

Armenians on Azerbaijanis in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Shaping the image of the enemy

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Abstract

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is an intractable conflict that has been the agenda of the international community for over two decades, has gone through sporadic outbreaks of violence, as well as multiple and failed peace mediation attempts. Hence, despite the resolution efforts, the conflict persists, sustaining the parties' main grievances and entailing victimization, long-lasting trauma, and disruption. This paper aims at exploring how the image of the enemy is reflected in the official discourse of the Armenian leaders about Azerbaijanis during 2004-2016, and how trauma and victimization shape this type of image. For the present paper, I have selected 10 speeches belonging to the Armenian Presidents and Foreign Ministers in office and held at various national meetings and international forums which I collected from governmental and non-governmental websites.

Keywords

enemy images; intractable conflicts; trauma; victimization; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

1. Introduction

Intractable conflicts are broadly defined as being protracted, opposing multifarious mediation attempts and presenting occasional violent episodes fluctuating in intensity.¹ They often involve identity differences, high-stakes resources or struggles for power and self-determination and lead to widespread mortality, grievances, trauma, injustice, and victimization for the societies involved.² The long-lasting conflicts between Israel and Palestine, Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots in Cyprus, Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka or India and Pakistan over Kashmir region are just a few examples.

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, intractable conflicts entail a large share of psychosocial factors

1 Louis Kriesberg, „Nature, Dynamics, and Phases of Intractability”, in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds.), *Grasping the Nettle. Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), 66-68.

2 Peter T. Coleman, Robin R. Vallacher, Andrzej Nowak, Lan Bui-Wrzosinska, „Intractable Conflict as an Attractor. A Dynamical Systems Approach to Conflict Escalation and Intractability”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50 (2007): 1456.

which accompany their internal, less visible sides, and ensure their uniqueness.³ The images that the conflicting parties hold of each other and themselves, and of the conflict as such, are cases in point. The concept of images, defined as representations of a social object in a person's cognitive system, comprising of an affective and behavioural component, has been used in the context of intractable conflicts to capture the mutual perception of enemy and self.⁴ In this type of protracted and destructive conflicts, the enemy is portrayed as the perpetrator of unjust harm and solely responsible for the suffering and failure of individual tracts. Also, commonly encountered, he is dehumanized and represented as evil, aggressive, immoral, conspiratorial, opportunistic or predisposed to violence. Dehumanization is a mechanism through which the enemy is described as possessing inhuman traits and manifests itself in discourse by using terms such „uncivilized savage“, „demon“, „monster“, „devil.“⁵ Once a group is denied of humanity, actions such as expulsion, dispossession, ethnic cleansing or genocide appear as justified. For instance, research on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has demonstrated that „dehumanization of Palestinians, expressed as disgust and contempt toward them, in a national sample of Israeli Jews, was related to support for coercive policies toward Palestinians, such as administrative detention, the use of rubber bullets, demolishing homes, and torture.“⁶ Such enemy images contain a strong emotional dislike, reduce empathy, foster a win-lose mentality between the conflicting parties, and in time become resistant to change, thus contributing to the escalation and self-perpetuating dynamic of the conflict.⁷

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In the following sections, after briefly presenting the background of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, I highlight how the image of the enemy is reflected in the official discourse of the Armenian leaders about Azerbaijanis, and how trauma and victimization shape this type of image. For this purpose, I have selected the following speeches: President Robert Kocharian's speech at The Parliamentary Assembly of The Council of Europe, 23 June 2004; President Serzh Sargsyan's statement at the 63rd session of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 25 September 2008; President Serzh Sargsyan's remarks at The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Summit, 2 December 2010; President Serzh Sargsyan's congratulatory address on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the creation of the Armed Forces of Armenia, 28 January 2012; President Serzh Sarkisian's statement at the 69th session of UNGA, 24 September 2014; President Serzh Sargsyan's address at the 3rd International Forum of Moscow State Institute of International Relations, 23 October 2015; President Serzh Sargsyan's statement at the 70th session of UNGA, 29 September 2015; Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian's speech at University of Helsinki, 2 May 2016; Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian's speech at Stanford University, 28 September 2016; President Serzh Sargsyan's statement at the commemoration of the Armenian „genocide“ victims, 24 April 2016.

3 Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 137-213.

4 Ronald J. Fisher, Herbert C. Kelman, „Perceptions in Conflict“, in Daniel Bar-Tal (ed.), *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 65.

5 Daniel Bar-Tal, Phillip L. Hammack, „Conflict, delegitimization, and violence“ in Linda Tropp (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of intergroup conflict*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 30.

6 Fisher, Kelman, „Perceptions,“ 67.

7 Herbert C. Kelman, „A social-psychological approach to conflict analysis and resolution“ in D. Sandole, S. Byrne, I. Sandole-Staroste, J. Senehi (eds.), *Handbook of conflict analysis and resolution*, (London and New York: Routledge 2008), 180.

2. Background to the Nagorno-Karabkh conflict

Nagorno-Karabakh – located in Azerbaijan and inhabited mainly by ethnic Armenians – is a landlocked region which in 1992 declared itself an independent republic. The secession attempt led to a war between Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh forces backed by Armenia which resulted in roughly 30.000 casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons. The parties signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994 when Armenia managed to gain control over Nagorno-Karabakh and other seven adjacent regions, meaning over approximately 20% of the Azerbaijani territory. Since then, the two countries have embarked on a long peace process for solving the conflict, but without any positive results. Currently, there is no peace agreement signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation and the United States, has been mediating the conflict since 1994. Nevertheless, the various peace proposals advanced by the mediators and representing different methodologies of resolution (e.g. the „package solution“, the „step-by-step“ solution or the „common state“ solution) failed one after another.

Against a backdrop of a long period of tried-and-failed attempts at resolution, Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in frequent violent clashes along the Line of Contact and at the border that gradually became part of the „new normal“ of this conflict. The deadliest clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place in April 2016 and caused the highest number of casualties since the signing of the ceasefire. Even if this outburst was included in the cycle of sporadic episodes of violence characterizing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it was unprecedented in its intensity and in the type of armament used. For the first time in years, Azerbaijani troops managed to cross the Line of Contact and regain a portion of the territory. The fights continued for four days and ended with the signing of the Moscow truce.⁸

The peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan has become in time „an arena for redefining issues rather than a means for adjudicating them.“⁹ Following the lack of progress in the official mediation and the repeated violations of the ceasefire agreement, the two sides remained locked in an adversarial frame and fixed in fundamental grievances.

3. The image of Azerbaijanis in the Armenian official discourse

The enemy images Armenians have about Azerbaijanis contain the following elements: a) the dehumanization of the „other“; b) the tendency to overlap the image of the current enemy to the image of the historical enemy and the current experiences of victimization to other past traumatic experiences; c) the fear of national annihilation.

3.1 The dehumanization of the „other“

Armenian leaders represent Azerbaijanis as the evil enemy, aggressor and inhumane, capable of committing massacres intentionally directed against Armenians with the purpose of eliminating or banishing them. „Aggression“, „aggressive“, „large-scale attack“, „military offensive“, „bomb/bombardment“, „annexation“,

⁸ The Economist, A frozen conflict explodes, April 9, 2016 <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21696563-after-facing-decades-armenia-and-azerbaijan-start-shooting-frozen-conflict-explodes>, accessed on February 6, 2018.

⁹ Edward E. Azar, Paul Jureidini, Ronald McLaurin, „Protracted Social Conflict. Theory and Practice in the Middle East“, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 8 (1978): 51.

„mercenaries“, „unleash“, „slaughter“, „ethnic cleansing“, „atrocities“, „massacre“, „cruelty“, „expel“ are just a few examples of words through which the enemy is dehumanized: „*The war of 1992-94 was launched by the aggression of the Azeri authorities, which attempted to implement ethnic cleansing of the territory of Nagorno Karabagh with the purpose of its annexation*“ (President Robert Kocharian, The Parliamentary Assembly of The Council of Europe, 23 June 2004); „*Only in 1920, 40 thousand Armenians were slaughtered and expelled from Shushi – the cultural center of the region. That terrific massacre left a thorough and bleeding wound ... Azerbaijan ... repeated the practice of 1918, initiating an aggressive action against Nagorno-Karabakh, bombing peaceful cities and villages, slaughtering and expelling Armenians ... Furthermore, in the winter of 1993-1994, Azerbaijan initiated the most large-scale attack on Nagorno-Karabakh*“ (President Serzh Sargsyan, 3rd International Forum of Moscow State Institute of International Relations, 23 October 2015); „*Just a few days ago in the bordering area of Armenia three women fell victim to Azerbaijani bombardment. The question that comes up to one’s mind is whether there is any reasonable person that can demonstrate any unflawed logic of that cruelty. It is obvious for us that the Azerbaijani leadership has irreversibly lost both the sense of reality and of norms of human conduct*“ (Serzh Sargsyan, UNGA, 70th session, 29 September 2015) ; „*Azerbaijan has for decades carried out a policy of ethnic cleansing towards Nagorno-Karabakh, menacing the physical security of the Nagorno-Karabakh people, then unleashing an open aggression against Nagorno-Karabakh using mercenaries closely linked to the international terrorist organizations*“ (Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, University of Helsinki, 2 May 2016); „*Azerbaijan continued with large scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh committing new atrocities. The heavy, indiscriminate use of force, massacres and ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Azerbaijan against the Armenian population was yet another confirmation that the struggle of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh was existential and legitimate*“ (Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, Stanford University, 28 September 2016).

Armenians’ portrayal of Azerbaijanis as aggressive and inhuman are clear and straightforward and contain a certain evaluative stance for what happened during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The constant references to the „massacres“, „atrocities“, „ethnic cleansing“ of the Armenian people, together with words such as „slaughter“ or „cruelty“ which imply not just simply killing, but killing in an indiscriminate and cruel manner, allude to the „evil“ nature of Azerbaijanis and encourage the audience to adopt negative attitudes towards them. Furthermore, as seen from the above examples, Armenian leaders claim that during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijanis „repeated the practice of 1918“ which left Armenians with a „thorough and bleeding wound.“ Thus, they also bring into discussion past traumatic episodes and victimization feelings, non-related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in order to depict Azerbaijanis as „murderers“ who have committed „atrocities“ against the Armenian people.

3.2. The tendency to overlap the image of the current enemy to the image of the historical enemy and the current experiences of victimization to other past traumatic experiences

The official Armenian discourse towards Azerbaijanis is built around the past traumas and victimization lived by the Armenian people during its history either at the hands of Azerbaijanis and/or other groups. Specifically, Armenians evoke the traumatic experiences connected to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (such as those from 1988-1990 that took place in Sumgait, Baku and Kirovabad and which they consider a „pogrom“), and other two major traumas that happened in a distant past, but without any connection to the conflict in question (the events from

1918-1920 seen as „massacres“ committed by Azerbaijanis against Armenians and those from the First World War considered a „genocide“ committed by the Ottoman Turks). For instance, in an address from 23 October 2015 held at the 3rd International Forum of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, President Serzh Sargsyan claims that: „**From 1918 to 1920, Azerbaijani military formations committed massacres of the Armenian population. Only in 1920, 40 thousand Armenians were slaughtered and expelled from Shushi – the cultural center of the region. Azerbaijan was carrying out a policy of systematically eliminating the Armenian population and exterminating Armenian cultural monuments**“. Within the same speech, Serzh Sargsyan also states that „Azerbaijan ... **repeated the practice of 1918, initiating an aggressive action against Nagorno-Karabakh, bombing peaceful cities and villages, slaughtering and expelling Armenians. Academician Andrei Sakharov characterized the pogrom of Armenians in Sumgait, Baku and Kirovabad as an attempt to commit a new genocide against Armenians**“.

The „massacres“ from the 1918-1920 period, the „pogrom“ from 1988-1990, and the „Armenian genocide“ represent a prism through which Armenians evaluate the enemy and other threatening events that they went through during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Furthermore, the above-mentioned excerpt from President Serzh Sargsyan’s speech points to the tendency of Armenians to overlap the image of the current enemy (of Azerbaijanis) to the image of the historical enemy (of Ottoman Turks) and the current experience of victimization to other traumatic past experiences. Specifically, Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Armenia associate Azerbaijanis with Turks.¹⁰ As Professor Denis Sandole explains, „via transference from the past to the present, Armenians view the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as an effort by Turks to finish off the final solution they started in 1915.“¹¹ The encounter and exposure to another tragic, traumatic and threatening event such as the assault of Armenians from Sumgait, Baku and Kirovabad within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reactivate and reinforces the past trauma of the „genocide“ and the fear that it could be repeated: „*Academician Andrei Sakharov characterized the pogrom of Armenians in Sumgait, Baku and Kirovabad as an attempt to commit a new genocide against Armenians*“. The same connection between the Armenian „genocide“ and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is again expressed by President Serzh Sargsyan during a speech held on 28 January 2012: „*There was an imperative to thwart the imminent danger of a genocide looming over the Armenian people and, particularly, over the Armenians of Artsak*.“¹²

The insertion of several traumatic events within the same speech indicates the centrality of trauma and the powerful orientation of Armenians toward the past. Of additional significance to the way in which Armenians construct the image of the enemy is the sense of victimization generated by the collective past traumas Armenians lived which left deep, painful marks in their collective memory. For instance, president Serzh Sarkisian refers to the Armenian „genocide“ as being „*a crime that continues to be an unhealed scar for each Armenian*“ (statement at the UNGA, 24 September 2014) and to the 1918-1920 events as being a

10 For instance, in a sociological survey undertaken by the Center for Strategic Analysis Spectrum in 2007 on the territory of Armenia, the majority of the respondents identified Azerbaijanis with Turks. „Mainly owing to historical experience and memory, Azerbaijanis, because of Turkic ethnicity, were included into the enemy category in the perceptions of broad cross sections of Armenians“ See Gayane Novikova, „The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict through the Prism of the Image of the Enemy“, *Transition Studies Review*, 18 (2012): 552.

11 Denis J. D. Sandole, „Identity Under Siege: Injustice, Historical Grievance, Rage and the ‘New’ Terrorism“, in Daniel Rothbart, Karina V. Korostelina (eds.), *Identity, Morality and Threat. Studies in Violent Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 79.

12 Armenians refer to the Nagorno-Karabakh region using the name Artsakh.

„*terrific massacre*“ which „*left a thorough and bleeding wound*“ (address at the 3rd International Forum of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, 23 October 2015).

3.3 The fear of national annihilation

The images Armenians have about Azerbaijanis contain also the fear of being annihilated which is anchored in the collective memory of the Armenian nation. The Armenians leaders use frequently in their speeches words such as „eliminate“, „exterminate“, „extinction“, „deportation“, „purge“ or „ethnically cleanse“ which indicates their view that the Armenian people have been oppressed and persecuted: „*The people of Nagorno-Karabakh, who followed the legal path in declaring their desire for self-determination, were subjected to a brutal war. For years they hovered on the brink of extinction*“ (President Serzh Sargsyan, UNGA, 63rd session, 25 September 2008); „*In response to the policy of ethnic cleansing and full-fledged military aggression unleashed by Azerbaijan against Karabakh in 1992 ... Nagorno-Karabakh, in the face of imminent extinction of its people, was forced to resort to its right to self-defense in full compliance with the norms of international law*“ (Serzh Sargsyan, OSCE Meeting of the Heads of State or Government, 2 December 2010); „*The true objective, or more precisely dream of Azerbaijan is to occupy Artsakh and ethnically cleanse it from Armenians. It implies that the population of Artsakh should be partly purged, partly deported*“ (Serzh Sargsyan, commemoration of the victims of the 1915 „genocide“, April 24, 2016). Furthermore, the fear of annihilation was transferred into the need for struggle and survival and received the meaning of preventing „another Armenian genocide“, as it emerges from the same statement of President Serzh Sargsyan held on April 24, 2016: „*Today, on April 24, 2016, I declare for the entire world to hear: there will be neither extermination nor deportation of the Armenians in Artsakh. We will not tolerate another Armenian genocide.*“

4. Conclusions

The research approach of this paper attained its objectives, namely it highlighted how the image of the *Azerbaijani enemy* is reflected in the official Armenian discourse and how trauma and victimization shape this type of image.

Armenians portray Azerbaijanis as the main enemy, the perpetrator of a series of violent and repeated acts, anchored in their „evil“ nature, unjustly directed towards the Armenian people with the intention to „annihilate“ them. Azerbaijanis are thus placed in the category of subhuman and depicted as possessing extreme negative traits. Hence, dehumanization and the fear of national annihilation are part of the images Armenians have about Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, against the backdrop of some traumatic experiences lived in a distant past, Armenians tend to overlap the image of the current, main enemy to the image of the historical enemy and the current experience of victimization connected to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to other traumatic past experiences.

The Armenian official discourse about Azerbaijanis revolve around some specific collective traumas encoded in the collective memory of the Armenian nation and engendering strong feelings of victimization: the „massacres“ from the 1918-1920 period, the „pogrom“ from 1988-1990, and the Armenian „genocide.“ These represent a prism through which Armenians evaluate the enemy and other threatening events that they went through during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict at the hands of Azerbaijanis. Hence, trauma and victimization are salient in the experiences Armenians have about Azerbaijanis and contribute to the shaping of the enemy image.

The content analysis indicates that Armenians developed in time and maintained the same type of negative image towards Azerbaijanis. Against the backdrop of a continued lack of resolving the conflict, this enemy image has petrified and has become an accurate representation of reality. Its persistence has made it increasingly resistant to change, hence contributing to the escalation and further perpetuation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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