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Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia: The Role of Religion, Religious Institutions, and Networks in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of religion, religious institutions, and networks on Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia during and after the 2020 Karabakh War. It analyses the opinions of members of both communities on the role of religion in the Karabakh conflict and how religious institutions used their resources during and after the 2020 war. It also examines how Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia have accommodated religious symbols and rhetoric in the context of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.¹

Introduction

This article focuses on Azerbaijani–Armenian relations in Georgia concerning the role of religion and religious networks during and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While the 2020 war impacted Armenian–Azerbaijani relations in Georgia, the Georgian state failed to develop a strategy for interethnic dialogue. As a result, both communities turned to their kinstates to support their ethnic groups. Religion and religious leaders were important during and after the 2020 conflict.

Based on an analysis of primordialism, Fox (2018, 34) indicates that religious issues are deeply embedded in the historical identities of the groups. Religion has been relevant in politics for so long that only historians can say when it became essential and why. Consequently, religious identity is valid today because it was significant in the past. Conflicts rooted in primordial grievances can continue for generations. Hatred between groups is based on imaginary injustice, and a spiral of violence and revenge can go back centuries. For example, long-term animosities such as Armenians' claims against Turks, conditioned by the policy of the Ottoman Empire towards certain religious/ethnic minorities, culminated in genocide and the expulsion of Armenians in 1915–23. It became a basis for the Karabakh War being presented as a conflict between Christianity and Islam in some Armenian circles (Yemelianova 2017, 130–36).

Comparing language and religion, Brubaker (2013:3) writes that both qualities are constitutive of most ethnic and national identifications. They often constitute the “key diacritical markers, emblems or symbols of such identifications.” However, he also indicates that neither religion nor language is fixed in its form. Religion and language are transformed by political, economic, and cultural processes in response to changing

circumstances. Therefore, religion is one of the markers distinguishing Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and their historically grounded grievances are partly rooted in religious differences. Nevertheless, as far as Karabakh is concerned, the conflict started because of a dispute over land based on territorial, economic, and historical claims, and religion *per se* was a minor factor. Religion came into play later, reinforcing social and emotional solidarities in the period of instability after the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the onset of a full-fledged war in Karabakh. At that time, religious leaders influenced politics and people's opinions on the conflict (Tonoyan, 2018).

Fox (2018, 67) further notes that religious language supports and legitimizes certain political activities, views, and persons in a political context. The new political elites of Armenia and Azerbaijan incorporated religion and ethnicity to obtain legitimization for the emerging nationalist discourse. They use religious motifs, metaphors, and symbols to present the Karabakh issue as a struggle “between Islam and Christianity.” Both sides adopted religious rhetoric in political discourses, even if the conflict is not religious, since Armenians and Azerbaijanis do not kill each other in the name of religion (Tonoyan 2018, 17).

As far as Georgia is concerned, until the 2020 war, the relationships between Armenians and Azerbaijanis were relatively good. Nevertheless, they were constantly exposed to the political propaganda of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Consequently, when the hostilities in 2020 began, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were caught up in the conflict happening in a place other than their homeland, Georgia. Informal and formal institutions and networks (including religious ones) played a significant role in the people's mobilization. In this con-

¹ In this article, I use the terms Nagorno-Karabakh war/Karabakh war/conflict interchangeably while being aware of the fact that the conflict occurs on the territory and surroundings of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Armenian: Artsakh, de jure within Azerbaijan, de facto semi-independent entity), not in the entire geographic region named Karabakh.

text, I apply a primary assumption of social network analysis: social ties function as channels for disseminating material and nonmaterial resources (Everton, 2015).

Paradoxically, the level of religiosity of individuals was not always at stake. Religious institutions were important for resources and the consolidation of people. Armenian priests gave psychological support to believers after losing the 2020 war. Muslim religious leaders prayed for the killed, termed “martyrs,” which gave their death a religious dimension. There were also some reconciliation initiatives, such as the interconfessional collective prayers for peace in Karabakh held on the premises of the Peace Cathedral, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia in Tbilisi. However, it was a niche initiative that was not supported by all Azerbaijani and Armenian religious leaders and masses. After the hostilities ended, the importance of religious symbolism and religious clusters has not lost its significance; it only changed dynamics and direction.

For local Armenians, some stressed that Georgia should support Armenia because it is also a Christian state in the Caucasus, bordering Muslim-majority territories. Some of them emphasized the struggle between civilizations and religions as one of the motives of the conflict, repeating the rhetoric promoted by Armenia. However, the situation in Georgia has one more aspect, as Turkey is her first trade partner, and Georgia has good relations with Azerbaijan. Consequently, some Armenians believed that Georgia’s neutrality meant indifference to the cause of Christian Armenia. In addition, Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan fuelled various conspiracy theories, such as rumours about mercenary terrorists helping in Karabakh. Still, Georgian Armenians were not the only ones who questioned Turkey’s role in the 2020 war. Shiite religious leaders in Georgia also criticized Turkey for supporting Azerbaijan during the conflict. They believed that in this way, Turkey interfered with the internal affairs of Azerbaijan.

Based on the analysis of my field data, in this article, I discuss the influence of religion, religious institutions, and networks on Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia during and after the 2020 Karabakh war. What is the people’s opinion regarding the role of religion in the Karabakh conflict? How did religious institutions use their resources during and after the 2020 war? How have religious symbols and rhetoric been accommodated by Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia considering the conflict in Karabakh?

According to the results of the 2014 census, Armenians comprise 4.5 percent of the Georgian population (168,000 people), and Azerbaijanis comprise 6.3 percent (233,000 people). Armenians constitute the main population of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (54.6%).

Some groups also live in the Kvemo Kartli region. Most Azerbaijanis live in Kvemo Kartli (42%), Kakheti (10%), Shida Kartli (2%), and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (2,5%). Some Armenians and Azerbaijanis settled in Tbilisi and other regions of Georgia. Although both groups have lived in Georgia for centuries, their level of integration into Georgian society varies.

Their area of residence, economic and social status, age, and knowledge of the Georgian language largely determine their level of integration, which is also subject to government policies concerning minorities. Most Armenians, 109,000 people (2.93% of Georgia), belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and some follow Catholicism (Geostat 2014). According to most estimates, Shiite Islam is followed by 60 to 70 percent of the Azerbaijani population in Georgia; others are adherents of Sunni Islam (Prasad 2012, 5). However, the cases of conversions from Shiism to Sunnism (the opposite is less frequent), especially in the 1990s and 2000s, and the emergence of nontraditional Muslim groups may have changed these proportions.

Methodology

This article is based on field research I conducted during the 2020 Karabakh war in Georgia (the first stage). The second research stage was completed between 03–09.2022 in Kvemo-Kartli, including the municipalities of Gardabani, Marneuli, Kvemo-Kartli, and the region of Samtskhe Javakheti. Some information was collected in Tbilisi. Altogether, I conducted approximately 50 interviews and conversations with village residents, people in the town of Marneuli (the centre of the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia) and the town of Akhalkalaki (a hub of Armenians in Georgia). I also spoke with Azerbaijanis and Armenians working at the Lilo Market in Tbilisi, social activists, journalists from both communities, and religious leaders. Most of my conversations and interviews were informal, some lasting half an hour, some a full day or more. Only some interviews were recorded. I kept notes of the rest of the conversations. I also participated in communal, religious, and political events. I obtained additional information on religion and the Nagorno-Karabakh war during four focus groups, two of which were organized in Marneuli and the village of Vakhtangisi with the participation of Azerbaijanis (Kvemo-Kartli region, Gardabani district). The two other groups took place in the Samtskhe Javakheti region, in the town of Akhalkalaki, and in the village of Sulda among Armenians.

Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti

There was a high political mobilization of Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti during the 2020 war. Shortly after hostilities began in September 2020, Armenians

from Javakheti organized rallies to support Karabakh (Ajvazjan 2020). As the 2020 war erupted, Armenian activists from Akhalkalaki established the Javakhk NGO (*Russian*: Fond Dzhavakhhk riadom s Armianami; *English*: Javakhk together with Armenians) to provide help to Armenians fighting on the frontline. Parishes played an essential role in coordinating humanitarian aid collected on the premises of churches and in the office of the Javakhk NGO. Then, transports were sent to Armenia; Armenians from across Georgia donated 500 tons of humanitarian aid and approximately 370 000 USD (Cieslewska, 2022).

According to a priest from the Surb Khach Church (Holy Cross Church) in Akhalkalaki, volunteers stayed on the church's premises during the war and collected what people brought. In his opinion, most of the local Armenians hoped for victory. However, the war ended with the defeat of Armenia, and priests had to work with people to restore their emotional balance². The church cultivates the memory of the war and fallen soldiers. A memorial service for those who were killed in the 44-Day War in 2020 is held annually on September 27 at the Surb Khach Church (Armenian church, 2021; research 2022). Armenian activists founded a khachkar³ commemorating the Second Karabakh War that is located at the front of the Surb Khach Church. Occasionally, the events in Karabakh are remembered at local shrines (*surb*, Armenian: sacred) during various ceremonies.

Nevertheless, opinions on the place of religion and religious institutions in the conflict varied. Some interlocutors believed that Karabakh is a war between Christianity and Islam. It has a historical background dating back to the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries when Armenians were persecuted in the Ottoman Empire. According to some interviewees, "all countries should help Armenian against Muslims, 'dushmans'⁴" In their view, Armenia is the bulwark of Christianity, as it is the oldest Christian country in the world, bordering three Muslim-majority countries. According to this logic, Georgia and other European countries should help Armenia defend against the invasion of Muslims. However, some of my Armenian interlocutors assessed Georgian's role ambiguously. One interviewee stated, "Georgia's neutrality comes at a price. Turkey may one day claim Adjara once it is established in the Caucasus. 'Sultan' Erdogan policy has a religious background. 'The Sultanate' cannot be multi-religious. Christians have no place there"⁵.

Moreover, information about the alleged jihadist mercenaries sent by Turkey to Karabakh during the 2020 war stirred emotions. Some interlocutors showed me videos disseminated on the internet about Azerbaijanis supposedly destroying Armenian religious sites in the territories gained by them in 2020. However, confirming the authenticity of these videos with reliable sources is difficult, as both sides widely spread fake news. Notwithstanding, some people said religion had no significance in the Karabakh war, which is a typical territorial conflict. They indicated that Iran, a Muslim country, supported Armenia in the Karabakh War, while Christian countries left Armenians to their fate in 2020.

Azerbaijanis from Kvemo-Karli

Azerbaijanis organized demonstrations in Marneuli and Tbilisi and one in Gardabani during the 2020 war. Religious leaders participated in rallies, and people prayed in mosques for victory, soldiers, and those who were killed. However, there was no organized humanitarian effort as in the churches of Samtskhe-Javakheti, although some mosques helped in the logistics of organizing various events related to the war.

At the demonstration in Marneuli set up on October 10, 2020, one of the banners read: "Martyrs never die. The country is not divided" (*Az: Şahidlər ölməz. Vətən bölünməz*). There were also photographs of two Azerbaijanis from Georgia who died in the war displayed on the main stage for speeches. Elevating those killed in Karabakh to the status of martyrs appeared in the discourse regarding Karabakh in Azerbaijan. As Karabakh is included in the national identity-building mechanisms, religious elements such as comparing Imam Husain and his people who died during the battle of Karbala in 680 and deceased soldiers fit into the general concept of a new national identity (Cieslewska and Kosicińska, no date). Despite being citizens of Georgia, most of my Azerbaijani interlocutors are influenced by the political propaganda of Azerbaijan. They accept discourses promoted by the government of Azerbaijan, including religious discourses.

For instance, during the celebration of Ashura in 2022 in the village of Jandara (the Gardabani Municipality), a local akhund (a Shia religious professional) referred to those who died in Karabakh in the context of Karbala. In the words of some interlocutors, "Husain's martyrdom is exemplary for people fighting for their land and freedom. The soldiers killed in Karabakh are martyrs because they fought and died

2 The author's interview with a priest, Akhalkalaki, 28.04.2022.

3 Khachkar (Armenian cross-stone). It is a carved memorial stele with a cross and often additional motifs.

4 In Persian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani the word dushman means "enemy"; some Armenians also used it in conversations in the context of "Turk, enemy, terrorist."

5 The author's interview with a journalist, Akhalkalaki, November 2020.

for their land; in this sense, Karabakh has a religious dimension”.

Nevertheless, as in the case of the Armenians, opinions on the role of religion in the Karabakh conflict were divided. Fewer people associated the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with religion. Most people supported the view that territorial disputes are a significant cause of the war. Those who argued in favour of the importance of faith in the Karabakh conflict referenced examples of religious spots allegedly desecrated and destroyed by the Armenian side. Horák and Hoch (2023) note that the cultural and religious symbols and places belonging to one party of the conflict are permanently neglected, desecrated, or transformed by another party currently controlling them. Armenia and Azerbaijan use religious symbols to promote their national ideologies. In this way, religion became a tool to evoke negative emotions that fuelled animosity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

With this in mind, the opinions of some Shiite leaders in Georgia seem particularly interesting. While assessing the role of Turkey and Iran in the Karabakh conflict, they indicated that Iran's aid to Armenia is overestimated. According to them, it is a manipulation by Sunni Turkey to discredit the Shiites and Iran. They blamed Turkey for spreading “false information” regarding the pro-Armenian stance of Iran. In their opinion, this is why Shiites are persecuted in Azerbaijan⁶. The last statement applied to Aliyev's religious policies and the detention of some Shiite religious leaders accused of collaboration with Iran.⁷ It is unlikely that they would be able to express such a view in Azerbaijan without fear of persecution.

About the Author

Dr. hab *Anna Cieślowska* is a social anthropologist. She is Associate Professor at the Collegium Civitas in Warsaw and cooperates with the Centre for International Studies and Development at Jagiellonian University. Her interests include Central Asian socioeconomic development, the geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Islam and local traditions in the postSoviet region. She spent the last seventeen years working on various research and development projects in the CIS region and the Middle East.

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⁶ The author's interview with a Shia professional, 09 August 2022, Tbilisi.

⁷ The author's interview with a Shia professional and social activist, 15 April 2022, Marneuli.

Conclusions

Although the context of Georgia gives new dimensions to the relationship between religion and the Karabakh war, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's propaganda strongly impacts the views of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia.

For Shia Azerbaijanis, the death of Imam Husayn and his people at Karbala is used to present the Karabakh issue as a national cause. At the same time, Georgian Shiites criticized Azerbaijan's religious policies towards Shiism and Iran and pointed to the alleged Sunni (Turkish) influences over Azerbaijan's internal affairs. Some Sunnis also perceived the religious perspective as relevant to the Karabakh cause. Some Armenians of Georgia presented the Karabakh conflict as a war between Islam and Christianity, calling on Georgians to support Armenia against the “common enemy.”

However, some people in both communities believe that the religious factor in the Karabakh conflict is insignificant. Moreover, a level of religiosity or even a place in religious structures does not always influence someone's opinion. Religion is seen by many as one of the symbols rooted in historical and social identification but not a direct cause of the conflict.

Religious institutions and infrastructure were essential in the 2020 war, especially in Samtskhe-Javakheti, where Armenians constitute a majority, as the local branches of the Armenian Apostolic Church coordinated the collection of humanitarian aid. While opinions among Armenians on the relationship between religion and the war in Karabakh varied, the cooperation of the community and the church strengthened the solidarity of Armenians from Georgia during the war.

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