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‘REAL ARMENIA’ OR ‘HISTORIC ARMENIA’?

(‘GERÇEK ERMENİSTAN’ MI, ‘TARİHİ ERMENİSTAN’ MI?)

Jeremy SALT*

Abstract: *The protracted Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, rooted in historical grievances since the First World War and the Soviet collapse, is now at a critical juncture with the negotiation of a 17-point peace settlement. Despite significant progress, unresolved issues—including Armenian constitutional claims to Karabakh, third-party monitoring, and the Zangezur corridor—pose obstacles. Domestic and diaspora opposition complicates Armenia’s political calculus, with Prime Minister Pashinyan facing declining popularity and pressure to amend the constitution. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan leverages its military gains and demands for territorial integrity. The evolving regional landscape, including Armenia’s strained ties with Russia and potential Western alignment, underscores the high stakes and complexities of achieving lasting peace*

Keyword: *Armenia , Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Peace settlement*

Öz: *Birinci Dünya Savaşı ve Sovyetler Birliği’nin dağılmasından bu yana tarihi şikayetlere dayanan Ermenistan-Azerbaycan çatışması, 17 maddelik barış anlaşmasının müzakereleriyle kritik bir dönemde bulunmaktadır.*

* ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9139-6036>
Former Assoc. Prof., E-mail: jeremysalt42@gmail.com

Önemli ilerlemelere rağmen, Ermenistan'ın Karabağ üzerindeki anayasal hak talepleri, üçüncü taraf gözetimi ve Zangezur koridoru gibi çözülmemiş sorunlar engel teşkil etmektedir. Yurtiçi ve diasporadaki muhalefet, Ermenistan'ın siyasi hesaplarını karmaşıklştırırken, Başbakan Paşinyan popülaritesinin düşmesi ve anayasayı değiştirme baskısıyla karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Bu arada Azerbaycan, askeri kazanımlarını ve toprak bütünlüğü taleplerini kullanmaktadır. Ermenistan'ın Rusya ile gergin ilişkileri ve Batı ile olası ittifakı da dahil olmak üzere değişen bölgesel manzara, kalıcı barışın sağlanmasının ne kadar önemli ve karmaşık olduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ermenistan, Azerbaycan, Türkiye, Barış anlaşması*

An Armenia-Azerbaijan peace settlement is on the table. The two governments have basically agreed on a 17-point peace settlement, ‘basically’ because there are still outstanding points to be settled. Given the hostility between them since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and much further back to the aftermath of the First World War, will the settlement actually make it to the finishing line of a treaty?

The agreement, disclosed by the Azerbaijani government on March 13 and confirmed soon afterwards by Armenia, immediately met with strong party and parliamentary opposition in Baku, on the basis that the government had made too many concessions without getting anything in return.

The two final sticking points were resolved with an agreement to withdraw all legal claims in international courts and end any deployment of third-party forces on the border between the two states.

However, Azerbaijani objections have arisen outside the 17 points. One refers to Article One of the Armenian Constitution, which takes as its basis “the fundamental principles of Armenian statehood and the nationwide objectives established in the Declaration of Independence, Armenia having fulfilled the sacred behest of its freedom-loving ancestors for the restoration of the sovereign state.”

The Declaration of Independence (August 23, 1990) was issued in the name of the Supreme Council of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, from that point onwards known as the Republic of Armenia. It states that the declaration is based on the December 1, 1989, joint decision of the Armenian SSR Supreme Council and the Artsakh (the Armenian name for Karabakh) National Council on the reunification of the Armenian SSR “and the mountainous region of Karabakh.”

Thus, tracing the line forward to the Armenian Constitution, the way is left open for the territorial claim to Karabakh to be revived one day, even though Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who said in 2019 that “Artsakh is Armenia – period!”, has conceded in the negotiations that Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is insisting that Armenian Constitution must be amended “to eliminate the claims against the government and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan” before the peace accord can be signed.

Azerbaijan is also insisting on the abolition of “the obsolete and dysfunctional Minsk Group and related structures of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *before* a peace agreement can be signed but Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan says the future of the group can only be considered *after* the agreement is signed.

The future of EUMA (European Union Mission in Armenia), which operates six forward bases along the border for monitoring purposes, is another issue Azerbaijan wants settled before the signing of a treaty.

Azerbaijan says bilateral dialogue will continue to resolve these and other issues, including the ‘Zangezur corridor,’ the road Azerbaijan wants built through southern Armenia to connect the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, an Azerbaijani enclave bordered by Armenia and Iran, to the rest of the home country.

Baku wants the road placed under Azerbaijan’s control. This is strongly opposed in Armenia, as is the government’s agreement to hand back to Azerbaijan five border villages occupied by Armenia since the 1990s (Pashinyan says there are only “two and a half” because of partial control already by Azerbaijan).

A profound lack of trust marks the relations between the two countries. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev says trust in Armenia is “close to zero,” accuses it of preparing for a new war and regards EUMA as an “EU intelligence mission.” Again, Pashinyan says “mutually beneficial agreements” with the EU over EUMA can be discussed only *after* the signing and ratification of a peace agreement.

Meeting Azerbaijani’s demand for a constitutional amendment could only be done through a referendum. Having insisted a year ago that he would not amend the constitution, Pashinyan has now announced that a new one will be prepared in which the contentious article is expected to be listed for removal.

Parliamentary elections in Armenia are due in June 2026. Writing in the *Armenian Weekly*, Haret Sassounian, President of the Armenia Artsakh Fund, says holding the referendum at the same time would be a “golden opportunity” to get rid of Pashinyan. Public opinion polls held over the past year show a continuing slide in support for Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party, as well as a high level of apathy among voters.

A January 2025 poll indicated that only 11.3 percent of voters would cast their vote for Civil Contract at the next elections. Dissatisfaction with Pashinyan was running at 65 percent, with 44 percent of those polled believing early elections were necessary. What protects Civil Contract, despite its low polling, is the fragmented nature of the parliament, with small parties incapable of joining forces to create a credible opposition.

While the Armenian Justice Minister Srubuhi Galyan has said the new constitution would be ready before the next elections, the constitutional committee has been given until the end of 2027 to complete it.

Pashinyan has referred only to an “opinion” that elections and the referendum could be held simultaneously. He says, “I’m ready to put my signature under the agreed draft.” Foreign Minister Mirzoyan believes that with the peace treaty, “Armenia will emerge from a large and deep swamp from which, if we do not emerge, we will sink and be buried.”

Along with the Armenian domestic opposition, however, sections of the influential US Armenian diaspora have damned the provisional settlement. Aram Hamparian, executive director of ANCA (the Armenian National Committee of America), described it as a surrender of Armenia’s security that was “forced on Yerevan at the point of a gun.”

An April 21, 2025, an article in *Providence*, the journal of the (right-wing Christian) Institute of Religion and Democracy, headed ‘Appeasing Azerbaijan Is a Sure Way to Start a New War,’ compares the draft treaty to the Munich agreement handing Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland to Germany in 1938. Four of the six authors are Armenian, their views undoubtedly representative of a broad section of US Armenian communities.

The provisional agreement was quickly welcomed by the EU and the United States. Russia brokered an end to the 2023 war following the successful Azerbaijani military operation that ended in the collapse of the ‘Republic of Nagorno Karabakh’ (Artsakh) and said it was ready to host further negotiations.

However, the relationship with Armenia has been severely strained in recent years. Armenia is a member of CSTO (Collective Security Organization), comprising Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).

Article 4 of the CSTO pact is like Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which binds all members to come to the defence of

one member if attacked. In 2022, Armenia tried to invoke Article 4 but failed, following which the Secretary of the Security Council, Armen Grigoryan, said there was “no more hope” for CSTO.

In 2023 Russia refused to take sides, which included the withholding of arms supplies to Armenia. It was “unable to deliver,” Pashinyan said, adding that it was a strategic mistake to rely on Russia.

In February 2024 Armenia froze active participation in CSTO, said its membership was “under review” and even described CSTO as “a threat to national security.”

In June 2024 Pashinyan said Armenia would withdraw from the organization (as Georgia had done in 1993 and Azerbaijan in 1999). “We will leave,” Pashinyan said. “We will decide when to exit. Don’t worry. We won’t return We already consider ourselves outside CSTO ... I believe we have reached the point of no return.”

The feeling of being betrayed by CSTO strengthened pro-US and pro-NATO membership opinion in Armenia, which already has a strong ‘partnership relationship’ with the organization. Having gone to war to prevent Ukraine joining NATO, Russia now faces the possibility, however remote at this stage, that two south Caucasus states, Armenia and Georgia, may follow the same path.

In 2003 the ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia, influenced by US support for the opposition, brought down the pro-Soviet/Russian government. In 2008 Russia intervened in support of two separatist Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The war ended in a ceasefire, but with Russia recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

Georgia is already on the path to EU accession and has been accepted as a future member of NATO. In 2024 the electoral success of the pro-Russian Georgian Dream party led to the suspension of the membership process by the EU and the suspension of strategic relations by the US.

Türkiye has watched these developments in the South Caucasus carefully and has said little. Reconciliation with Azerbaijan could precede reconciliation with Türkiye, if Armenia can be persuaded to remove the constitutional barrier to relations with governments that do not accept the Armenian claim of genocide in 1914-18.

An open border would benefit Armenia economically, as well as linking it to the trade, transport routes and oil pipeline routes linking Europe to Central Asia and China and the North-South Corridor. This vast region is the rapidly developing economic powerhouse of the 21st century and Armenia has the opportunity to be part of it.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union Azerbaijan has maintained equidistance between Russia and the US but is now signalling that it will be ‘pivoting’ towards Central Asia. Another drawcard is the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project linking Europe to Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Central Asia and India.

Türkiye and Azerbaijan are members of OTS (Organization of Turkic States) and already have a relationship described by Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as “one nation – two states.” For Armenia, the practical benefits of signing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan and opening diplomatic relations with Turkey are many but in the case of the latter, Armenia would first have to decide between what Prime Minister Pashinyan has called ‘real Armenia’ and ‘historic Armenia’. According to Pashinyan “the real Armenia is the one that has an internationally recognized territory and internationally recognized borders and, realizing this fact, has the self-awareness of a full and respectable member of the international community,” he further remarked that adherence to “historic Armenia” poses challenges “this adherence to “historic Armenia” poses challenges when the Republic of Armenia seeks to normalize relations with its neighbors.”¹

The damage done in history is not to be underestimated, even more than a century later. The wounds are deep. This is as true of Turkish-Armenian relations as it is of those between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917 brought on a series of tectonic changes. The scramble for territory and new borders after 1918 threw Armenians and Azerbaijanis against each other in the wider context of the ‘war of intervention’ fought by allied forces against Germany and the Bolsheviks.

Baku, abutting the rich oil reserves of the Caspian Sea, was the main centre of this conflict. In late March-early April 1918, Bolshevik and Dashnak forces slaughtered thousands of Azerbaijani Muslims in Baku. After the collapse

1 Hetq online newspaper published in Yerevan. Hrant Gadarigian. 10 Apr 2024. <https://hetq.am/en/article/165645>

of the Bolshevik-dominated Baku Soviet in July, the arrival of the Ottoman-Azerbaijani 'Islamic Army of the Caucasus' precipitated panic amongst Armenians in Baku. Thousands fled or were massacred in revenge attacks for the killings of the 'March days.'

The triumph of the Soviets and the establishment of autonomous Armenian and Azerbaijani socialist republics restored an order which lasted until the next tectonic shock, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Open conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh had already broken out in 1988. Described as 'Nagorno-Karabakh' by Armenia, Western governments and the media, the 'enclave' was in fact internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan's sovereign territory.

This first war (1988-1994) ended in a victory for Armenia, which took full control of Karabakh, as well as surrounding Azerbaijani territory. The 'Republic of Artsakh' was established in 1991 and its independence declared in 1992. In the years of fighting an estimated 700,000 Azerbaijanis, including 500,000 from Karabakh and 186,000 from Armenia, headed towards Baku or fled to other regions where public buildings, schools and hostels were turned into refugee centers.

About 300,000 Armenians also fled, mostly from Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. While there were massacres by both sides, the worst in terms of numbers was in the Karabakh town of Khojaly in 1992, where Armenian forces massacred 600-1000 Azerbaijani civilians.

Largely sympathetic to Armenians since the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, Western media generally paid little attention to Azerbaijani suffering and the atrocities committed against Azerbaijanis by Armenians.

The second war in 2020 lasted for 44 days. Azerbaijan regained control of much of the lost territory and, on September 20, 2023, launched a military offensive that ended in a Russian-brokered ceasefire 24 hours later and the dissolution of 'Artsakh' on September 28.

The victory puts Azerbaijan in the box seat. It can afford to wait. The ball is now in Armenia's court and the Pashinyan government has to decide how to return it. Pashinyan can see the political and economic benefits, but opposition is strong both domestically and in the Armenian diaspora.

Then there is Türkiye, which is never going to agree to the Armenian claim of genocide. These two poles will decide Armenia’s future direction. Will ‘real Armenia’ be strong enough to overcome ‘historic Armenia’ for the sake of a peace treaty with Azerbaijan, and, perhaps further down the road, diplomatic relations with Türkiye, leaving the events of 1914-18 to be battled over by historians?

Or will ‘historic Armenia,’ strongly backed by Armenians who do not actually live in Armenia, pull ‘real Armenia’ back into the “large and deep swamp” as warned by Armenian Foreign Minister Mirzoyan?

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