Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh: A Delicate Balance

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With the break-up of the Soviet Union in late 1991, Azerbaijan and Armenia both became independent, and Moscow's responsibility to manage and contain the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh suddenly disappeared. Within a few months, the conflict flared up into a full-size war, even involving Armenian regular troops and whole detachments of the former Soviet military on the side of the Karabakh Armenians.1 Consequently Azerbaijan, within less than two years of fighting, lost the entire territory of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast but also many of its neighbouring and surrounding areas, which previously had been homogeneously Azeri-populated. Totally, over 20 per cent of the territory of the country remains under occupation. Over a million Azeris have been forced to leave their homes in Armenia, Karabakh or its surrounding areas since the beginning of the conflict in 1988.

During the whole conflict and up to today's date, Azerbaijan has been for a number of reasons internationally isolated. Both the United States and Russia have pursued policies in the conflict inclined towards Armenia; so has Iran, despite the fact that it is an Islamic state and of Shii denomination just like the Azeris are. The only country that constantly expressed its support for Azerbaijan is Turkey. In all international fora Turkey has tried to explain and promote the Azeri view of the conflict, and has certainly been instrumental in preventing a pro-Armenian approach from totally dominating these fora. Furthermore Turkey and Azerbaijan jointly placed an embargo on Armenia, and Turkey refuses to normalize its relations with Armenia as long as the latter occupies territories in Azerbaijan. However, despite its support for the Azeri cause, Turkey has largely stopped short of furnishing Azerbaijan with weapons or affluent financial aid which would enable it to buy any; nor has Turkey even threatened to intervene militarily on Azerbaijan's side. Here an attempt is made to evaluate Turkey's policies in the conflict and to analyse the factors that have constrained Turkey and prevented it from pursuing a truly independent policy in the dispute.

Before discussing Turkey's role in this issue, it is necessary to see a brief history of the conflict, particularly of the events following the First World War when Soviet Transcaucasia was established.
Tensions between Azeris and Armenians can be traced back to the first Russian revolution of 1905. Disturbances first broke out in Baku but soon spread to Shusha in Western Karabakh, where the first inter-ethnic riots erupted. It is still disputed how the clashes started. According to Erich Feigl, the Armenian Dashnaktsutiun (Dashnaks) terrorized the Azeri majority in Shusha, leading to the tensions erupting. Christopher Walker, on the other hand, argues that the Azeris (whom he calls Tatars) provoked the fighting, which led to a strong Armenian response. Whatever the case, there were clashes all over Azerbaijan, notably in Baku, Ganja and Nakhichevan as well as in Yerevan. According to Feigl, over 10,000 Azeris were killed during this period. Basically, it was a time of terror.

With the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, a short-lived Transcaucasian Federation was born. Transcaucasia became in most matters completely separated from Russia, and finally declared independence on 22 April 1918. However it soon proved to be impossible to reconcile the three Transcaucasian peoples, notably as the Armenians were interested in either a British or a Russian protectorate and the Georgians were favourably disposed towards German rule. In May of 1918 already, the Azerbaijani and Georgian Democratic Republics (AzDR and GDR) were declared, and soon enough an Armenian Democratic Republic (the ArDR) was proclaimed in Tbilisi, although at the time of its conception it had no territory. Azerbaijan proclaimed its independence under Ottoman protection, and was forced to locate the capital temporarily at Ganja as Baku was in the hands of the Bolsheviks (the Baku Commune). In the closing days of the First World War, Ottoman armies entered the Caucasus and there were severe clashes between the Ottomans, supported by local Azeris, and the Dashnaks. After the Baku Commune fell at the end of July 1918, the Ottoman forces conquered the city in September, after having briefly fought the British who had come there by sea. Nevertheless, the Ottoman empire at this late stage was hardly fit for any adventures and conquests, and soon had to watch its own back as the military situation in the Balkans and in Syria was becoming disastrous. When the Ottomans signed an armistice with the entente at Mudros, they were forced to evacuate Transcaucasia and on 17 November, the British landed in Baku. The British nevertheless only reaffirmed Karabakh’s belonging to Azerbaijan, by appointing a Muslim governor in Shusha. This led to protests among the local Armenians, who only later and reluctantly accepted Azerbaijani jurisdiction.

In the following years, three separate republics existed with uneasy relations with each other, mainly spurred by the Dashnaks’ territorial claims on both Azerbaijan and Georgia.

In April 1920, the Red Army rolled into Baku as the Azerbaijani army was busy putting down an Armenian uprising in Karabakh. Following this,
the Bolsheviks secured control over Transcaucasia within a year, with Yerevan subdued in November and Tbilisi in April 1921.7

With Soviet power established, the political struggle for Karabakh began, and would last long, as it took the Soviet leadership three years to settle the issue. Initially the pendulum seemed to swing in favour of Armenia, as the revolutionary committee of Soviet Azerbaijan in December 1920 (under Soviet pressure) issued a statement that Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan were all transferred to Armenian control. Four months later, the pendulum swung back. The ‘Treaty of Brotherhood and Friendship’ between the Soviet Union and republican Turkey included a provision that both Nakhichevan and Karabakh were to be placed under the control of the Azerbaijani SSR. It seems as if this was a concession on the part of Stalin to the newly founded Turkish republic; Lenin was initially positively inclined to Kemal Atatürk, whom he saw as an ally at the time, and Atatürk was hostile to any territorial arrangements favouring Soviet Armenia, since a strong Armenia could have potential territorial claims on Turkey. Even given Stalin’s (at the time Commissar for Nationalities) tendency to divide the Caucasian peoples to prevent unified resistance,8 the idea of separating the Armenians into two entities — the Armenian republic and Nagorno Karabakh — must have been welcome. Furthermore, Stalin managed not only to divide the Armenians but also the Azeris, into the Azerbaijani Republic and Nakhichevan.

Thus we see that Turkey had more than one finger in the game in the Caucasus in general and in Karabakh in particular in the 1920s. According to the 1921 treaty, which has not been made public yet, Turkey certainly maintains a guarantor position over Nakhichevan, and probably over Nagorno Karabakh as well. Consequently Turkey cannot be defined as an outsider in the conflict, as any change in the status of Nagorno Karabakh or Nakhichevan would necessitate Turkish approval.

When Nagorno Karabakh on 7 July 1923 became an Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within the Azerbaijani SSR, the Armenians were naturally disappointed with this situation, especially given the fact that they had been promised Karabakh by the Soviets at an earlier stage, and that Nakhichevan was given the status of an Autonomous Republic (ASSR) of the Azerbaijani republic in 1924.9 Thus it became their persistent aim to reverse this situation and persuade Moscow to turn Karabakh over to the Armenian SSR.

Although sporadic Armenian attempts to bring Moscow’s attention to the issue had been occurring even in Stalin’s years, it was only with the advent of Gorbachev and Glasnost9 that they really gained momentum, as it was possible to express political views without having to fear repression. Hence petitions and letters asking for the return of the area to Armenia
started flowing into Moscow, and turmoil resulted when Armenians in the village of Chardakli refused to accept the appointment of an Azeri kolkhoz director in October 1987. As incidental small-scale clashes took place, news of these reached Yerevan, where ecological demonstrations were going on, asking for the closure of polluting industries. In a way typical to the Glasnost' era, the ecological demonstration quickly turned to irredentism, asking for the transfer of both Nagorno Karabakh and Nakhichevan (where the 1979 census recorded over 97 per cent Azeri population) to Armenian sovereignty.

As Moscow kept its silence, the antagonism between Azeris and Armenians increased in both republics, and culminated in the events of February 1988. In January, large numbers of Azeris had fled their homes in Armenia due to harassment; and on 20 February the Soviet of Nagorno Karabakh passed a resolution (with 110 votes for and 17 against) appealing to the Supreme Soviets of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the USSR to be transferred to the Armenian SSR’s jurisdiction. Again, large-scale demonstrations were held in Yerevan, supporting this appeal. A ‘Karabakh Committee’ was formed under the leadership of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, and the Catholicos of the Armenian Church joined the demands. In Azerbaijan, Baku radio reported that two Azeris had been killed in Karabakh, and as a result counter-violence erupted and the ethnic conflict, as Yerasimos puts it, followed its own logic. This led to the pogrom of Sumgait, where Azeri thugs, with the help of frustrated refugees from Armenia, attacked Armenians in the dark industrial town of Sumgait, 35 km from Baku. The Soviet army, as it usually did in inter-ethnic conflicts, stood by and watched.

On 23 March, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union – that is the highest instance in the Union – rejected the demands of the Karabakh Soviet to be joined to Armenia. On 15 June, the Armenian Supreme Soviet voted unanimously for unification with Karabakh; two days later the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet, equally unanimously, rejected the decision, and accused it of being a violation of the Soviet constitution and of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity.

The conflict was to take a temporary pause, due to the Spitak earthquake in Armenia on 7 December. Whereas this natural catastrophe and its immense human and material losses led to the momentary calming of the fervours, it posed a perfect opportunity for the Soviet government to take control of the events as the attention of the public was moved away from the conflict. Thus all eleven members of the Armenian ‘Karabakh Committee’ were arrested, formally on charges that they were obstructing the earthquake relief (which only led to the movement’s increased popularity in Armenia, and to widespread disillusionment with Gorbachev,
Perestroika, and the Soviet system as a whole)\textsuperscript{16} and troops were sent in to Azerbaijan. Martial law was declared in Baku. Subsequently the Soviet leadership decided to impose a ‘special government administration’ in Karabakh, putting the region under Moscow’s direct control. In this way the conflict was calmed during the first six months of 1989, but meanwhile the Armenian National Movement (Hayots Hamazgayin Sharjum) and the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) (Azerbaycan Khalq Cephesi) were formed, which were to have a particular importance in the further development of the conflict, as they would shortly form the governments of the two republics, in the case of Armenia lasting until today.

Whereas Moscow by this arrangement managed to stop the escalation of the conflict, there were no attempts to find a lasting solution to the Karabakh question either. Thus Moscow simply put a lid on the conflict without making a serious effort to deal with the long-run questions regarding the status of the region. Consequently, it was inevitable that the conflict would flare up again. In the precarious conditions that are usual in ethnic conflicts, six months was actually a valuable period to initiate some conflict resolution mechanisms, such as organizing talks between the communities, providing a ground for confidence-building measures, or even dispatching peacekeepers (not just regular army units without a clear mandate, as was the case). This opportunity was lost because of the incompetence of the men in Moscow – including the head of the Karabakh special government, Arkadiy Volsky – and in a way this failure to act was also a result of the general decadence and lack of initiative that plagued the Soviet system.

From the second half of 1989 onwards, skirmishes and shoot-outs between armed bands in Karabakh became the rule rather than the exception, and the Soviet army’s attempts to calm the situation by setting up checkpoints and searching cars and villages for arms were largely futile. When in November the special rule over Karabakh was lifted, the Soviet leadership seemed to recognize its failure and leave Nagorno Karabakh to its destiny. As this meant that the NKAO was returned to direct Azerbaijani rule, the Armenian Supreme Soviet took its historic (and legally binding)\textsuperscript{17} decision of 1 December 1989 to promulgate the incorporation of Nagorno Karabakh into the Armenian republic.

Simultaneously paramilitary formations grew in number and strength on both sides, as the parties seemed to build up for a military solution of the conflict. Again the Armenians were more active than the Azeris (who seemed rather to rely upon the Soviet central government for a solution) and a considerable flow of arms from Armenia proper to Karabakh was reported. Observers noted how planes loaded with military equipment, coming from Beirut, landed in Yerevan and how the matériel was
subsequently transported to Karabakh. In this environment of heavily armed paramilitary forces, the escalation of the conflict was irreversible. Sporadic clashes became frequent, and by June 1991 the casualties of the conflict were estimated at 816.

From this point onwards, Armenian militants started taking control of Nagorno Karabakh. As their uprising grew, the militants were supported by regular armed forces of the Republic of Armenia — a fact which Armenia still denies in spite of evidence of the contrary — and, what is more, by Russian ‘volunteers’, in some cases complete armed units with full equipment. (The fact that most ‘volunteers’ were regular soldiers of the Soviet armed forces indicates to what extent they were actually volunteers.)

On 2 September, the resuscitated Karabakh Soviet, renamed the ‘Karabakh National Council’, proclaimed the independent republic of Nagorno Karabakh over the territory of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and the Shaumianiovsk district of the Azerbaijani republic. During autumn, Azerbaijani forces moved to counter Nagorno Karabakh’s declaration of independence, and the Armenians responded by conquering or retaking villages.

As the Azerbaijani government realized the military force behind the Karabakh Armenians, it proceeded to nationalize all military hardware in the republic and to recall all Azeri conscripts from the Soviet army. Furthermore, as a direct answer to the declaration of independence, the Azeri parliament on 26 November abolished the autonomous status of Nagorno Karabakh and reduced it to a ‘region’, with the same status as any other district. Naturally, this move had more of a theoretical political importance than a real value, since the military control of the enclave was rapidly slipping out of Baku’s hands.

Faced with a powerful aggression, the ill-organized forces of the Azerbaijani republic were unable to protect their lands, and by 1994 the military situation for Azerbaijan was disastrous. Not only the territory of the NKAO was under the control of Armenian forces, but also neighbouring and surrounding regions, which were homogeneously Azeri-populated. Totally, over 20 per cent of the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan remains under occupation.

This led to a severe refugee crisis in Azerbaijan. In addition to the near 300,000 refugees that had arrived from Armenia from 1988 onwards, the internally displaced persons leaving their homes in Nagorno Karabakh and its surrounding areas amount to between 600,000 and 800,000 people, depending on the sources. Thus Azerbaijan had to provide shelter for between 1,000,000 and 1,200,000 people. In view of this massive refugee flow, the help efforts of the international community indeed seem passive and wobbling. The total population of Azerbaijan being less than seven and
a half million, the impact on the country of such a refugee flow is easy to imagine. Ten to 15 per cent of the population of the country consists of displaced persons, many of whom are still living without permanent housing or assistance.

Despite the fact that it has been subjected to aggression, Azerbaijan received little support, either real or verbal, from the world community. The United Nations has been involved in the matter only superficially, delegating its authority in conflict resolution to the CSCE (since 1994 OSCE, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). Although this organization (just like the United Nations for that matter) has reaffirmed the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, most recently in its Lisbon Summit of December 1996, it has done little to uphold or protect it, refraining from threatening Armenia with international sanctions or even from accusing it of involvement in the conflict.

From the individual Great Powers as well, Azerbaijan has met little support. The United States, for its part, has been heavily influenced by the powerful Armenian lobby in Congress in the formulation of its policy towards Azerbaijan and Armenia. In October 1992, the Freedom Supports Act section 907a was passed by the United States Congress, according to which Azerbaijan was denied all forms of governmental US aid unless it 'respects international human rights standards, abandons its blockade of Armenia, ceases its use of force against Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, and searches a peaceful solution to the conflict.' Whereas Azerbaijan remains the only former Soviet republic to be deprived of US aid, Armenia has constantly been the highest per capita recipient.

Interestingly enough, there seems to be two US policies towards Nagorno Karabakh. The first one, as exemplified above, emanating from the Congress, and another one from the White House. Indeed, the State Department has tried to pursue a more balanced, less biased policy, and the Clinton administration has repeatedly tried to lift the Freedom Supports Act's restrictions on Azerbaijan, without success.

As for Russia, the last few years have shown with all necessary clarity that Moscow is pursuing its own interests in the Caucasus – that is, to bring the three Transcaucasian states back under Russian control. This policy has been realized with quite some success by supporting the Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists to bring Georgia to the verge of dissolution, and by supporting the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh, and by extension Armenia, in their war with Azerbaijan. In the case of Nagorno Karabakh, initially Moscow (roughly until the disintegration of the Soviet Union) actually had sided with the Azeris in the conflict, whom they perceived as
aiming at preserving the status quo, something which coincided with the interests of the Soviet leadership. After Armenia and Azerbaijan became independent, however, it soon became clear that Armenia was Russia’s only reliable ally in the region, in spite of the deep resentment towards Moscow that had been existing in the late Gorbachev years. In fact, both Georgia and Azerbaijan were both at times headed by vehemently anti-Russian nationalists (Gamsakhurdia and Elçibey) and initially refused to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Consequently Moscow used Armenia and the Karabakh Armenians as levers to bring back Georgia and Azerbaijan to its fold.23 Russia’s direct interests in Azerbaijan are mainly the following:

- to prevent Turkey or Iran from getting a foothold in the Caucasus through Azerbaijan;
- to have Russian troops stationed in the republic, guarding the ‘common CIS border’ with Iran and Turkey just like it does in Armenia and Georgia (Azerbaijan is the only Transcaucasian state not to have any Russian troops on its soil); and
- to gain influence over Azerbaijan’s exploitation of its Caspian oil, and to ensure that the oil is exported via Russia.24

Russia’s handling of the international efforts to resolve the conflict has only served to clarify this attitude. In fact Russia makes no secret of its feeling that it considers the OSCE an intruder in its own sphere of influence and that it prefers a Russian-only mediation with Russian peacekeepers in the enclave. Thus from the two perhaps most powerful (permanent) members of the United Nations Security Council, Azerbaijan received nothing but a hostile attitude. Among Western powers, France, which has a strong and active Armenian lobby, has tended to pursue a policy similar to that of the United States, although on balance more neutral. Great Britain, in the extent to which it has had a policy in the issue, advocated giving Moscow free hands in bringing an end to the conflict.25 The one major European power which has shown sympathy for Azerbaijan in the conflict has been Germany, which has continuously attempted to broaden relations with the country on all fronts, without however taking Azerbaijan’s side officially.

Iran, on Azerbaijan’s southern border, could a priori have been seen as Azerbaijan’s prime ally in the war. Indeed, Iran is an Islamic fundamentalist state, of Shi‘i denomination like a majority of the Azeris, and furthermore has a numerous Azeri population, estimated at 15–20 million – several times larger than the Azerbaijani Republic’s population. Thus it would have seemed logical for Iran to take Azerbaijan’s side in its war with Christian
Armenia, in order to gain influence over the Azeri Muslims. Unfortunately for the Azeris, this was not the case. Iran on the contrary gave its tacit support to Armenia in the conflict, for a number of reasons. First, the prospect of an affluent, oil-rich Azerbaijani state on its northern border seemed dangerous to Tehran, which was afraid that this could incite irredentist feelings among its Azeri minority, especially if Iran's economy continued on its present declining road. As Dilip Hiro states,

[Iran's president] Rafsanjani realized that in the long run, Azeri nationalism would prove as problematic for the Islamic regime in Tehran as it was proving then for the Communist administration in Moscow ... The emergence of a strong, independent Azerbaijani republic – whether Islamic or not – would fan the flames of Azeri Nationalism within Iran.26

The Iranian attitude was doubtlessly worsened by the very tactless announcements of the short-lived, very secular and very anti-Iranian APF government in Baku in 1992–93. President Abulfez Elchibey on certain occasions even stated that the Iranian state was doomed and that within a five-year period Azerbaijan would be united.27

Even from other Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, Azerbaijan found no support. In fact, the leaders of the Central Asian republics were all too cautious about preserving their relations with Moscow to risk anything on helping Azerbaijan. Thus the most that Azerbaijan received from that front was the participation of Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev in a mediation attempt orchestrated by Boris Yeltsin only months before the break-up of the Soviet Union. At 'Turkic Summits' in Istanbul or elsewhere, the Central Asian leaders have maintained their unwillingness to extend any solidarity to Azerbaijan.28 Thus it becomes clear that the only direction Azerbaijan had left to look at was Turkey.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Turkey from the beginning gave priority to Azerbaijan in its relations with the republics of the former Soviet Union. Thus Ankara recognized Baku on 9 November 1991, almost a month before it granted recognition to the other former republics.29 In the first half of 1992, however, the internal turmoil in Azerbaijan and the ministerial instability of the country led to a difficulty in improving and developing relations.30 Nevertheless Turkey did not commit the mistake of tying its relations to one person, which otherwise could have been the case during Abulfez Elchibey's term as President. In fact, Elchibey's fancy for the 'Turkish Model' for Azerbaijan, his secularism and very anti-Iranian views might even have been a bit too pro-Turkish for Ankara's taste, arousing
fears that too close ties with Elçibey’s Azerbaijan – Elçibey reportedly was even ready to accept a federation with Turkey – could have lead to frictions with Iran and Russia.

In examining Azerbaijan’s relations with Turkey, it should first be mentioned that Azerbaijan never officially asked for a Turkish intervention in the conflict. According to Azerbaijan’s ambassador in Ankara, Mehmet Novruzoglu Aliyev, the main support Azerbaijan wanted from Turkey was to try to use its Western alliance contacts to show Azerbaijan’s side of the story to the world.31

In the framework of bilateral relations, Turkey concluded a number of economic and commercial agreements with Azerbaijan, and started to beam Turkish state television channels into Azerbaijan, followed by private channels and Turkish newspapers.32 Further Turkey has offered assistance in Azerbaijan’s transition to the Latin alphabet by sending books and typewriters to Azerbaijan. However, in the end, Turkey’s image in Azerbaijan largely depended upon its behaviour with respect to Karabakh.

Initially, Turkey embarked on a policy of neutrality, which simultaneously enabled it to present itself as an impartial mediator between the parties. Although Armenia was wary of Turkish involvement from the beginning, it did not immediately denounce Ankara’s efforts. Hence Turkish diplomats, especially Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin, embarked on several rounds of shuttle diplomacy to the region and European capitals,33 and were instrumental in bringing the issue to the agenda of the OSCE.34 Furthermore, Çetin upon Azerbaijani request used his connections in the West to try to bring the conflict to the attention of Western governments, notably by personally telephoning US Secretary of State James Baker on the issue.35 Prime Minister Demirel defended his cautious policy by arguing that there was no legal basis for a Turkish intervention, and that in any case the Azeris had not asked for it.36

However, the Turkish attempt at neutral mediation was not destined to last long, as statements by President Turgut Özal in particular would compromise Turkey in Armenia’s eyes. After the massacre of Azeri civilians in the Karabakh town of Khojaly in late February 1992, huge anti-Armenian demonstrations were held in Turkey, with hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating in favour of an intervention on Azerbaijan’s behalf. The government naturally could not disregard these demands from the public. In particular, Özal on several occasions stated that the Armenians should be ‘frightened a little’,37 statements which sent shock waves through Armenians in Armenia and in the Diaspora, and enabled them to discredit Turkey as planning a ‘new’ genocide on Armenians. In any case, Turkey soon adopted a more pro-Azerbaijani stance, as Armenian military advances on Azerbaijani territory intensified.
To a certain degree, domestic pressures made it impossible for Turkey to keep a neutral stance in the conflict. Public opinion, first of all, was strongly pro-Azeri, outraged over the Armenian military advances in Karabakh and Azerbaijan proper, and especially infuriated by pictures of the fleeing Azeri refugees. The Turkish press was filled with criticism of the government’s mild stance on the Armenian advances, and generally of the feeble performance of Turkey in the Caucasus and Central Asia compared to its aims of becoming a regional leader.  

The opposition did not miss this opportunity to criticize the government, either. Criticism for standing idle while the Azeri brethren were being massacred came from virtually all political directions. The most natural critic was the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Alparslan Türkeş, who at a very early date, in late February, argued for a Turkish military intervention in the war, arguing that ‘Turkey can not stand idly by while Azerbaijan’s territory is being occupied’. Former Prime Minister and leader of the Democratic Left Party, Bülent Ecevit, argued that Turkey’s failure to demonstrate unambiguous support for Azerbaijan might undermine Turkey’s prestige in Azerbaijan and Central Asia. However, perhaps the mightiest challenge to the government came from main opposition leader and head of the Motherland Party, Mesut Yılmaz. On 4 March already, he argued for troops to be deployed along the Armenian border and reminded the public that Turkey retains a guarantor status over Nagorno Karabakh. On several later occasions, he reiterated his belief that Turkey should deploy troops near the Armenian border and Nakhichevan to show the seriousness of its opposition to Armenia’s behaviour. The government naturally could not avoid being influenced by this increased pressure.  

Indeed, already at the beginning of March 1992, Turkey announced that it would inspect airplanes headed for Armenia passing over Turkish airspace, in its effort to implement an arms embargo on the warring parties. Furthermore Turkey helped enforcing Azerbaijan’s economic blockade on Armenia, refusing to allow aid for that country to pass through Turkey.  

By the middle of March, Demirel started altering his stance. In an interview with the Washington Post, Demirel stated that he was under severe pressure to take more decisive action, and did not rule out a Turkish military intervention.  

Nevertheless, in this context it should be noted that Ankara always made sure it left doors open for a rapprochement with Armenia. Ankara refused to establish full diplomatic relations partly because of Armenia’s war with Azerbaijan, but also because the Armenian government did not recognize its borders with Turkey, thus keeping potential territorial claims on Kars and other regions of Northeastern Turkey. Nevertheless both Ankara and
Ter-Petrosyan’s moderate government have attempted to ‘rescue’ the bilateral relations. Hence on certain occasions Turkey did open its border with Armenia, thus allowing humanitarian aid to pass through. In November 1992, Turkey even signed a deal by which it would have supplied 300 million kilowatt hours of electricity to Armenia, which at the time was suffering from a severe energy shortage which threatened to leave thousands of people without heating in the winter. This deal received vehement criticism from the opposition and was seen as a stab in the back in Baku. Thus, in January 1993, Turkey had to cancel the deal before it had even begun to be implemented.

When the Elçibey government was ousted in June 1993 by a coup which, although orchestrated by Colonel Surat Husseinov, brought Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan’s leader in the Brezhnev era, to power, this development was seen as a loss for Turkey and a gain for Russia, as it was in a way a repetition of a phenomenon which had occurred in other former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Lithuania, that is a former Soviet leader returning to power. Indeed, voices both in Turkey and in the west saw in the power shift Turkey’s inability to keep a friendly regime in power and to keep its position in Azerbaijan. In Turkey itself, voices were heard that Elçibey’s fall would mean an end to the Turkish model. In any case, Russia’s ability to interfere in the internal affairs of the Caucasian states was reaffirmed, as evidence of Moscow’s backing Husseinov are blatant.

If Aliyev’s replacing Elçibey was initially seen as a victory for Moscow, this can actually only be characterized as a Pyrrhic victory. For although Aliyev made some accommodating moves towards Moscow, by joining the CIS for example, he staunchly refused to accept the stationing of Russian troops in Azerbaijan. The fact that Aliyev did not turn out to be the Moscow-friendly leader the Russians had hoped for is best illustrated by the fact that the Russians actively tried to remove him after little more than a year; lingering allegations of Russian involvement in coup attempts against Aliyev in October 1994, among others, have been put forward by Baku. With respect to Turkey, it is clear that unlike Elçibey, who gave priority to Turkey, Aliyev plays the Turkish card whenever it suits his purposes, but can turn his back to Ankara as well if necessary. In September 1993, he annulled many agreements signed between the Elçibey administration and Turkey, ordered Turkish nationals to seek visas before entering Azerbaijan, and dismissed 1,600 Turkish military experts serving in the country. Only a year later, Aliyev courted Ankara and expressed his confidence in the brotherhood existing between the two countries. Furthermore Aliyev attempted to broaden Azerbaijan’s links with the Muslim world and courted Iran and Saudi Arabia, selectively, even attempting to ameliorate his Islamic credentials. Thus, clearly, for Turkey the replacement of Elçibey with
Aliyev meant a less reliable and more unpredictable regime in Baku. Now while analysing the environment in which Ankara’s Karabakh policy was shaped in 1992 and 1993, it becomes clear that there were heavy constraining factors upon Turkey.

In fact, it is possible to discern at least five factors that constrained Ankara in the formulation and implementation of its policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A first factor, in the domain of the principles of Turkish foreign policy, is the doctrine of Kemalism, which prohibits any kind of adventurism abroad. In the original interpretation of this maxim, Turkish policy-makers shall refrain from involving the country in any conflicts abroad except for two cases: the Turks on Cyprus, and perhaps the Mosul area of Northern Iraq, areas which are both considered to be morally if not actually belonging to Turkey. In the case of Azerbaijan, this being an independent and sovereign country, Turkey should not involve itself in the conflict this country faces with another independent state.

As a response to this statement, opposition politicians, in particular the nationalists under Türkeş, have argued that Azerbaijan represents as an important region for Turkey as Cyprus does. Nevertheless the regime seems to have stuck to the original interpretation of the doctrine. Furthermore it can be argued that Turkey’s (by now regular) incursions in to Northern Iraq cannot be compatible with the doctrine, and that consequently Turkey could at least make some military moves such as troop deployments in Armenia’s vicinity. As Mesut Yılmaz correctly commented, Turkey can move its troops freely on its own territory and is responsible to no one in doing so. In any case, Turkey’s behaviour cannot be solely explained by this principle.

Secondly, and perhaps the most important constraint upon Turkey, was its Western alliance. As the Western countries wanted to stay out of the conflict, while in some cases tacitly or openly supporting Armenia, they exerted pressure on Turkey not to involve itself on Azerbaijan’s side. Furthermore it was generally believed that Turkish involvement would increase the risks of an escalation of the conflict, in the worst case leading to a confrontation between Turkey and Russia, possibly involving Iran as well.

NATO was one of the organizations where Turkey was subjected to Western pressure, with the argument that Turkey’s NATO membership does not permit it to pursue an ‘adventurist’ policy in its ‘near abroad’ (to generalize a Russian term). In a wider context, Turkey’s relations with and will to integrate into Western Europe gives Western powers a certain
amount of influence over Turkey. By using a mixture of carrots and sticks, the Western leaders ensured that Turkey did not diverge markedly from the official Western policy towards the conflict. Two factors in particular ensured Turkey's compliance with the West.

The first factor is Turkey's reliance upon US military aid for its war against the Kurdish separatist organization PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) in South-East Anatolia. In fact, given America's partiality for Armenia in the conflict, Turkey feared that in case it supported Azerbaijan to a greater extent the United States would retaliate by cutting US military aid to Turkey. The fact that the US has used this weapon to make Turkey comply with international human rights standards ensure that such a threat would be seen as real in Ankara. In the extreme case of a direct Turkish military involvement, Turkey would have to take into account the possibility of an arms embargo against itself.

The second factor is Turkey's quest for full membership in the European Union (EU). Indeed, the relations between Turkey and the EU have been strained in the 1990s by Turkey's failure, in the eyes of the Europeans, to speed up its democratization process and to improve its human rights record. In this context, keeping in mind that Turkey has been negotiating for a Customs Union with the EU, it is clear that any Turkish adventurism in the Caucasus would not serve its interests on the 'Western Front'. On the other hand, a balanced Turkish policy in the whole region, involving a normalization of relations with Armenia, could serve Turkey's purposes by highlighting Turkey's importance as a stabilizing factor in the region and a bridge between the Caucasus and Europe. Moreover, in the event that Azeri oil would flow to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, as proposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, this would increase Turkey's economic importance for Western Europe and be instrumental in easing tensions. Perhaps the Europeans would be encouraged to put economic benefit before moral concerns for Turkey's democratization and human rights record, hence easing their pressure on Turkey. Thus there would be an opportunity for Ankara to try to restructure its relations with the West to a mutual benefit relationship where both sides are dependent on each other, rather than one where there is a one-sided relationship, like the present one where Turkey is dependent upon Europe.

The third factor concerns Turkey's relations with the Russian Federation, and can be seen either as respect or fear for Russia's might, or as a policy which gives priority to keeping good relations with Moscow for political but also economic reasons, given Turkey's huge private business relations with Russia.

Indeed, the huge emerging Russian market has been penetrated by Turkish firms, especially in the construction field. The total volume of trade
between the two countries ranges between US$ three and four billion; in 1992 Turkey’s trade with Russia was five times larger than its trade with Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states combined. Hence Turkey needs to keep its relations with Russia at a somewhat decent level for its own interests, given the fact that the hard currency earned by Turkish companies in Russia is increasingly important for the Turkish economy. Also, Turkey seems interested in purchasing arms from Russia for its war in its southeast, at least to broaden its sources of weaponry at a time when Germany in particular, but other Western powers as well, are increasingly reluctant to contribute to Turkey’s crushing of its Kurdish rebellion. The decision of the US Congress to suspend 10 per cent of US military aid to Turkey in July 1994 should be seen in this context as well.

Furthermore, at every occasion that Turkey has signalled its intention to involve itself in Karabakh, Moscow has responded promptly and without trying to conceal its discontent with Ankara’s policies. An illustrating example occurred in April 1993, immediately after Armenian forces had seized the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan and established a second land corridor between Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia. As President Özal accused Russia of supporting the Karabakh Armenians, he announced that Turkey would intensify its military relations with Azerbaijan and send arms to that country. As a response, Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, during a visit to Ankara, reportedly warned Ankara in quite undiplomatic ways to stay out of Azerbaijan. Clearly, Turkey retains a certain degree of respect for Russia; in fact the Turkish Chief of Staff, General Doğan Güreş, in June 1994 expressed his belief that ‘Russia is now posing a greater threat to Turkey than it used to during the Cold War.’

In this context, Turkey has been unwilling to risk its relations with Moscow for the sake of active unilateral support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh war. This fact also illustrates the complex web of relations, much the result of Turkey’s geopolitical location, that Turkey has to take into consideration while formulating its foreign policy.

A fourth factor which both directly and indirectly has constrained Ankara, particularly in its relations with Armenia, is the legacy of the 1915 alleged genocide of Eastern Anatolia’s Armenian population by the Ottoman army. Without going into the details of the events during the First World War, which have been studied at length by other scholars, suffice it here to state that since the 1970s, Armenians, particularly in the United States, have been actively lobbying for an official recognition of the Ottoman persecutions on Armenians. Ankara, on the other hand, refuses to accept the historiography of the Armenians, instead claiming that it was a general time of chaos and war, which led to high numbers of lost lives both among Armenians and Turks. In January 1991, Soviet Armenia declared
that it did not recognize the existing borders between Turkey and Armenia, laid down in the Russo-Turkish treaty of 1921, thus blocking the establishment of future diplomatic relations.  

Ankara feared that any Turkish move to support Azerbaijan actively would be inflated by the powerful Armenian Diaspora in the West so that Turkey would be pictured as planning new atrocities against Armenians. This fear was only proved correct with the reaction to the above-mentioned statement by President Özal that the Armenians should be ‘frightened a little’. In general, Turkey has been carrying the burden of the massacres of Armenians for decades, including having dozens of its diplomats killed by Armenian terrorists, whose actions were met by a rather understanding attitude in the West, in many cases escaping the hard condemnations that other terrorist organizations have faced.

Thus since Armenia’s independence Turkey has made a distinct effort not to let it appear that it had a hostile attitude to independent Armenia from the beginning. These circumstances in turn made it difficult for Turkey to be as anti-Armenian as it might have liked to be. In fact, statements by the opposition and public demonstrations tend to show that the government’s policy towards Armenia is distinctively more lenient than what the general atmosphere in Turkey otherwise would allow. In particular, the right-wing media have been successful in creating public anger against the atrocities committed by the Karabakh Armenians on the civilian Azeri population of Karabakh. In trying to calm the public, Prime Minister Demirel stated that a Turkish intervention on Azerbaijan’s side would only result in putting the whole world behind Armenia.

A last point which might have influenced Turkish behaviour, as a precedent, is the international reaction which Turkey faced after its invasion of Northern Cyprus in 1974. In fact, certain parallels can be drawn between Cyprus and Karabakh. Both cases involve Turkish/Turkic kin who have been subjected to aggression and whose position and civil rights are in danger. Furthermore Turkey according to international treaties reserves a guarantor right in both cases. Naturally, there are huge differences between the two, especially to the extent of Turkey’s guarantorship and the general constellation of power in the respective regions. However the memory of the reaction it faced in Cyprus might have helped to calm any fervour among the Turkish leadership to rush to the support of the Azeri kin.

It is obvious that heavy pressure has been exerted on Turkey not to involve itself too deeply in Karabakh. Furthermore many Turkish interests, particularly its quest for integration into western Europe and its commercial relations with Russia, have discouraged Ankara from being more active in the issue.
While observing the restraint in Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan, particularly given the euphoric statements on ‘brotherhood’ and Turkish leadership in the region that were common in Ankara during 1991–92, it is interesting to see what kind of a reaction Azerbaijan had to these developments.

Basically, the Azeri reaction was twofold: first of all, a popular feeling of deceit and Turkish betrayal; and second an understanding among the leadership of the constraints upon Turkey.

The prime factor that angered the Azeris was the Turkish abortive energy deal with Armenia in November 1992. Had this deal become reality, it would have destroyed Azerbaijan’s main bargaining chip at the time – its energy blockade of Armenia. Although it was soon abandoned, the deal left a permanent seal on the perception the Azeris have of Turkey. The Azeri view was expressed as ‘They claim to be our brothers, but give bread to our enemies’.64 Whereas it might have been possible to explain to the Azeris why Turkey does not give direct support to Azerbaijan, it certainly was difficult to justify the need of collaborating with their enemy. Hence, in many ways, the Azeri population is disillusioned with Turkey. If they had hoped that Turkey would present itself as Azerbaijan’s main protector, it soon became clear that Turkey lacked either the capacity or the will to assume such a role.

Among the Azeri leadership, however, there is more of an understanding of Turkey’s difficulties. Turkey’s position as a member of NATO, in particular, as well as its own turmoil in the South-East, form legitimate reasons as to why Turkey had no possibility to support Azerbaijan more than it did.65 This is not to say, however, that the Azeri leadership is satisfied with Turkey’s attitude. Clearly, Turkey has lost a lot of its prestige in Azeri eyes and perhaps its privileged position in that country. However, the Azeris are faced with the cold fact that Turkey, despite its shortcomings, is the only country it can count on as an ally against the Armenians, which should ensure the continuation of cordial relations between the two countries.

In a way Nagorno Karabakh can be taken as a test case for Turkey’s ability to act as a regional power in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It seems likely, moreover, that analysts in Tashkent or Alma-Ata have taken an interest in Turkey’s activities with regard to the conflict. And clearly, the Turkish record seems to dismiss any illusion that may have been existing about Turkey as a regional leader. But then again, what are Turkey’s interests in the region? Despite the rhetoric of the early 1990s of a ‘Turkic 21st century’, Turkey quickly overcame any illusions of its own power and capacities.66 Although in the longer term Turkey certainly intends to expand
its relations with the Central Asian republics, it has no illusion of replacing Russia as the dominant power in the region. Rather, Turkey’s interest for the time being lies in expanding cultural, scientific and economic relations with the Turkic republics. In this framework, Turkey is pursuing a number of policies which, although not reaching the headlines, are instrumental in bringing the people of the Turkic republics and Turkey itself closer, and the importance of which will only become apparent in the long run. First of all, Turkey is providing scholarships for thousands of Azerbaijani and Central Asian students in Turkish universities, a gesture which will be instrumental in bringing about an elite in these countries which is familiar with and favourably disposed towards Turkey. Secondly Turkey is projecting its mass media into the region, particularly to Azerbaijan where a number of Turkish newspapers are being published on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

Measures of this kind, given some years and coupled with increased economic interaction, are certain to establish warm and beneficial relations between Turkey and its ‘lost cousins’. The setback in Nagorno Karabakh has to be seen as only a part of this puzzle of relations.

Even with respect to Azerbaijan, the importance of the Turkish record with regard to Karabakh should not be exaggerated. Especially if a wider time perspective is applied, it seems clear that this episode will be recalled as an early failure of Turkey to exert a distinct political influence in the Caucasus, but not as a hindrance to future relations, nor even to Turkey’s future influence in the area.

The conflict in Nagorno Karabakh at an early stage dispersed the illusions of Turkish policy-makers about the capacities of their country with regard to its relations with its ‘lost cousins’ of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Indeed, as if subjected to a cold shower, the Turks who had not done so realized the complexity of their country’s relations with the United States, Western Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, and the constraints upon it that prevented Turkey from pursuing a truly independent policy in the region. Turkey found itself involved in a myriad of liabilities, as it was compelled to take into account the stance of the West and that of Russia while formulating its policy in the Caucasus. In view of the difficult conditions it was subjected to, Turkey in fact managed to keep its relations with all involved powers, avoiding compromising its position in any centre where that would have been to its detriment. The price Turkey had to pay for this was a popular dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan and a manageable loss of prestige in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union.

Thus although momentarily Turkey has not shown its ability to assert its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, it still maintains a pivotal role
in the region, being the main link between these countries and the West, and poses a developmental model for these countries, a quality which is not to be underestimated, as many more rounds are left to be played in the struggle for influence in this emerging region of world politics. Simultaneously Turkey has ensured that it keeps at least working relations with the Russian Federation, which for the foreseeable future will remain an indispensable factor for anyone who wants to deal with the former Soviet Union’s successor states.

In view of the larger geostrategic position of Turkey, which after all has other priorities than the Caucasus to look after as well, this could be termed a fair deal.

NOTES

8. This policy of Stalin’s is clear if one observes the national delimitations in the Caucasus. An example is the regions of Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. It seems, indeed, as if the delimitation is designed purely to cause dissent in the regions that would enable Russia to control the regions. The Karachay and Balkar are in fact in most respects one people speaking the same Turkic language; similarly Kabardins and Cherkess are both Circassian peoples. Thus the result of the national delimitation is that both regions include two titular nationalities without ethno-linguistic affinities, which have mutual prejudices and historical antagonisms against each other. For an overview of the subject, see Pustilnik, Marina, ‘Caucasian Stresses’, *Transition*, 15 March 1995, pp.16—18; or Rieks Smeets, ‘Circassia’, *Central Asian Survey*, 1, 1995.
9. In the regional hierarchy of the Soviet Union, the highest units were the 15 Republics of the Union, which had the theoretical right to withdraw from the union. Immediately under these were the Autonomous Republics, with a higher degree of autonomy than the autonomous Oblasts, or regions.
11. Tamara Dragadze sees this report as being announced to show the gravity of the conflict and to calm down sentiments. See Tamara Dragadze, ‘The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: Structure and Sentiment’, *Third World Quarterly*, No.1 (Jan. 1989), p.56. Igor Nolyain, on the other hand, sees the radio statement as a deliberately provocative statement, which was unnecessary and would obviously flare up the conflict. Indeed, studies of crowd psychology tend to show that such statements do not have any calming effect on individuals; on the


13. Certain analysts have tried to prove that the Azeri-Armenian conflict was initiated by the authorities in Moscow in as a part of a policy of 'divide and rule' in the Transcaucasus, as they felt that the region was getting out of their control. Moscow's support for the Abkhazian separatists in Georgia is well documented. For an overview of the subject, see Igor Nolyain, op.cit [11].

14. The claim of the Karabakh Soviet was based upon Art. 70 of the Soviet constitution, which affirms the right of peoples to self-determination. However, the claim was rejected on the basis of Art. 78, which states that 'territory may be altered only by mutual agreement of the concerned republics, and subject to the ratification by the USSR'. Thus the rejection of the demand by the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet made the proposal impossible according to Soviet law.


17. For a detailed discussion of the legal aspect of the conflict, see Svante E. Cornell, ‘Undeclared War — the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict Reconsidered’ in Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.20, No.4 (Summer 1997).


19. Human Rights Watch, Seven Years of Conflict, pp.4, 63.


23. On this issue, see also Thomas Goltz, ‘Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand’, Foreign Policy, No.92 (Fall 1993).


28. Hence at the first summit of Turkic republics in Ankara in November 1992, the Central Asian leaders refused to enter into any tight Turkic political or economic body. Nazarbayev further refused to endorse any statement supporting Turkish Cypriots or Bosnian Muslims, claiming that the primary allegiance of the Central Asian states remained with Russia and that they would not accept anything that could jeopardize their relations with Moscow. Moreover, he maintained a strict neutrality on Nagorno Karabakh. For a discussion of these developments, see Goldenberg, op. cit. [16], pp.50–2.

30. In February 1992, ex-communist President Ayaz Mutalibov was ousted by a popular revolt led by the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF). In his place, the parliamentary chairman Yakub Mamedov was installed as acting president. In May Mutalibov attempted to regain his position, but again the APF opposed him and forced him to flee the country. Until 7 June 1992 Isa Gamberov served as acting president until Abülfeyz Elçibey was elected President by popular vote in a multi-candidate election.


32. FBIS-WEU, 3 March 1992, quoting Milliyet, same date.


37. See, for example, the religious-conservative dailies Türkiye and Zaman. For an English sample article, see FBIS-WEU, 5 March 1992, quoting Türkiye, 1 March 1992.


46. Goltz, op. cit. [23].


50. For a recent discussion on Turkish-US relations, involving the Kurdish and the aid issues, see Mahmut Bali Aykan, ‘Turkish Perspectives on Turkish-US Relations Concerning Persian Gulf Security in the Post-Cold War Era’, Middle East Journal, Summer 1996.

51. On 9 March 1993 Turkey and Azerbaijan signed an agreement for the construction of a 1,060-km pipeline which was planned to go from Baku into Iran, then back into Nakhichevan and from there cross over into Turkey. (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts [Middle East], 16 March 1993.) However Azerbaijan’s political instability and its difficult relations with Russia make the pipeline project unclear. Furthermore the deal was signed without consultations with Iran, although the drawing of the pipeline would include Iranian territory. Iran, for itself prefers the laying of a pipeline from Baku through Iran to the Persian Gulf, thus staying within Iran. Hence other drawings of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline have been discussed, and to day’s date a route crossing Georgian territory seems to be the most realistic alternative, although it would mean 1650 km instead of 1060. Hence the Turkish Ministry of Energy declared that for the feasibility of such a project, a guaranteed throughput of at least 25 million tons of crude annually is necessary. For a recent assessment of the pipeline issue, see Nazlan Ertan, ‘Baku-Ceyhan: Pipeline or Pipe Dream’, Turkish Probe, 17 May 1996, pp.19–20.


54. Ibid., quoting Die Zeit, 8 April 1994.
55. See Aykan, op. cit. [50], p.351.
57. Ibid., quoting the Independent, 1 July 1993.
58. See FBIS-WEU, 6 June 1994.
60. See discussion in Goldenberg, op. cit. [16].
61. For an account of Armenian terrorism, see Michael M. Gunter, ‘The Armenian Terrorist Campaign against Turkey’, Orbis, Summer 1983.
62. See issues of the newspapers Zaman and Türkiye, as well as a statement by the head of the Turkish state’s Directorate for Religious Affairs, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz, in FBIS-WEU, 5 March 1992, quoting Türkiye Radyoları, same date.
63. For an example of Demirel’s statements to explain the government’s Karabakh policy, see FBIS-WEU, 10 March 1993, quoting TRT Television, 9 March 1993.
64. This statement seems to come back over and over again in conversations with Azeris.
65. Interview with Dr Novruzoğlu, op. cit. [31].
66. For a discussion on Turkey’s achievements, see Bölükbasi, op. cit. [52].