of the conflict (De Waal 2003). At least three times, in 1997, 1999 and 2001, the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders came close to an agreement, but were never able to sign it. Every possible solution -- from various forms of autonomy, through confederation, independence, power-sharing and territorial swap-- had been on the negotiating table. Great powers, as well as some smaller states,³ have tried to mediate this conflict. The OSCE Minsk group was transformed in 1997 when the US and France became co-chairs with Russia. Despite the efforts and 15 years of negotiation, the conflict has not been resolved, no agreement has been reached, and no mutually acceptable solution has been articulated.

Identity

The formation of the present day Armenian identity is an important contributing factor in the conflict. Armenians trace their ancestry to the sixth century B.C. According to Suny, their identity was consolidated as a “unique, identifiable, ethno-religious community when they adopted an exclusive form of Monophysite Christianity and a common language in the fourth century A.D.” (Suny 1993). For some brief periods of its history, Armenia was an independent state, but for the most part it was dominated by different empires--Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Russian and Soviet.

The Armenian popular narrative often refuses to acknowledge Azerbaijanis as a distinct ethnic group. They fully associate the Turkic speaking Azerbaijanis with Turks.⁴ According to the Armenian narrative, ancestors of the present-day Turks and Azerbaijanis played a devastating role in Armenian history. They invaded the region along with other Turkic tribes in the 10th through 12th centuries and have been responsible for innumerable massacres and the colonization of indigenous peoples, including Armenians. This historic injustice culminated in the Armenian Genocide of 1915

³ Italy and Sweden

⁴ In fact, it is commonplace not to use the word ‘Azerbaijani’ among Armenians, but to use the term ‘Turks’ instead.

in Ottoman Turkey, in which the entire Armenian population of Anatolia was destroyed. (Hovannisian 1988). Recent research and polls show that most Armenians believe that the memory of the genocide contributes to the Armenian national identity along with the language, culture and history (www.acnis.am). In the Armenian collective memory, the Turkic speaking Azerbaijanis are considered part of the “genocidal” Turkish nation, responsible for massacres, ethnic cleansings and the destruction of Armenian culture. As a consequence, Armenians fear a genocide of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, should NK become part of independent Azerbaijan. The nationalistic public rhetoric of the Azerbaijani authorities often directly calls for war and ethnic cleansing.⁵ The current policy of supporting Turkey’s denial of the Armenian genocide does not discourage those perceptions.

Nagorno-Karabakh has a particular importance for the Armenian collective memory. According to some Armenian historians, Nagorno-Karabakh, unlike the rest of Armenia, has always remained autonomous or independent (Hovannisian 1988). Armenians in other regions were assimilated, but in Nagorno-Karabakh they preserved their identity. This notion has become a major component of the Armenian collective memory in the last decade, contributing to the perception of Nagorno-Karabakh as the “last Armenian stronghold,” the “surrender” of which will result not only in the loss of territory but in the loss of a big part of the Armenian identity.

The formation of the Azerbaijani identity is another factor contributing to the intractability of the conflict. Azerbaijanis trace their ethnic ancestry from the aboriginal Caucasian Albanians and the Turks. The Azerbaijani cultural traditions are mainly those of Shi’a Islam (Croissant 1998). By some accounts, Azerbaijani identity consolidated in the 17th-19th centuries, while others trace it as a

⁵ As it is often remembered in Armenia, the then Azerbaijani President Elchibey was quoted as saying in June 1992, "If there is a single Armenian left in Karabakh by October of this year, the people of Azerbaijan can hang me in the central square of Baku."
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199798/ldhansrd/vo970701/text/70701-19.htm>

distinct identity group going back to the 10th century or earlier (Atabaki 2000). This discrepancy might have to do with the fact that the Muslim groups in the Ottoman and Persian Empires, although they had many distinct features such as culture and language, did not have a tradition of describing themselves in present-day ethnic terms and had one overarching Muslim identity. After the Russians conquered the Caucasus, people who lived in contemporary Azerbaijan and were part of the Muslim majority in Muslim empires suddenly became a religious minority in an Orthodox Christian state.

According to the Azerbaijani narrative, Armenians play a very destructive role in the history of Azerbaijan. Tsarist Russia employed policies of assimilation and relocated large numbers of Christians, mostly Armenians, to the region populated by Azerbaijanis, simultaneously deporting Muslims from the same areas. Russians also favored local Christians, particularly Armenian Christians, who assumed political and economic control. The Azerbaijani collective memory also contains examples of 1918 Russian massacres of Azerbaijanis that Armenians participated in. At that time, the Azerbaijani identity was also consolidated and defined in ethnic terms, reinforced by the ideology of Pan-Turkism, a secular form of Turkic nationalism. Azerbaijani (or Azeri) identity, although it developed in protest to Russian (Christian) policies and colonization, was mainly directed against the local 'privileged' Christian Armenians (Atabaki 2000). Armenians were seen as opportunistic aggressors that used their good relationship with Russia to expand into Azerbaijani territories in the east. The Russian-Armenian military alliance and the continuing presence of the Russian army in the Caucasus reinforced this perception.

Just as in the Armenian case, Nagorno-Karabakh has a special place in the Azerbaijani collective memory. It is remembered as the birthplace of Azerbaijani identity, the center of Azerbaijani culture and the home to many Azerbaijani poets and musicians. The loss of Nagorno-Karabakh equated to the loss of a big part of national identity.

In the last two decades, since the onset of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1988, the Azerbaijani and Armenian historical narratives have grown increasingly hostile, each portraying its own group as indigenous and peaceful. The other has become the archenemy who methodically destroys their population and cultural heritage with the help of the assimilatory and discriminatory policies of the dominant powers, Russia and Turkey respectively. Both narratives blame any possible past or present tragedy exclusively on the other group, be it injustice or misfortune, genocide, the destruction of cultural heritage the start of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, ethnic cleansings resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees or economic disaster. Both consider the other's historical accounts to be lies, manufactured for political purposes. This mutual perception has grown so hostile that any compromise or concession, particularly related to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, is now seen as humiliating, defeatist and unacceptable to either side.

The current Armenian and Azerbaijani governments have risen to power on radical nationalistic slogans with mutually exclusive claims to deliver Nagorno-Karabakh to their respective constituencies. Every politician who takes a moderate stand and tries to improve relations is inevitably stamped as a traitor. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle of political outbidding in which politicians are forced to take more and more radical positions so as not to appear unpatriotic compared to the opposition. This war of rhetoric, produced mostly for internal consumption, forces the leaders on both sides to adopt an increasingly radical stance vis-à-vis the other side. It widens the gap between the positions of the two parties and leaves little room for a solution. Even worse, the rhetoric penetrates the media and educational institutions, gradually transforming them into propaganda machines. Entire generations have been raised on this propaganda during the 20 years of conflict. It has intensified the feeling of mutual mistrust and hatred, while elevating the mutually exclusive myths of Nagorno-Karabakh to such a level that no politician can suggest any concession

without producing public outrage. The polarization of public opinion is so deep that if the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan could reach an agreement, they would likely fail to implement it because of the fear of making such agreements public.⁶ The current negotiation effort, therefore, is something of a farce since any possible solution that would determine the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be dissatisfactory to at least to one party and likely both. Both sides refuse to acknowledge any need to cooperate until a solution is found, and each side wants that solution to satisfy its own demands.

The above analysis shows that the collective memories and identities of Azerbaijanis and Armenians have developed in opposition to each other and the “us versus them” dynamic is central to defining relations between the two societies. A meaningful peace process intended to achieve a lasting solution should approach the identity dimension of the conflict as seriously as the political one. It must develop a long-term comprehensive strategy to promote reconciliation between the two societies.

Developing a detailed list of specific recommendations for working with identities does not fall within the scope of this article. However, a few general suggestions can be made that require further examination. There is a need for an in-depth study of the agents of transmission of historical memory with an aim to understand the role of these agents in influencing Azerbaijani-Armenian relations, on both the political and societal level. The following questions should be asked: what is the exact role of historical educational materials, and electronic and printed media in shaping policy? How can school curricula and media be transformed into factors contributing to the resolution rather than exacerbation of conflicts? Can a better understanding of the relationship between memory and

⁶ Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian and many of his allies were forced to resign by the Armenian military shortly after he announced publicly the decision of his government to sign an agreement with Azerbaijan that would compromise the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to ICG report, in 2001 president Heidar Aliev secretly agreed for a territorial ‘swap’, but it caused his foreign policy adviser and his foreign minister to resign and organize protest demonstrations, forcing Aliev to back out.

conflict be used to produce less dichotomous policy-making? How can this knowledge help improve Armenian-Azerbaijani relations?

Based on this research, a long-term strategy can be developed to work with the identity dimension of the conflict. The strategy should be sustainable and should focus on attracting resources from actors who have interests in peace in the region, rather than depending on the good will of traditional donors whose support may be short-term and limited. Specific initiatives must have a long-term vision. The strategy should develop a network of researchers and educators, which would provide channels of dialogue and cooperation on various levels, including official ones, so that it may catalyze larger social change and sustainable peace. Resource centers should be established to provide the people and organizations involved with the necessary skills, networks and educational materials for grassroots work. These centers should also secure ways of keeping network members connected over long periods of time.

Politics: Stakeholders and their Interests

The Azerbaijani and Armenian governments have been negotiating since 1994, yet they have never signed an agreement. Fifteen years of failure have led to skepticism within Armenian and Azerbaijani societies as well as in the international community about the possibility of resolving this conflict. This stalemate has created a widespread assumption that resolution is simply not in the interests of the political actors and that they only pretend to negotiate while benefiting from the conflict. We start by challenging this skepticism and analyzing the interests of the main and secondary stakeholders. Our analysis will show that improved relations between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians and lasting peace are in the interest of the overwhelming majority of the stakeholders. The Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of NK, the populations of the Republics

of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the governments of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, the Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) from the regions other than NK are considered here to be the primary stakeholders.

The Armenian economy is suffering enormously from the status quo. It is left out of all the regional integration and cooperation projects. Continuing confrontation with Azerbaijan and its ally Turkey decreases its security and increases its dependency on Russia. The process of democratic reforms is stagnant and most of its educated youth are leaving the country. Azerbaijan, in turn, is deprived of the shortest land link with its closest ally and economic partner, Turkey. Nakhichevan, the autonomous region of Azerbaijan that is separated from the rest of the country by Armenia, is completely isolated from the world and suffers from economic hardship; hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs live in refugee camps and cannot return to their homes. The continuing confrontation with Armenia and presence of the Russian Army decreases the security level. Improving relations would not only resolve these vital problems, but would also increase cooperation with the entire region, as well as the United States and the European Union. Armenia and Azerbaijan might even be considered for EU accession, something that both countries aspire towards.

Conversely, if the current level of mutual mistrust persists, then any potential solution will fall short of the governments' maximalist promises to create strong opposition and will endanger their power. The status quo might be convenient in the short term, but in the long term will show that the governments are unable to deliver on promised solutions. Armenia will deepen its dependence on Russia and will be left out of regional cooperation opportunities. Azerbaijan's land will continue to be occupied and almost a million IDPs will be unable to return, exacerbating the sense of insecurity among the population. The level of economic deprivation and sense of hopelessness for the future

may lead to a new cycle of violence. This scenario is not in the interests of the political leaders either, as it is likely to further decrease their popularity and endanger their political future, though not as quickly as an unpopular solution would.

To summarize, while short-term political calculations push governments to take radical and mutually exclusive positions, the long-term interests of Armenian and Azerbaijani people and both governments would be better served if relations improved and the needs of the other side better understood. It would then be more acceptable for both governments to consider compromising on the NK's status. It is therefore in the interests of the governments, if not to support, then to at least not hinder the cooperation between the two societies. Cooperation between the civil societies would increase the level of mutual trust, break down negative stereotypes and decrease the sense of insecurity. Only then could the negotiations addressing structural issues-- the return of occupied territories around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, the return of most of the IDPs, and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh -- cease to be political suicide.

More than a million Armenians and Azerbaijanis became refugees or IDPs as a consequence of the conflict. Intensive nationalistic propaganda has led them to believe that the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh will influence their future, and that the conflict cannot be resolved because of the other side. This creates extreme anti-Azerbaijani and anti-Armenian sentiments. Only 50,000 of the refugees and IDPs are from Nagorno-Karabakh; the other million are from Armenia and Azerbaijan proper and the Azerbaijani territories around NK that are under Armenian military control. Their return depends less on the final status of NK and more on the normalization of relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, protection of minority rights in both countries and the return of the other Azerbaijani districts outside of NK.

The Armenian leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh is often considered radical and uncompromising. But this is an assumption. The real problem is that they are primary stakeholders in the conflict and not present at the negotiating table. Their needs are neglected and their opinions are largely unknown. When looking at the interests of the NK Armenians, it is obvious that they require improved relations with Azerbaijan and a voice in the search for a solution, not the dangerous status quo and its possibility of a new war,

Nagorno-Karabakh's Azerbaijani community is fully uprooted and displaced and, just like the Armenian one, directly affected by the conflict. Improved relations between the societies would serve their long-term interests well and would allow the IDPs to return home safely. The needs of this community, as well as those of the Armenian community in NK are central to the conflict. Both must be integrated into the search for the solution should there be a hope for a lasting peace.

The most important secondary stakeholders in the conflict are Russia, the US, Georgia, Turkey, the Armenian diaspora and the growing Azerbaijani diaspora. Some Western oil companies, like British Petroleum (BP) that recently invested billions into the Azerbaijani oil industry, may also be included (International Alerts Reports 2004). NATO, the EU and some individual European countries are the other parties with stakes in the outcome and influence over its dynamics.

After the Soviet Union broke up, Western attitudes toward the conflicts in the former Soviet republics were based on the desire for good relations with Russia and non-interference. Later, the general Western orientation of the South Caucasian republics, particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the geopolitical importance of the region between Iran, Russia, Turkey and central Asia contributed to the decision by the US and the EU to increase their influence over the region.

The oil resources of Azerbaijan have attracted the attention of the major Western oil companies. Initially, the pipeline transporting oil from the Azerbaijani capital Baku to the Turkish port Ceyhan

was intended to go through Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia as a “peace pipeline” fostering regional cooperation and integration. The security risks, however, were too high, and the pipeline eventually went from Baku to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and then Ceyhan (BTC pipeline), bypassing Armenia. As a result the pipeline created an economic alliance among Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and the oil companies -- an alliance that was backed by Britain and the US. It left out Armenia, Russia, and Iran, thereby pushing them to seek closer ties with each other. Initially intended as a peacemaker, it only reinforced existing political divisions.

Improving relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan would contribute to stability, security, and economic cooperation in the Caucasus, a region that seeks closer ties with the US, the EU and NATO, and is open to their influence and cooperation. The prospect of another war endangers the oil companies’ multibillion-dollar investments in the BTC pipeline. War would destabilize the possibility of regional cooperation and enable Russian armies to increase their presence in the Caucasus. This might provoke Iran to invade in order to prevent a spillover of the conflict into its territory.⁷ A new war would decrease Western and Turkish influence in the Caucasus and central Asia and could pave the way for the proliferation of radical Islam in Azerbaijan. Therefore, the US, NATO and the EU have a genuine interest in seeing Azerbaijani-Armenian relations improve. They can provide resources and political support for the implementation of a long-term strategy to improve Armenian-Azerbaijani relations.

For the same reasons (oil security, regional stability, increased influence in the Caucasus), Turkey also has economic and security interests that favor an improvement of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. After the first visit of a Turkish president to Armenia in September 2008, Turkey has actively tried to initiate Armenian-Azerbaijani talks, signaling its interest in being a mediator. It has

⁷ Iran has a 20 million Azerbaijani minority that it suspects to have secessionist aspirations.

also shown that it intends to cooperate rather than compete with other mediators, particularly Russia. A few days after the start of the Russian-Georgia war in 2008, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan suggested creation of the Caucasus Stability Pact, which would ally Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkey.

Politically, however, the Turkish government is not in good a position to support a reconciliation effort. The Armenian quest for recognition of the 1915 events as genocide in parliaments around the world is seen as hostile and intended to damage Turkey. Fear that recognizing the genocide would reinforce mistrust and could be followed by territorial claims and demands for reparations. Besides that, pro-Azerbaijani feelings are strong within the Turkish elite and public, which makes Turkey look biased towards Azerbaijan. Finally, in the last few years, Turkey has suffered internal political crises. A power struggle between its religious and military/nationalist elites has made any potentially unpopular move in handling the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict a big risk for any politician. Turkey, therefore, can be considered an actor interested in peace and cooperation in the Caucasus, but one that is likely to exercise caution.

The interests of Georgia, which has tried to stay away from the conflict to not damage its relations with either party, also favor a lasting peace in the region. It is a neighboring country, with large Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities, two conflicts of its own, and a tense relationship with Russia. Georgia is looking for peace and stability in the Caucasus and increased cooperation with the West. Another war in Nagorno-Karabakh would increase Russian military presence in the Caucasus, destabilize the region, affect its economy, and might renew violence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If engaged more actively, Georgia could play a pivotal role in the improvement of Azerbaijani-Armenian relations as a regional broker since it is interested in peace, has good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and would suffer greatly from the renewal of hostilities.

Russia's role and its presumed interest in prolonging rather than resolving the conflict was discussed above. The perceived decrease of its role in the region and the increasing influence of the West are the main reasons for its ambiguous attitude toward a lasting peace. Because Russia is a key player in the region and cannot be simply dismissed, the peace process should clearly signal that the economic and security interests of Russia would not be overlooked and the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict would not invariably lead to their accession into NATO. Greater involvement of Russia in regional economic and security developments might help. Turkey's Caucasus Alliance proposal would create a regional security structure and has been welcomed by Russia.

Additionally, Russian influence is largely conditioned by the necessity for Armenia to balance its economic and military isolation in the region. If Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey improved and Armenia were better integrated into regional economic and security projects, its dependence on Russia would greatly decrease. This would transform Russia's role from a coercive to cooperative one.

The main questions persist: If the improvement of relations is in the interest of most of the parties, then why is the conflict intractable? Is the current peace process adequate for resolving the core issues? Can the current format be improved or can a more comprehensive and effective peace process be developed?

The above stakeholder and identity analyses reveal a number of shortcomings in the current format of the peace process. First of all, it is limited to the political level and all other components of the conflict, such as identity, are ignored. A second set of shortcomings is related to the political process itself. The Minsk Group was chaired initially by Russia, until France and the US joined as co-chairs in 1997. From the outset, the group has tried to broker a peace agreement between the

governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian community and its leadership are the primary stakeholders to the conflict, but they are represented at the negotiating table by the president of Armenia. The latter fully supports them, yet does not have much control over the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh nor has enough legitimacy in the eyes of either the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians or the population of the Armenian Republic to sign any agreement without the explicit approval of the NK leadership. Moreover, from the start of the negotiations, all three of Armenia's presidents have been consistently unpopular, often facing radical opposition at home. They would never have been able to make major concessions or compromises, as it would equal political suicide. The NK leadership, to the contrary, is very popular, both in NK and in Armenia. If its needs are neglected, it has its own armed forces and enough popular support to sabotage the implementation of any agreement. Also, unlike the government of Armenia, it is in a better position to sign and honor an agreement, as it is seen as the legitimate representative of NK Armenians in Karabakh, Armenia and the diaspora. The presence of NK Armenians at the negotiation table is a necessary factor for signing and successfully implementing any peace agreement.

Another deficiency of the negotiating process is the composition of the mediating group itself, consisting of official representatives from the US, France and Russia, all three of which are great powers with competing interests in the region. The US is most actively trying to find a sustainable solution that will satisfy the needs of both parties and has the resources to provide incentives for them to cooperate. In fact, US interests seem to require a lasting peace and improvement of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. US oil companies invest in Caspian oil and a new war would endanger that. Also, an improvement of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations would lead to greater regional integration and likely increase US influence in this strategic Western-inclined and NATO alliance-seeking region. Finally, both Armenia and Azerbaijan see the US as a

relatively neutral force since the interests of its oil lobby⁸ and the Armenian lobby balance each other out. As a result, the US is acceptable as a mediator for both parties.

France, so far, has chosen a passive stance toward the conflict and is hardly contributing to progress in negotiations. France's oil giant, Total, owns 5% of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The Azerbaijani side regards it suspiciously as a mediator because it has historically come across as a pro-Armenian actor with an influential Armenian diaspora. But pro-Armenian or not, France's approach indicates that it is comfortable with the status quo and has little incentive to promote development, since it might require either Armenian or Azerbaijani concessions that would dissatisfy French-Armenians or its own oil lobby. France, therefore, has little incentive to actively broker any compromise.

Azerbaijan also regards Russia as a pro-Armenian force. Until recently, however, Russia pursued its own interests by ensuring the continuation of the conflict, supporting both sides, rather than supporting one in any meaningful way. This instability allowed Russia to maintain a military presence in the region under the pretext of preventing a larger scale regional war that might involve Turkey or Iran, which would have led to greater instability. Russian policymakers considered a stable peace likely to increase the influence of the US and the EU. It might even enable NATO to penetrate the south Caucasus, a move that Russia has been actively trying to prevent. The interests of Russia, therefore, favor a state of permanent conflict, rather than a sustainable peace or improved relations. Recently, Russia has changed its approach. While NATO has been slowly penetrating the former Russian sphere of influence, Turkey has been increasingly active in the Caucasus, leaving Russia little room to exercise influence. Under its new president, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia has shown signs of activating its role as a mediator and even hosting unilaterally mediated talks. Today,

⁸ Chevron and ExxonMobil are investing heavily in Caspian oil.

Russia seems to prefer a peace deal signed on its terms involving some stake in Caspian oil, a continuing military presence and economic dominance in the Caucasus.

This controversial composition and interests of the mediating group hardly make it an effective vehicle for finding the best outcome. It should be acknowledged, however, that the negotiations mediated by great powers do have one major positive impact: for almost 15 years, they have kept the parties at the negotiating table and so far have prevented them from resorting to a new cycle of violence. Any change in the format of negotiations, including the composition of the mediating group, can lead to instability and renewed violence. The above criticism of the negotiation process, therefore, should not be regarded as a call to alter the current format. It rather points out the limitations of what is currently called the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and invites parties truly interested in peace and stability, be they governments, individuals, academic institutions, businesses or NGOs, to actively explore, develop and implement additional measures conducive to the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

Politics: Suggestions

As indicated earlier, one of the principal parties to the conflict, NK is not represented at the negotiating table, while the mediators themselves are viewed suspiciously and have conflicting aims. Nonetheless, it would be premature and quite dangerous to alter the political process. Firstly, even if it does not help to resolve the conflict, the current format prevents the two parties from resorting to violence. Secondly, the obstacles to a resolution are not limited to the political level and before making any changes to the process, it is necessary to address the other non-political obstacles analyzed in the identity section earlier. These societies are full of hatred and mistrust towards each other. A zero-sum vision of the conflict prevails; civil societies have a marginal role in conflict

resolution and the opinions of the Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian and Azerbaijani people are neglected. No political agreement signed under such conditions is likely to be implemented successfully.

As the analysis shows, most of the actors' long-term interests require an improvement of relations and peace. Such an effort should become an integral part of the peace process. Strengthening democratic institutions and civil society and gradually involving Nagorno-Karabakh's Azerbaijani and Armenian communities in the peace process are some examples of what could be done. Furthermore, it is evident that the educational systems and the media in both societies have a central role in disseminating hatred. They should be transformed from factors contributing to conflict into tools of conflict resolution. To balance the spoilers and extremists in politics or media, moderate actors should be supported and integrated into the mainstream. Many more factors that hinder the resolution of the conflict have to be identified, analyzed and addressed.

Until now, conventional wisdom has suggested that the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh's status has to be resolved before Armenian-Azerbaijani relations can be improved. Fifteen years of unfruitful negotiations over the status allowed the relations between the societies to deteriorate, leaving little room for any compromise. It is time to reverse this approach and make the improvement of relations a priority. This process has already started, but it is moving slowly because of the lack of political support and resources. Since the number of stakeholders that would benefit from improved relations is large, it should be feasible to conduct a thorough analysis of the conflict, develop a long-term strategy, align the resources and proceed to integrate them into the peace process. Actors who would benefit from the improvement of relations, but who might be under political pressure at home not to cooperate, such as the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia, could at least agree not to hinder the peace process.

The US and EU, in cooperation with Azerbaijani and Armenian civil societies, as parties with substantial material and human/professional resources and interest in building a lasting peace in the Caucasus, could be the catalysts of a coordinated peace effort. Existing moderate strains within the Azerbaijani and Armenian media and academic communities have to be cultivated and cooperation among them encouraged. Moderate intellectuals' access to local and international peace-building NGOs, media and education have to be promoted so they can communicate alternative views of cooperation based on a shared Caucasian identity, history, interests and security concerns. The Armenian and the Azerbaijani governments should be continuously consulted to ensure that the strategy does not contradict their interests. If the governments signal support for such a strategy or at least make it clear that they are not against it, then Georgia, the oil companies and local business communities could play a larger role in non-security related long-term projects intended to foster regional, cultural and economic cooperation. Excluding Russia would provoke an economic crisis near the northern boundaries of the Caucasus, could undermine the rising stability and could provoke Russia to directly sabotage the peace process. However, if the inclusion of Russia in the peace process proves to be impossible, methods should be found to reduce its influence in the conflict.⁹

As relations between the societies improve, the role of the moderates in both will grow, the people will fear less for their lives and ethnic identity as a result of a political agreement, and hundreds of thousands of refugees will be able to return to their homes. The fear of Russia and Turkey attacking will decrease. Economic conditions will improve. Co-existence will become possible; the zero-sum vision will recede and compromise will stop being perceived as a destruction

⁹ As noted above, the influence of Russia and Iran is conditional upon their alliance with Armenia, which needs them to counterbalance the perceived threat of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and the NATO alliance. Therefore, if Armenia was better integrated into the projects of regional economic and security cooperation, and if Turkey and NATO became strategic allies and not strategic threats, the necessity of Russian and Iranian support, and, as a result, their unconditional influence over the region would decrease, forcing them to adopt more cooperative and less coercive positions.

of identity. Only then can the sides try to improve the format of negotiations. The leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh should be invited to the negotiating table and alternative mediation efforts considered. Then a sustainable agreement that has a chance of being accepted and implemented by the societies can be produced.

Scholarship

The bulk of the literature on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which varies from open propaganda to pseudo-theoretical and theoretical analysis, has been written mostly in the last two decades by scholars, journalists, and policymakers who are usually of Armenian or Azerbaijani origin.¹⁰ All the mainstream Armenian and Azerbaijani media, both in the region and diaspora, also represent this trend. What unites this literature, from the point of view of the author, is that even the literature that is academically sound, such as Chorbajian (2001) and Nassibli (Mollazade 1993), focuses on legitimizing the position of their side and disregards even the most basic needs and interests of the other side.

Azerbaijani writers focus on the right of a state to preserve its territorial integrity and portray Armenia as a military aggressor aiming to seize Azerbaijani territories. They write that as a result of past aggression, Armenia occupies Nagorno-Karabakh and territories outside its borders. They also claim that over a million of Azerbaijanis have become refugees or IDPs after ethnic cleansings. They often mention UN resolutions demanding the withdrawal of Armenian military from the occupied territories and from Nagorno-Karabakh and the return of refugees to their homes before Nagorno-Karabakh's status can be discussed. After the Armenian forces withdraw, Azerbaijan is supposed to discuss the possibility of granting Nagorno-Karabakh the highest status of self-government within

¹⁰ The analysis of sources in this article is limited to the English language literature or literature translated into English.

the structure of the Azerbaijani state, the form and degree of which are not specified and must be worked out in the course of negotiation. They believe that according to international law, Azerbaijan should preserve its territorial integrity within the borders of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. This question is not subject to negotiation. The concerns of Armenians are not addressed, including such vital ones as the security of NK Armenians returning to Azerbaijani rule. The grievances that led to the war, such as the discrimination against the Armenian population under the Soviet Azerbaijan, are not addressed or are deemed lies to justify the aggression.

Armenian writers usually advocate for the right for self-determination of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh. They believe that Azerbaijani rulers have actively discriminated against the Armenian population in NK and that the survival of Armenian identity and culture is in danger. They insist that according to international law, Nagorno-Karabakh must be recognized as a lawfully formed independent state or part of the Armenian Republic. In particular, they argue that there were no legal grounds for the inclusion of NK in Azerbaijan and that it was a deliberate decision by Stalin. Even from the legal point of view, they argue, the declaration of Nagorno-Karabakh independence conformed to the existing USSR laws and was implemented on the basis of a referendum conducted in the presence of international observers. Those writers usually reject any possibility of restoring Azerbaijan's jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh. Some stress that Armenians won a military victory over Azerbaijan and this fact must be taken into account when formulating a solution. They also blame Azerbaijan for discrimination and aggression against the peaceful Armenian population of NK. The vital concerns of the Azerbaijanis, including the faith of hundreds of thousands of IDPs, as well as the Azerbaijani community of the NK, are not discussed.

Both Armenian and Azerbaijani authors often use rhetorically charged language. They have very similar approaches to the conflict: every positive feature is attributed to their side and every negative feature to the other. The conflict is seen from an adversarial point of view. The Armenian side usually blames Azerbaijani ill-will and the Azerbaijani side blames Armenian ill-will for the failure of the peace process. They are united in their critique of the international community's inability to deliver a just solution, the Armenian version of which, obviously, is the opposite of the Azerbaijani one. These writings suggest ways to reinforce the leverage of one side vis-à-vis the other, usually by trying to attract the sympathies or interests of international actors, and to force the other side to concede. Those approaches look for a win-lose outcome in which one side will gain everything and the other will lose it all.

The limited, yet emerging, research on Armenian or Azerbaijani identity and its role in the conflict falls into this category. Even if it does not have explicit political aims, this anthropological literature is subjective, focuses on the needs of one's own identity, explores the myths and confirms the role of the other as a historical enemy and a challenge to its own identity. In spite of this, some of the identity research does meet high academic standards and its mere presence should be considered as great progress in understanding the conflict and the relations between Azerbaijani and Armenian societies.

Another trend in the literature includes authors who tend to take a neutral or objective stance, and also look at the conflict from a zero-sum point of view. Abasov and Khachatryan, Croissant, Carley, Crocker, Hampson and Aall and many others see the source of intractability in the objective unfavorable context, conflicting interests of external actors, ancient hatreds, internal politics of conflicting parties, mutually exclusive claims, and security dilemmas. The most common solutions

that these authors regularly propose are various schemes for granting Nagorno-Karabakh a degree of autonomy within the formal jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. Mediators have often adopted those options as a basis of official negotiations and they have not led to any results. Another option, first proposed by Andrey Sacharov in 1988 and then developed by Paul Goble is the so-called “territorial swap.” This option proposes handing over Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia along with the territory that unites those two in exchange for transferring the Armenian territory between the Azerbaijan Republic and its autonomous region of Nakhchivan to Azerbaijani control. According to information in the media and opposition figures in Armenia, some variant of territorial exchange like the one proposed by Goble was seriously considered during presidential talks in 2000-2001 in Key West, Florida. Officially, Yerevan and Baku refuted these allegations and there was no additional information about it or confirmation that it was actually discussed. The other variant that political scientists often put forward is the “common state” or some kind of federation or confederation of Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan. This was offered to the conflicting sides as a solution in 1998 by the co-chairmen of the OSCE’s Minsk Group. Nagorno-Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia stated that they were ready to accept these proposals as a basis for negotiations. Meanwhile the Azerbaijani side rejected this idea and stressed that the confederation of Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh will make the security and the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, with its population of seven million, dependent on Nagorno-Karabakh with only 150,000 inhabitants.

These various compromises, although diverse, have something in common: they require painful concessions from both sides. They have been viewed by key stakeholders as offering ‘lose-lose’ outcomes that dissatisfies both parties.

Some literature moves away from the adversarial view and looks for a mutually beneficial solution. Laitin and Suny, Thomas De Waal, Phillips, Emerson and other scholars and practitioners

represent this approach. They find many points of common interest and, with rare exception, tend to focus on positive dynamics and ignore objective threats and obstacles to their solutions. Some writers following this trend go as far as proposing a "Trans-Caucasian Confederation" that would unite Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in a common confederate state. The idea that the future of the South Caucasus countries lies in their integration is not new.¹¹ But a group of researchers from the Center for Research of European Politics (Brussels) headed by Michael Emerson proposed a radical variant. He assumes that integration in itself may turn out to be a key to the solution for Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts. This proposal, however, assumes the leaders of the three recognized states in the South Caucasus are ready to immediately take steps towards regional integration, the creation of the so-called South Caucasus community. It also assumes the consent of the EU, Russia and the US to sponsor such integration. However, the governments of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have shown negative reactions toward all of these ideas, and they have not generated any interest from the international community.

A newly emerging trend in the literature on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict signals a clean break with existing literature in its way of thinking about conflicts. The authors representing this trend are process, rather than outcome, oriented and approach conflict resolution as a long-term road toward the improvement of relations. This trend is represented in reports by conflict resolution organizations, such as the International Crisis Group (October 2005) and the younger generation of Azerbaijani and Armenian social scientists who studied conflict resolution or some related social science discipline with an emphasis on conflict resolution. The authors of this issue of *International Negotiation* -- Tabib Husynov, Aytan Gahramanova, Irina Ghaplanyan, Ruben Harutunian, Phil Gamaghelyan and others -- represent that trend. The philosophy and position of these authors on

¹¹ It is sufficient here to recall the term "the Caucasian Benelux" coined by Eduard Shevardnadze as far back as the first half of the 1990s.

many issues, including the status of NK, greatly differ from one another, and many are not much different from that of the most hard-line writers. What unites these authors, however, and what differentiates them from others, is that they break with the tradition of looking for a quick solution to the conflict and instead try to look beyond the established boundaries of conventional approaches. All of them put a great emphasis on the analysis and better understanding of the conflict and its dynamics. These authors try to understand the needs of all the parties involved and look for a sustainable solution that will take these needs into consideration. The following paragraph from the International Crisis Group's 2005 report summarizes some of these authors' concerns.

Restoring confidence between Azerbaijanis and Armenians living in and around Nagorno-Karabakh will be a huge challenge, requiring transformation of the language, images and modes of dialogue they use with reference to the other. Political leaders, media, and educational sources in Armenia, and even more so in Azerbaijan, demonize each other, calling for revenge and appealing to people's sense of victimization without calling on them to consider their responsibility in the conflict. To prepare the population for a peace deal and implement it, new symbols and rhetoric with respect to the conflict are needed (International Crisis Group 2005).

In terms of suggestions for conflict resolution, all focus on the development of a long-term peace process that could transform the relations between the societies and make sustainable co-existence of Azerbaijanis and the Armenians possible. Many mention that accepting the other's grievances with as legitimate is an important first step in looking for a solution and that lasting peace requires reconciliation between the societies, not only among politicians and elites. Some emphasize the central role of identity in the perpetuation of the conflict. All of them stress the necessity of involving civil societies in the peace process. Some authors also write about the necessity of including the people who are the most directly affected by the conflict, the Armenians and the Azerbaijani communities of Nagorno-Karabakh.

This analysis of the literature shows a direct correlation between the trends that dominate the scholarship at any given time and the development of the conflict itself. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the literature was almost exclusively developed by the supporters of one side or the other and who favored and tried to legitimize a clear 'win-lose' outcome. This period was followed by the onset of violence and war. In the early and mid-1990s, the conflict attracted the attention of the international social science community, mainly political scientists and policy researchers who studied it from the traditional realpolitik point of view and offered a number of lose-lose outcomes; they urged both sides to compromise and make painful concessions. These ideas largely informed the negotiating process, but failed to produce an outcome, as they continuously dissatisfied both parties. It was only later that conflict resolution experts, mostly those focused on interest-based conflict resolution, joined the debate and offered what they considered a number of win-win possibilities. Their proposals tried to find a political solution that would satisfy both parties. Some of the proposals have been presented to the Armenian and the Azerbaijani presidents by the Minsk group co-chairs during negotiations, but so far no political solution has been devised that would satisfy both sides.

Most of the literature, if not extremely biased, has contained both useful findings and deficiencies. The proponents of the 'lose-lose' approach considered the cooperative approach naïve and did not use its obvious advantages, while the partisans of the win-win approach often refused to see the objective threats of imprudent cooperation. What unites all authors is the constant search for a final political solution. All possible solutions have been on the negotiating table at one time or another and all of them have failed to bring the conflict to an end.

However, the discussion of identity, let alone identity-based conflict resolution, has been virtually nonexistent until recently. It is no surprise, therefore, that identity matters as well as all other nonpolitical components of the conflict have not been addressed in the negotiations to date.

In the last few years, a number of US and European-educated Azerbaijani and Armenian social scientists started gradually filling this gap. Research on identity and its influence on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, the role of civil society, on collective memory and transmitted trauma and other factors is growing. Various experts increasingly approach the resolution of the conflict less as an outcome and more as a process. This process requires a long-term vision and commitment and a comprehensive understanding of all the underlying needs and factors, not only the political ones. It must involve continuous assessment and reassessment of the ever-changing context, political and economic factors and identity needs. So far, this new trend of scholarship has been limited and quite marginal, but it is gaining currency. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has produced a number of reports stressing the need to improve relations. Mediators have adopted some of these principles and the negotiations seem increasingly focused on putting the status issue on hold and considering long-term steps toward normalizing relations.

Because there has been a strong correlation between the scholarship on this conflict and the peace process, there is hope that the mainstreaming and growth of this latest trend can inform the peace process. The abovementioned experts have already demonstrated the ability to self-organize and cooperate across conflict lines. A concerted effort to increase conflict-sensitive research in the fields of sociology, anthropology, social psychology, political science, and history, as well as the applied fields of international development and journalism, can produce a breadth of knowledge and more experts that are able to contribute to the transformation.

Conclusions

First and foremost, a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the conflict is necessary. The areas that require further assessment should be identified and the relevant research should be initiated. Conferences that will provide Armenian, Azerbaijani and foreign experts from various fields with forums to discuss the conflict on a regular basis should be established. These conferences would enhance the general understanding of the conflict as well its particular components. The conferences should be accompanied by smaller-scale workshops and joint research initiatives.

The involvement of major policy-oriented think tanks from both countries in the peace process would help translate the generated knowledge into policy decisions. Contact with international mediators could be carried out on an even more direct level by inviting them to the workshops and conferences as observers. Once a basic understanding has been established, practical initiatives would follow. Local actors, including the NGOs, media and educators should be active in implementing the initiatives.

Three themes – identity, politics and scholarship – have been analyzed here together because they all are pieces of the same puzzle. An understanding of any of the three will not be complete unless its relationship with the other two is established. Understanding and working on the political context is crucial as it is the driving force behind the conflict and attempts to resolve it. The emotional level, the identity one, is the central yet underappreciated component that fuels the ethnic hatred and mistrust. It affects the policy decisions just as much as relations between the societies. The ‘knowledge’ level, the scholarship, informs the feelings and actions. It is the foundation upon which policy makers base their decisions, both consciously and intuitively. Until now, unfortunately, their actions have been based on flawed knowledge and without awareness about the emotions

involved and their influence over these actions. Understanding the link between these three can help greatly to improve the peace process.

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