

Breaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Deadlock: Power of the “Powerless”

Written by Efgan Niftiyev

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As the restive crowds sweep away long standing authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East, the world is witnessing the manifestation of power of the “voiceless” and disenfranchised. The wave of revolutions clearly portrays how impotent the security forces could become in the face of adamant will of millions, no matter how brutal and merciless they are. Looking at what non-violent protests could achieve I couldn’t stop myself thinking of all the suffering and injustice inflicted on people as a result of war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and how non-violent, masterfully orchestrated march of thousands of civilians could actually bring an end to deadlock in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has a story of ethnic hatred, the seeds of which were planted long before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This decades enduring hatred was reignited and politically instrumentalized by the national elites towards the end of 1980’s. With the growing ethnic tensions in Azerbaijan and Armenia first ethnic Azerbaijani refugees had to leave Armenia in dire conditions in winter of 1988. Over two hundred thousand refugees had to be

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sheltered in different regions of Azerbaijan. Ethnic Armenians shared similar destiny when they were forced to leave their homes in Azerbaijani territories. Some of them fled to Armenia and many others to Russia. Nevertheless, it was just the harbinger of the brutal conflict that was to follow, and the hostility that to this day continues to take lives along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border despite the seventeen years of ceasefire.

Over one hundred thousand of Karabakh Armenians still live and cultivate their lands while one in eight Azerbaijanis became internally displaced. This accounts to around one million people that lost their homes and belongings. Many Azerbaijani towns in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the surrounding seven districts have now become ghost towns. Agdam, that was once home to tens of thousands of ethnic Azerbaijanis, is the concrete example of complete destruction of human civilization (in our modern time). Armenian political elite justifies it as the right of self-determination of Karabakh Armenians, and many others in international community applaud what has been done. Despite the conflicting narratives of the destructive armed conflict, there is one simple reality that needs to be acknowledged - that is the right of return; and there is no entity that can deny it forcefully.

Since 1992 the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, United States and Russia, has been trying to mediate between Azerbaijan and Armenia to end the conflict, and the return of the IDPs has been one of the main issues on the negotiation table. Hundreds of meetings between the conflicting parties failed to produce any meaningful progress. Now there is an ongoing talk about the possibility of resumption of armed conflict in the peace process. Azerbaijan did strengthen its military might to be able to overrun Armenian forces in the event of renewed armed clashes, but the second war would be far more devastating than the previous one because it was not fought with S 300s or other more advanced weapons. Several experts in the international community are trying to tackle the question of how to prevent similar tensions that happened in South Ossetia in 2008. However, the subject of discussion should not be how to keep the status quo, but how to end the conflict and bring about the long awaited justice.

The local people who suffered and lost their homes and property have to take initiative to end their destiny of being hostage of fruitless negotiations and political brinkmanship. The non-violent “march of return” of thousands of Azerbaijanis can bring long desired peace to the region. It is time to have their voices heard. They do exist and every single IDP has every right to claim his/her home back. I know many can find it dangerous and think that it may cost unaccountable loss of civilian lives. There is a lot of talk about land mines and the deep trenches built by occupying Armenian forces, but no force can stop thousands of protesters marching toward the areas that they once left behind. This kind of action may take several months of preparations and thorough organization, but once the will of thousands is combined with strong international media coverage a lot could be achieved to the mutual benefit of Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

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The world is changing and there is no place to unjust practices and denial of basic human rights. The arms, rockets launchers, artillery all sound upsetting and alarming, but lets not forget about the power of the “powerless” and “voiceless”. Azerbaijan’s frustration over peace process must be understood. During the Arab spring the world witnessed and continues to witness what crowds with rightful demands could achieve, no matter how chaotic their organization may be. In the early stages of the protests in Egypt, and Tunisia security forces, neither police nor military fired on the protesters. As the determination and fearlessness of the crowd grew there was nothing to stand in their way. In a similar way, the civilian march has a potential to achieve a break in the deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh. It will not be an easy task to forcefully stop it from advancing. It is not with the power of the four United Nation Security Council’s resolutions, nor the potential of OSCE negotiation talks that will return displaced people back to their homes. It is their own rightful action that can bring long-term solution to the conflict.

People want peace and their occupied homes back, and this can be reached by peaceful means. International experts, politicians, diplomats and others may try to propagate their own versions of “justice.” and try to be seem as if negotiating or mediating while keeping the status quo of no war no peace. This will produce little help to ordinary Azerbaijani IDPs who are yet to see their homes and true justice served. Their right of return is undeniable, unstoppable, and cannot be delayed whether they are from Nagorno- Karabakh or other occupied territories. Unfortunately, in the cloud of conflicting narratives and propaganda the bare consequence of the conflict is often forgotten.