RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RSIS COMMENTARY

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 183 – 22 October 2020

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Religious Strife?

By Mohamed Bin Ali and Chew Si Xing Theresa

SYNOPSIS

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia has once again flared up, with many depicting it as a religious dissension. However, labelling it as a "religious conflict" is imprecise and complicating the search for a durable peace among the main protagonists in this vulnerable underbelly of the former Soviet Union.

COMMENTARY

SINCE THE conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan intensified on 27 September 2020, hundreds of soldiers and civilians have died and thousands of people displaced in the concentrated exchange of firepower. From the beginning of open armed hostility in 1988, the fighting has been portrayed, particularly by the Western media, as a "religious war" between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis.

Such a characterisation is imprecise and is disputed. A deeper examination of this strife clearly reveals that politics rather than religion is the primary cause. Following decades of political disputes, there is strong mutual distrust and insecurity. In fact, the absence of religious themes has also been persistently maintained by the leaders of both sides in the conflict.

How It Started

The bloodshed in Nagorno-Karabakh has been described as an ethnic and territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two neighbouring states in the South Caucasus region between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. This region has been described by scholars as the frontier of Europe, Russia, Turkey and Iran. It consists of various traditional homelands inhabited by populations belonging to different ethnic, religious and tribal backgrounds. For example, the original territory of Nagorno-

Karabakh was an autonomous area with a Christian Armenian majority, within Soviet Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim republic in the then Soviet Union.

Previously, the Soviet Union was in complete control. It kept irredentist tendencies and claims for ethnic autonomy in check. With a crumbling Soviet Union, war erupted over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988. Fighting continued till 1994 when a ceasefire was declared.

By then, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh (aided by Armenia) had also captured surrounding highlands belonging to Azerbaijan and physically connected Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. They proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Artsakh which survived till today even though it is only recognised by Armenia and almost totally ignored by the international community.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) set up the Minsk Group to seek a peaceful resolution. This is co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States, and participated by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and Turkey. Since 1992, the Minsk Group is the main forum for negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh's future political status. These talks have so far not borne any fruit.

Religious Conflict?

The lack of peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia has often been described in the media as a "religious conflict". This convenient portrayal is due to the fact that Azerbaijanis are mainly Muslim whereas Armenians are Christians.

Undoubtedly, religion is one of the causes fuelling distrust between both parties. Armenian priests had led anti-Azerbaijani protests in the Armenian capital of Yerevan while echoing demands by Armenians that Nagorno-Karabakh be integrated with Armenia.

On the other hand, the Grand Mufti of the Caucasus, Allahshukur Hummat Pashazadeh (based in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan), countered with a strong attack on "the enemies of Islam" and called for mobilisation of the faithful with Islamic banners and flags during protests. However, the viewpoint that the conflict is religiously motivated in its entirety is inaccurate.

In general, the populations of the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union have remained indifferent. Distinguished Muslim figures like the late Chingiz Aitmatov (from Kyrgyzstan) and the late Rasul Gamzatov (from Russia) had officially denounced the atrocities committed during the fighting as violence committed by individuals in the name of their faith. Likewise, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia have come to an agreement that the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is, in its essence, not caused by religion *per se*.

What is Fuelling the War

One needs to look into various primary factors for the prolonged armed clash between both parties. Roy Medvedev and Giuletto Chiesa argued in their book, *Time of*

Change, that then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev could have assisted in the resolution of the conflict if he had been more flexible and far-sighted with constitutional changes for Russia and its former Soviet republics.

The present conflict is also often the consequence of nationalism between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Expressions of nationalism arise in many ways, such as the official commemoration by Armenia on 21 April annually for the victims of the alleged Armenian genocide during the Ottoman period; the Armenians identified the Azerbaijanis with the Turks even though the two are ethnically and traditionally distinct.

The evocations of historical remembrance contributed to the constant bitterness of the regional crisis, hence the continued unwillingness by both parties to live in harmony.

Causes of Violence Among States

However, critics assert that much of the violence is driven by politically-vested interests of individual leaders who utilise the influence of secularism to gain public support. Janet Jakobsen, an expert on secular and religious violence, explains that modern secular states are the source of most of the world's violence today; hence secularism becomes a more important factor for violence compared to conflicts motivated by religion.

Out of the 1700-odd recorded historical conflicts, only 123 or seven per cent had religion as their primary cause. This means that other factors are much more prominent as drivers of violent conflicts, with politics the primary one.

Perpetuating the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is not religion but the political interventions of external players. The involvement of foreign actors has prolonged the conflict as a means to assert economic and political gains in the region.

By and large, the international media have played a big role in amplifying conflicts that are fuelled by religious reasons and seemingly diluting the seriousness of acts of violence perpetrated by secular states or other motivators. This leads to the conflation of "violence" and "religion".

As religious violence expert Mark Juergensmeyer describes, this conflation is "quite misleading". Indeed, it would be naïve to conclude that all conflicts that involve different religious communities boil down solely to religious differences. It would be useful to identify the political players and those with vested interests in a specific conflict so as to gain a more holistic picture of the origins and propagation of the violence. This might be helpful in the search for conflict resolution or conflict management.

Mohamed Bin Ali is Assistant Professor with the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme and Chew Si Xing Theresa is a postgraduate student in International Political Economy at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg