

How Kocharian And Aliev Tried To Bring A War To A Secret End

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Back in August Armenian president Robert Kocharian and his Azerbaijani counterpart Heydar Aliev met in Geneva to sort out Karabakh "man to man" behind closed doors.

President of Armenia Robert Kocharian and his Azerbaijani counterpart Heydar Aliev met in Geneva in late August to discuss the problem of the Karabakh conflict, and to try to find approaches to its solution.

It was their second recent meeting and each time the talks went on behind closed doors-secret even from those senior politicians who have worked to define the foreign policy of the two countries.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous Armenian-populated enclave in Azerbaijan started in 1988, and grew into a full-scale war in 1991.

By the time a ceasefire was called in May 1994, 30,000 people had died, more than a million persons had become refugees and some 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territory was under the control of Armenian forces. Despite the efforts of the so-called OSCE Minsk group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the US, talks on Karabakh soon came to a deadlock, making the outcome of August's secret sessions very interesting.

Returning from Geneva, Kocharian informed Armenian journalists that both sides were trying to avoid undermining each other's positions. This in itself is no mean achievement. He added that they had agreed to call meetings between their ministers of defence to discuss the state of the cease-fire. Other meetings were agreed between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, where the sides will discuss ways to reanimate the OSCE Minsk group talks.

Kocharian said that both sides exchanged opinions about the future status of Karabakh, without giving details. According to the Azerbaijani press in recent weeks, Heydar Aliev was even less forthcoming.

Immediately after the end of the presidents' meeting, the politicians and the press of two countries started to talk about the probable status of Karabakh. Naturally, everyone's attention was focused on the OSCE Minsk group suggestion, made in November 1998, to create a "common state" between Azerbaijan and Karabakh.

This suggested union would leave Armenian populated Karabakh, which broke from Baku's rule in the late 1980s, with its de facto independence intact, while preserving Azerbaijani territorial integrity - at least on paper.

The Armenian side basically agreed with the suggestion, but Azerbaijan was against it. Azerbaijan's State Advisor on international Vafa Guluzadeh told Armenian journalists in an interview in Baku that the suggestions of the Minsk group cannot be accepted.

"They were prepared by Russian professionals, which support Armenia," Guluzadeh said.

It is assumed that the parameters of the common state were at least subject to discussion at the meeting

of the presidents. At home their respective opposition parties stood against them.

Hayk Babukhanian, an MP representing the Armenian opposition party Constitutional Rights Union, part of the Rights and Accord bloc, cited rumours that Kocharian had agreed to return the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (RNK) to its Soviet era borders when it known as the 'Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast'.

At the same time, speculation had it that the so-called Lachin corridor connecting Karabakh with Armenia will be narrowed to its minimum width and, in Babukhanian's view, to unsafe levels.

But international pressure is intense. In an open letter published in the Azerbaijani media last month, US secretary of state Madeleine Albright said she believed it was possible to achieve an agreement before a summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) due on November 18-19 in Istanbul.

"The idea of 'common state' is doomed," said Kamal Ali, a journalist and a board member of the Azerbaijani Musafat party. "This confederative formation will live exactly as long as the present opposition will allow, after it comes to power.

"The parties, members of the opposition block had already notified that all decrees and decisions of the present powers are in effect non-binding for the future. A rally is being planned for this weekend in Baku to protest Aliyev's position on the resolution of the conflict.

It seems these mutual compromises are only guaranteed if the Armenian side gives up the idea of full independence of Karabakh, and returns the territory, presently controlled by Armenian forces, to Azerbaijani jurisdiction.

Azerbaijan is apparently willing to grant Karabakh a status "higher than autonomy, but lower than independence" and to give up the idea of controlling over the Lachin corridor and the citadel-town of Shushi, the ancient capital of Karabakh.

Certainly, it is difficult for both sides to give up their positions, not least because Armenians colonised the captured areas with people from various districts of Armenia after the fighting ended. But it should be noted that even in Armenia these areas are still described as "occupied territories", implying that it does not automatically lay permanent claim to the lands.

But there are other points of view. "If they decide to return the occupied territories, then all this war, all these victims suffered for nothing," said a former field commander, presently a deputy of the National Assembly of Armenia. " I do not know what will happen. The people may refuse such solution."

However the Armenian president has greater executive powers to resolve the situation and his parliament is required only to pass an opinion, not a ruling.

Things are more complicated in Azerbaijan, where according to article 95 of the Azerbaijani constitution, the problems of administrative-territorial division of the country must be determined by the Parliament.

That means that if the President signs the agreement on granting Karabakh a new status, this agreement cannot come into force before it is ratified by the Parliament. Also the Parliament will need to pass a separate law on the status of Nagorno Karabakh. The chairman of the Parliamentary Commission on International Affairs, Rza Ibadov, says the OSCE Minsk group plan on the Karabakh conflict settlement and its talk of a 'common state' is unacceptable.

Besides, there is the problem of tens of thousands Azerbaijani refugees who have lived in tent camps for more than six years, waiting in hope of returning home. It is clear that the Armenian population of Karabakh will oppose this.

And who knows what problems, even violence, may face those refugees trying to return to their homes in the occupied territories along the Lachin corridor.

One should not forget that the pressure raised by the international community has raised. In August Armenia and Azerbaijan were visited by missions from the US and Great Britain, and at the beginning of September the Russian foreign minister visited the Caucasian countries.

Adding to this the appointment of a new US representative to the Minsk group, and Iran's offer to mediate in the conflict, the interest of the international community in settling the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict may have reached an apogee.

Amid all this Karabakh celebrated the eighth anniversary of its 'independence' on September 2. On that day in 1991, the Parliament of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic declared independence, which was followed by a referendum on December 10. The leadership of

Karabakh, led by the president Arkadi Ghukasian, laid wreaths to the monument to the victims of war with Azerbaijan.

It is clear that the problem that existed in a latent form for decades and proceeded to an open confrontation, continuing for 11 years, can not be solved at once. A lot more time and effort still needs to be applied by Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as by the international community.

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