

KARABAKH CONFLICT: STILL SAME FACTS¹

(KARABAĞ ANLAŞMAZLIĞI: HALA AYNI GERÇEKLER)

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Yes, since the start of the Karabakh conflict nearly a quarter of a century elapsed, but we are still facing the same tragic facts and no solution is in sight.

In such circumstances it may be perhaps useful to recall the events of the early nineties, the important OSCE effort for a negotiated, peaceful solution within the so-called Minks Group, a Group which was conceived by the way mainly on our initiative and in fact by my insistence-as the senior member of our team- on the need to provide for the initial stages of the negotiations less formal and more flexible conditions, before going to a rather more solemn conference in the Belarus capital. The situation we were facing then obviously necessitated the urgent adoption of some important emergency measures in order to pave the way towards the expected result.

Thus the Minsk Group was created in May 1992 during the Helsinki meeting of the OSCE, with the participation of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, France, Germany, Italy, the Russian Federation, Sweden, Turkey and the United States of America, Italy assuming the chairmanship as the host country.

Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives of Karabakh were also invited on an informal basis.

The Group's task was clear enough. In conformity with the decisions approved of the OSCE bodies, therefore also by the Armenians, it had to define the required measures to ensure the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from Lachin-a key Azeri town

¹ This article is largely based on a previous article written by Ambassador S. Korkud for the first issue of Perceptions-SAM's journal of international affairs, dated March-May 1996. Its title was "Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict-Some Facts."

situated on the line of communication between Karabakh and Armenia- and Shusha (a town in Karabakh historically and culturally very dear to the Azerbaijanis, being hometown of many Azeri poets, composers, intellectuals), both illegally occupied by the Armenians in defiance of the said decisions.

It all started quite well at the historic Villa Madama overlooking Rome, generously put at the disposal of the Group by the Italian chairmanship. But in spite of this rather encouraging atmosphere, the participants soon realized that the talks were heading towards a deadlock.

The difficulties stemmed mainly from the uncooperative attitude of the Armenian side. The Armenian representatives pursued defiantly obstructionist tactics together with the representatives of the Armenian inhabitants of Karabakh, who after a two months long empty seat policy, came to Rome only to state that they could not accept equal treatment with the representatives of the Azerbaijanis of Karabakh and asked for national status.

Such conditions were of course incompatible with the relevant CSCE decisions and, therefore, unacceptable to Azerbaijan. It was obvious that matters relating to the status question were not included into the mandate of the Minsk Group and these had to be dealt with in the Minsk Conference. So through acrimonious polemics between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the talks stalled while fighting continued in the field. Nevertheless, in the session of March 1993, the Group was able to realize an agreement on the terms of reference of the team which would monitor the cessation of hostilities. This was of course rather a small step but could be a breakthrough in the process. Unfortunately, these expectations were short-lived.

At the following session, out of the blue, the group received the news of Armenian occupation of another Azerbaijani city, Kelbajar, situated in the north west of Karabakh. This was of course a deliberate blow to the whole process, a most unwelcome happening. In fact, from then on the Armenian offensive continued in and around Karabakh, resulting in the occupation of 20% of Azerbaijani territory, with around one million refugees who are still enduring their harsh fate, before the unseeing eyes of the international community.

At present Azerbaijan is the losing side of course, mainly because of its military inability, but certainly not because of lack of bravery. Contrary to the Armenians, Azerbaijanis did not get the support they needed. Or throughout the whole process, they showed their willingness to find a

peaceful compromise, in particular by agreeing to participate in the Minsk Conference in spite of the openly ambiguous positions of the Armenians to say the least. In the meantime, they had to defend their legitimate rights. Surely, they did not deserve such an outcome.

The Minsk Group still exists today. Though its chairmanship changed. USA, France, Russia are now co-chairmen. Several encounters took place between the leaders, without any tangible result.

There is a de-facto ceasefire on the ground. But clashes occur on the ceasefire line with loss of life for both sides. This is nothing else but a dangerous stalemate.

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To conclude a positive note.

Karabakh -a Turkish name meaning “black vineyard”- with its 4392 square miles, can very easily become a “trait-d’union” between the two countries, even a touristic land and provide a basis for a peaceful and prosperous coexistence for all those talented peoples. The present state of affairs cannot continue indefinitely. Even the worse expansionist ambitions should have a limit. Statesmanship must prevail and put an end to this cruel nightmare for the benefit of all concerned.

