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Religious Component as a Tool for Reconciliation of Armenian and Azerbaijani Populations

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In specialized scientific and academic literature the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been discussed and analyzed from the point of general approaches to ethnic or territorial conflicts, and the other components which might have played even a small role in the conflict or post-conflict era have been ignored by the researchers and practitioners. It is well known that any conflict has its own specifics and particularities, and from this point the solution of the conflicts cannot be similar—approaches to the conflict resolution should be diversified. While discussing and analyzing the role of the religious factor in the Azeri-Armenian conflict it should be stated that the religion can be a source for inter-group conflict as well as for conflict resolution. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, we would like to discuss the religious factor as a tool for peaceful resolution making a great emphasize on the moral aspects of religion because notwithstanding of religious belief or belongings the moral values are connected with human values and they are universal for all mankind. In this sense the religions and their formal representatives in the countries should become the essential bearers of moral values and try to root these ideas among the peoples of both parties assisting and promoting the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

In this article we analyze other small elements that might not play a direct role in the conflict or might not be a cause for the conflict but indirectly has its influence on conflict escalation, misunderstanding, the rise of intolerance, and may have a major role in conflict resolution through approaching the point of views of two confronting ethnic groups or try to spread the ideas of tolerance among the common people. During the Armenian-Azeri conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh such kind of indirect influence could play a religious factor but not as a reason, cause, or consequence, but only as a factor which not only emphasized the differences between the parties but also somehow created lot of hindrances, obstacles, and difficulties on the way to approach the fighting nations and societies.

During the first period of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Azerbaijan made lots of attempts to represent the conflict under the light of religious conflict, but the engagement of Iran into the peace establishment process and reconciliation of two parties showed that the conflict is mostly based on ethnic problems then on religious ones. The Armenian side's agreement on the mediation of Iran (which interrupted when Armenians took control over the city of Shushi in 1993) showed the world that despite some religious components the conflict is based on ethnic (Armenian approach) and/or territorial problems (Azerbaijan approach). During the Armenian-Azeri conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and after the signing of the ceasefire

agreement, the Conference of Islamic Republics condemned the Armenian policy against Muslim Azerbaijan and demanded to resolve the conflict as soon as possible. Though any practical steps for implementing the resolutions of the conference have not been taken, the union of the countries on the religious basis discussed the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh and tried to have influence on its resolution, which gives some religious aspects to the conflict. Also, both parties in the conflict belong to different religions – Christianity and Islam make the religious aspect more evident and actual to discuss. From this point of view the representation of the Armenian-Azeri conflict under the religious light was quite profitable for a Muslim country with a Muslim population because in that case Armenia will become a rival not only for Azerbaijan but also for the Muslim world, which could become decisive factor during the conflict and for conflict resolution. If the world recognizes the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as religious, Armenia would be surrounded from three sides (Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran) because of the ethnic factor in the case of Turkey and religious factor in the case of Shi'a Iran. We should convincingly state that the Iranian factor played a vital role during the conflict, especially the neutral role of Iran although Iran declared many times its position about the maintenance and restoration of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. But at the same time it is evidently observed that Iran did not impose any kind of pressures (economic, political, cultural, etc.) on Armenia and always kept the amicable relationships with its neighbor and even deepened its relationship with strategic cooperation. The vivid evidence of such kind of cooperation is the newly built Iran-Armenia gas pipeline and the cost of the gas Armenia pays by the supply of energy to Iran which can be deemed as mutual profitable project.

But before going deeper into the conflict resolution process let's describe some of the religious symbols used during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is evident that from Azeri side many mohjaheds and vahabists have taken part in the conflict and Armenians used Christian symbols to show the religious confrontation. Some extremist Sunni groups in Azerbaijan many times tried to announce religious war (jihad) against Armenians to gain the financial, physical, and spiritual support of Muslim countries but could not mobilize all these forces against Armenians. From the other side it was quite evident during the liberation of Shushi that Armenians made white crosses on their clothes to show the religious aspect of their struggle. It was conditioned also by the fact that the main church in Shushi, St. Ghazanchetsots, had been used as a weapon warehouse that made the Armenian population and fighters to be more aggressive and goal-oriented. During the Shushi campaign the Armenian fighters and soldiers became crusaders (they made white crosses on their clothes) to liberate "the tomb of Jesus Christ"–the synonym of which was St. Ghazanchetsots Church– and to liberate one of the cradles of their Christianity (though it was not well understood and the campaign was done on a sensitive-irrational basis).

At the same time several political actors tried to exaggerate the religious factor and show the conflict under a religious light. Of course many of the political actors try to use religion for political reasons and to abuse the role of religion in society. From this point of view in Armenian reality there were some actors who also used the force of religion to enhance the spiritual feelings of believers and to present the conflict under the light of maintenance of ancestors' culture and heritage. From the Azeri side there were many attempts to use the force and rules of Islam to consolidate the Muslim believers against the "unbelievers" to preserve the ancestors' land and culture. Such kind of approaches during the conflict enhanced the hostile attitude toward each other and could enhance terrible consequences.

The other point is the project of "Great Turan" headed by Turkey, having the purpose to join all Turkish-speaking nations and create a huge alliance under the presidency of Turkey. On the Armenian side, political and societal actors considered this project a strong threat for the Armenian state because on the way to creating such a space, the only hindrance is Armenia with its territory. Such fears were enhanced by the announcements of some Turkish or Azeri

public actors aiming to show that Armenia should be eliminated from the earth, and an ethnic group under the light of Islam would establish the "Great Turan." The Armenian newspapers always analyze the issue of "Great Turan" especially during the Uyghur problem in China when Turkey announced the Uyghur as his brothers and condemned the policy of China against one of its national minorities. These political steps were evaluated as the renaissance of the mentioned project, and people became more careful towards such announcements. This is also very interesting and challenging from the religious point of view because all mentioned nations that are to be involved in "Great Turan" project are Muslim nations and the implementation of the project should be done also under the religious light of Islam. The religious component in the identity determination of both nations should also be mentioned. Traditionally, religion in the face of the Armenian Apostolic Church played a crucial role in the maintenance of the Armenian nation and nowadays it continues to emphasize its role in society and public life, though its role in identity matters essentially decreased. From this perspective during the war between Azeris and Armenians, such issues were also touched because some churches and mosques and also cultural monuments reflecting the religious traditions were destroyed, and the religious issues were automatically legitimated and given rise. Also, Armenians identified the Azeri population with Turks and the propaganda was mostly made against the Muslim Turkish ethnos due to the ethnic cleanings that happened in Ottoman Turkey at the beginning of the 20th century. Among the Armenians, a crucial role played the consciousness that by fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, they were fighting for their ancestors who were killed or who were pressured to convert to Islam in order to preserve their lives and their families and assimilated during the time. Considering all the above-mentioned points we should conclude that religion is often used by the political actors for political and material benefit and for enhancing the nationalistic and religious feelings among the population for negative purposes. The religious factor may be used for reconciliation of both nations and tolerance towards each other. It is already evident that during the conflict the religious factor is mostly playing a role to raise and to deepen the mutual hostility and nationalistic approaches. But during the peaceful periods religion, its structures, and religious actors may play a great role for bringing the parties around the table. One of the contemporary tools of religious pluralism and religious tolerance taught that states, people, and individuals should overcome the concepts of "other," "the outsider," and being "different." For both conflicting parties this is one of the main problems because the Soviet propaganda and also the war in Nagorno-Karabakh created a huge gap between two societies living in the same region and made it very difficult to find practical means and ways for approaching both nations and societies. As soon as the individuals, groups, and people notice the similarities between the two societies, it can become possible to overcome the current hostile situation and take further steps towards reconciliation. Of course, it is impossible without the assistance of official state and religious authorities who can prepare both societies for dialogue and tolerance.

After the war in Nagorno-Karabakh there were some attempts to find common solutions by the spiritual leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church and Muslim Community of Azerbaijan, but such attempts have remained on paper or were ended by oral disputes. Recently, the Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin II was invited by Spiritual Leader of Azerbaijan Hachi Alashukur Pashazade to Baku to take part in the meeting of spiritual leaders of some post-Soviet countries which could have been a very good opportunity to discuss the common problems and try to find general ways for approaching both societies and eliminate the religious superstitions. Unfortunately, the announcements of Alashukur Pashazade on the Armenian Genocide may become a hindrance on the commencement of dialogue between two spiritual centers and their followers.

Inter-religious dialogue and engagement are the paths that both sides should use for relating to one another and to heal the antagonism among themselves. During the dialogue there should

not be any emphasis on absolute truths or truths of one religion or any dogmatic or pure religious issues because they can be exploited to incite religious hatred as well as violence and deepen the conflict and hostility between the parties. Religion and its possibilities are the basic tools for enabling people and civil society members from both parties to commence the dialogue emphasizing the essential values shared by the world's religions such as love, compassion, equality, honesty, and the ideal of treating others as one wishes to be treated himself.

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1. From Nonsense to Nationhood: A Dangerous Trajectory of Azerbaijani Nationalism. Retrieved from <http://www.cilicia.com/Convenience.htm>.
 2. Iran always tried to keep neutrality between Armenia and Azerbaijan because the escalation of the conflict could have the worst influence on Iran and also Iran always tries to be the main player in regional politics. The agreement of the Armenian side during the conflict on the mediation of Shi'a Iran could become possible only if the Armenian side has been convinced in non-religious and neutral approaches of Iran. See <http://www.turksam.org/en/a255.html>
 3. Taarnby, Michael (2008). The Mujaheddin in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Case Study in the Evolution of Global Jihad. Elcano Royal Institute Working Papers, Issue 20. Pashayan, Araks (2009). Mujahideen in War in Karabakh. Noravank Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.noravank.am/en/?page=analitics&nid=1735>
 4. Willaert, Rita (2009). Nagorno-Karabakh: Overture to the War on Terror. Retrieved from <http://www.the-vibe.co.uk/2009/07/14/bensnook/nagorno-karabakh-overture-to-the-war-on-terror-shame-no-one-noticed/>
 5. Armenians mention many times that in 1913 they had 222 functioning churches and places for worship and their number during the Soviet times sufficiently decreased. See Bishop Makar Barkhudariants. Artsakh. Baku. 1895.
 6. Арсен Мелик-Шахназаров, Нагорный Карабах: факты против лжи. Информационно-идеологические аспекты нагорно-карабахского конфликта. Глава 4. Война с храмами. Retrieved from <http://sumgait.info/caucasus-conflicts/nagorno-karabakh-facts/nagorno-karabakh-facts-4.htm>.

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