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Territorial Ambitions in Nagorno-Karabakh: Survey Results Before the 2020 War

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Abstract

Territory is central to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Borders and control of lands claimed by both Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic have shifted dramatically since the end of the Soviet Union. Following up on a 2011 survey, we again asked a representative sample of Karabakhis in February 2020 about their territorial aspirations and the possibility of surrendering some lands to Azerbaijan. The results are somewhat contradictory. While about half of the sample were willing to compromise on territory with Azerbaijan—in the expectation of a more permanent and peaceful settlement to the conflict—a firm majority (85%) rejected any return to the smaller lands of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Soviet times. This result is highly consistent with the 2011 data. Even more respondents than in 2011 aspired to extend Nagorno-Karabakh’s territory to encompass all historical Armenian lands, a patently unrealistic option. While Karabakhi attitudes remained hardened against territorial compromise, the 2020 war changed the facts on the ground and reduced the Republic’s control to an area even smaller than the NKAO.

Introduction

The six-week war of Autumn 2020 has redrawn the map of the South Caucasus—yet again. On paper, of course, nothing has officially changed. Azerbaijan and Armenia still have the same internationally recognized borders. On the ground, however, the situation is dramatically different. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), locally known as Artsakh, endures on a territorial template that is considerably reduced from what it once held. Given initial territorial form as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and controversially

situated within Soviet Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was first proclaimed in 1991 amidst conflict over the region’s status. The NKAO and neighboring Shaumian region was the initial territorial template claimed at that time. Victory in the subsequent intense warfare expanded that template into seven surrounding provinces of Azerbaijan in 1994. As the territory under the control of the NKR grew, so also did its justifications for holding these territories, and for claiming other areas still ‘occupied’ by Azerbaijan. In the most self-aggrandizing Armenian-focused narrative, as

for instance seen in the *Atlas of Artsakh* (Research on Armenian Architecture, 2018), the NKR is just a territorial fragment of a broader historical Armenian palimpsest of lands across eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus marked by the presence of Armenian churches, monasteries, gravestones and settlements.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has been formative to the identities of the post-Soviet states of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia suffered greatly to defend and protect what it viewed as historic Armenian land. Karabakh war fighters like Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan took power in Yerevan. By contrast, the promise of the recovery of lost territories has long legitimated authoritarian militarism in Azerbaijan. It was the victimized state, patiently building its military and waiting for the right moment to achieve its aims. Social media accounts burned with intensity during the 2020 war. The hastags *#KarabakhisAzerbaijan* accompanied its information campaign while *#Artsakhstrong* was ubiquitous among Karabakh's defenders.

But what about those who actually live in the disputed territory? Azerbaijanis were forcefully displaced from the region in the early 1990s, so those remaining, unambiguously identifying as Armenian, reflected only the Karabakh they were creating as a fully Armenian place. Well aware that they lived in an intensely disputed region, what did the residents of Karabakh think about territorial issues before the six-week war of 2020 dramatically changed their living space? Serendipitously, we concluded a representative survey of 820 respondents in the region in February 2020, about seven months prior to war. The results are somewhat contradictory. While about half of the sample were willing to compromise on territory with Azerbaijan—in the expectation of a more permanent and peaceful settlement to the conflict—a firm majority rejected any return to the smaller lands of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Soviet times.

Survey Research in Conflict Regions

We have been surveying in unrecognized, or *de facto*, states in the former Soviet Union for more than a decade (e.g. Kolosov, O'Loughlin, and Toal 2014; Bakke, Linke, O'Loughlin and Toal 2018). In late 2011, we organized a representative survey of 820 persons in the NKR (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013), and our February 2020 survey included many of the same questions about territory and future status of the Republic. These questions about territory, borders and recognition preoccupy governments, policy experts, geopolitical pundits and historians, but not necessarily ordinary people. Our research seeks to document what ordinary people living within contested regions actually think about these issues. It remains an important and under-researched

topic. Though the role of 'parent' and patron state governments and external state actors are important to conflict dynamics and conflict resolution—and, indeed, the question of recognition (Coggins 2014)—at the heart of the struggle are the people who live in the contested territory. Survey results are often challenged by politicians and commentators if they run counter to their assumptions about public opinion, and even the scientific motivations for the work have been questioned by the parent state representatives, who claim that such work should not be done in 'occupied' regions in supposed conditions of suspicion and fear (cf. Kuleba 2020).

Doing survey research in conflict regions, as one might expect, is not straightforward. For this one needs to have independent survey research organizations that employ the best practices in social scientific research methods. While the technical and scientific capacity exists in Azerbaijan, the guarantee of independent research free from government interference and control does not. Consequently, we were unable to survey there as part of a comparative study, though we did make a good-faith effort to do so. By contrast, our research partners in Nagorno-Karabakh were able to conduct their survey work without interference or hinderance.

As in our 2011 survey, the sampling design and the face-to-face interviewing in 2020 adhere to best survey practices (stratification by urban/rural residence, random selection of primary sampling units, random selection of respondents in these units, follow-up controls by supervisors, and protection of data) in gauging local opinions. We present results on two key dimensions here: people's willingness to compromise on land returns to Azerbaijan and their views on two territorial options at opposite ends of the minimalist to maximalist spectrum.

The territorial questions from our 2020 survey are particularly relevant, and somewhat poignant, given the subsequent war and NKR territorial losses. The NKR now exists on a territorial footprint that is smaller than the NKAO, with both the symbolic city of Shusha/i and other major centers like Hadrut (Khojavend) lost to Azerbaijani forces. Once again, Karabakh is a small enclave surrounded by Azerbaijani-held territory, now monitored by 2,000 Russian peacekeepers (Baku, of course, sees it as part of Azerbaijan). Our first question asked residents about their willingness to trade territories for peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. The extra territories seized in 1994 were not part of the initial NKR territorial declaration in 1991 but rather, were lands acquired in the course of the subsequent fighting for reasons of military expediency and defense. International negotiations, namely the OSCE-sponsored Minsk Process, have focused on the possible return of these lands, so we wanted to find out if there was any support for a 'land for peace' trade among Karabakhis.

The second question we asked followed up on our 2011 research about prevalent territorial visions within Karabakh. A decade ago, we discovered that there was considerable support for the most expansive territorial vision in Karabakh, one which viewed any place with evidence of historic Armenian artifacts and religious sites as legitimate Armenian land. We wanted to see if this view was still popular with residents in 2020. We also wanted to see if the border of the NKAO was no longer accepted by Karabakh residents. This last question is particularly significant given the territorial realities of today, in which the Soviet-delimited border is a ghostly presence in the background of conversations about any long-term settlement of the conflict.

Nagorno-Karabakh was homogenously ethnic Armenian at the time of the 2020 survey, before people fled lands now recaptured by Azerbaijan (between 75,000 and 100,000 left but about 40,000 have subsequently returned under the protection of the Russian peacekeepers). Because of this sample homogeneity, the sizable nationality divides on geopolitical questions (including territorial ambitions) commonly seen in the post-Soviet space are absent. We also note that significant demographic differences in the answers (according to age, gender, income, current mood, and education) are also non-existent. In a previous article, we highlighted this discrepancy with similar surveys that we have conducted in the region (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013).

Results

A pervasive mistrust of Azerbaijan’s intentions and actions characterizes the overall Karabakh sample, with 88% listing that country in an open-ended question enquiring about the “main enemy of the NKR” (any country or group could be chosen). The survey does, however, show conciliatory attitudes on the question of land return, with notable differences according to the respondents’ optimism about the republic’s direction.

A general question that preceded and framed the specific ones about NKR territorial extent asked respondents if they agreed with the statement that “some lands of NKR should be returned to Azerbaijan”. We can view the answers to this proposition as a general measure of territorial compromise, a sense of whether residents of the NKR were willing to give back some of the lands that were added to the NKAO in the early 1990s. Much of this acquired territory was in lower elevations in the south and east of the expanded territory as well as in the northwestern Kalbajar (Karvachar) region, which had been populated mostly by Azerbaijanis.

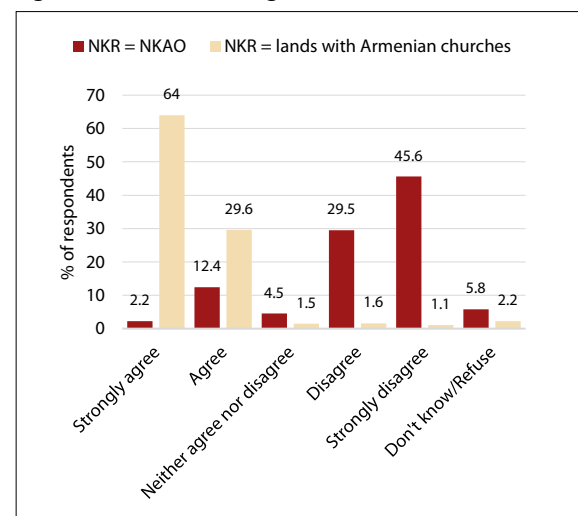
At first glance, the responses to this land-return prompt are quite conciliatory. Almost half of the respondents (46.1%) accept the proposition (strongly agree, 22.1%; agree, 24%) and 38.9% reject it (strongly disagree,

22.7%; disagree, 16.2%), with the remainder (14%) sitting on the fence. This split opinion does not show any clear demographic correlates within the sample.

However, we observe a difference among the Karabakhi respondents on the ‘land for peace’ prompt based on whether respondents think that the republic was heading in the right or wrong direction. In many surveys in the former Soviet Union, we have found that this simple but insightful measure of general satisfaction with local conditions correlates with political preferences. In early 2020, a majority of those who thought that the republic was on the right track agreed to return lands to Azerbaijan (59%), but among those who thought it was on the wrong track, less than half (42%) agreed to return lands to Azerbaijan. Satisfaction with current circumstances is therefore associated with a more conciliatory position on the thorny issue of land changes.

The second question we report here measured the degree to which residents subscribed to an expansive or restrictive vision of Karabakh. We asked respondents to agree or disagree with two question prompts describing an imagined normative territorial vision of Karabakh. The first defined the territory as equivalent to the NKAO, an entity whose borders were no longer demarcated on the landscape in Karabakh and may only have been meaningful for the entity’s older residents (in effect, it disappeared about 30 years earlier). The second prompt was the claim that Karabakh was equivalent to all territories with historical Armenian churches. Which vision of Karabakh is more popular, the smaller Soviet delimitation or an expansionist conception of Karabakhi/Armenian space?

Figure 1: Where is Nagorno-Karabakh 2020?



Source: Authors' own survey 2020

The figure shows strong rejection of a hypothetical return to previous borders (only 14.6% agree or strongly agree)

and an equally strong acceptance of an undemarcated but greater Armenia (94% agree or strongly agree). Our interpretation of these results is that, while the NKAO borders are remembered (and rejected as too restrictive), the expansionist version was a broadly-shared aspiration in the NKR, even if it is highly unlikely in practice. When we asked about the same territorial options in 2011, the results were similar for the rejection of the NKAO option (only 14% agreed) but the ambition of NKR expansion to all historic Armenian lands had gained support from ‘only’ 71% of respondents in 2011.

We titled our earlier article “Land for Peace” and emphasized the practical intransigence of NKR residents when it came to support for any territorial compromise. The 2020 results continue to show such obduracy in terms of actual territorial remappings. But there was

significant support (nearly half) for a policy that would cede indeterminate lands to Azerbaijan. One could interpret these seemingly contradictory positions as a contrast between the amorphous and the concrete, between an acceptance of the principle of ‘land for peace’ and a rejection of any settlement that would cede too much territory gained as a result of the 1992–1994 war with Azerbaijan. The six-week war of 2020 was the bitter fruit of the failure of Armenia and Azerbaijan’s leaders to find territorial compromise and a ‘good enough’ settlement that both sides could live with. Now power lies in the hands of Russia and Azerbaijan (supported by Turkey) as Armenia is rocked by political instability. Azerbaijan has recovered land through war but it has not won a sustainable peace. That remains elusive.

About the Authors

John O’Loughlin is College Professor of Distinction at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is a political geographer with research interests in the human outcomes of climate change in sub-Saharan Africa and in the geopolitical orientations of people in post-Soviet states.

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