



**THE SOUTH CAUCASUS:
REGIONAL CHALLENGES & CONCERNS**

Prepared for

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As an independent think tank based in Yerevan, Armenia, the Regional Studies Center (RSC), supports the mission and mandate of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs (DPA), which holds the responsibility for monitoring and assessing global political developments and advising and is empowered to assist the UN Secretary General and his envoys in the peaceful prevention and resolution of conflict around the world.

For the South Caucasus as a region, and especially in light of the recent escalation in clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh, the RSC would like to highlight several issues of direct relevance to the DPA:

The South Caucasus as a “region at risk.” The current outlook for security and stability in this Region is now at its lowest point, with the recent fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh only exacerbating the inherent risk of renewed hostilities,¹ driven by several deeper trends:

- A virtual “arms race” defined by several years of surging defense spending by Azerbaijan, with Armenia compelled to match, and featuring a dangerous procurement of more modern offensive weapons. With Russia as the primary arms provider to both sides, this trend is only likely to continue, with a further “arms race to the bottom” for all sides;
- The deepening of bellicose and aggressive rhetoric has driven the political narrative downward, with a disturbing discourse relying on nationalist posturing. This has only further marginalized moderates and empowered more militant elements of each society;
- A pronounced lack of political will and an absence of statesmanship with any strategic vision have made it even more difficult for the ruling elites to disengage from a path toward confrontation.

¹ For more, see: Giragosian, Richard, “The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Ceasing fire is not a ceasefire,” LSE (London School of Economics and Political Science) European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) blog, 11 April 2016. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/04/11/the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-ceasing-fire-is-not-a-ceasefire/>

FIVE “LESSONS LEARNED”

Against this backdrop, there are there are five important “lessons learned” from the recent fighting:

“Ceasing fire is not a ceasefire.” Despite the cessation of open warfare as a result of a Moscow-brokered agreement on 5 April, the risk of renewed hostilities and a resumption of open warfare over Nagorno-Karabakh remain seriously high. The *imperative is to persuade and pressure the parties to the conflict to re-commit to the previous ceasefire*, but with measures to bolster its resilience, including the stationing of permanent monitors equipped with adequate resources and equipment. Moreover, the inherent vulnerability of the previous ceasefire regime was obvious, and its sudden collapse only reaffirmed the potent risk of “war by accident,” based on misperception and miscalculation where smaller skirmishes can quickly and easily spiral out of control.² The fighting also revealed the limits of a ceasefire that has only held since 1994 based on the willingness and commitment of the parties to the conflict themselves. Without any external security guarantee and weak monitoring and supervision;

The absence of effective deterrence. The fighting also highlighted the *absence of any real deterrence* to prevent or at least pressure any side from launching military operations.³ Although there are no real strategic advantages for the Armenian and Karabakh sides from offensive operations, the lack of restraint and deterrence on Azerbaijan are only exacerbated by the limited leverage over Azerbaijan held by the West and by the Russian position as the primary arms provider to both Azerbaijan and Armenia;

Insufficient and inadequate diplomacy. Given Azerbaijan’s frustration with the peace process and its decision to resort to force of arms, the scale and scope of *diplomatic engagement must be expanded and enhanced*. Although the OSCE Minsk Group format is the sole diplomatic mechanism, more can be done to *widen and deepen diplomacy*, in several ways: (1) expanding the number of stakeholders, (2) reiterating the incentives for peace, (3) “naming and shaming” the aggressor, while ending the disingenuous “false parity” of always “blaming all sides” for unacceptable behavior;

Difficult to disengage. Another consideration is that given the intensity of the clashes and the unprecedented losses, it will be very difficult for all sides to disengage. Thus, there needs to be more investment in *“face-saving” ways for the combatants to “climb down” and “step back”* from the brink. But given the lack of political will and the absence of statesmanship, this necessitates a more nuanced strategy that seeks to “refreeze” the conflict itself and focus more on engaging civil society, empowering moderate peace advocates, and enhancing democratization in the parties to the conflict themselves, while at the same time resisting efforts by the local elites to drive the agenda and define the narrative;

A “new normal.” And a final observation is that this conflict is now defined by a “new normal,” meaning that it is now virtually impossible to return to the earlier status quo.

² For more, see our analysis from the time: “RSC Nagorno-Karabakh Situational Assessment,” Regional Studies Center (RSC), 14 December 2015, Yerevan, Armenia. www.regional-studies.org/publications/rsc-analysis/467-141215

³ See: Giragosian, Richard, “Nagorno-Karabakh: The death of diplomacy,” al Jazeera English commentary, 3 April 2016. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/nagorno-karabakh-death-diplomacy-russia-azerbaijan-armenia-160403105406530.html

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the same time, looking forward, there are also several recommendations for the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA):

Strengthening the Ceasefire: given the collapse of the previous ceasefire regime, it is now a pressing priority to elevate the 5 April agreement on the cessation of hostilities to a higher and more durable ceasefire regime. Clearly the inherent weakness and fragility of the prior ceasefire, evident in the lack of any external security guarantee and very weak monitoring and supervision, necessitates measures to forge a more robust and lasting ceasefire, including:

- the permanent deployment of ceasefire observation team, based on the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to Georgia model, but under the auspices of the OSCE and with a more effective mandate for inspections that no longer require the permission of all parties to the conflict in advance;
- a more strident investigation mechanism, with adequate resources, that can more forcefully deter any side from willfully violating the ceasefire.

Shaping the Environment: in the aftermath of the most serious military clashes in over two decades, the most pressing imperative is to “shape the environment,” in several ways:

- **Empower moderates & marginalize militants:** this is the time to embrace, engage and empower more moderate voices within civil society, through support for “track two” engagement, peace-building efforts and “conflict transformation” activities aimed at fostering a “return to normalcy” on all sides;
- **Challenging the narrative:** by retaking control of the debate and confronting the nationalist discourse and providing more political cover for the leaders to back down while “saving face.” At the same time, this will also help to marginalize and isolate the militants in each society, who are most often a small, but vocal minority.

Crafting a Communications Strategy: to reiterate the incentives for peace, highlighting the diplomatic dividends from mediation over the cost of force of arms, which involve a much higher scale of liabilities than simply the loss of life but that also constitute the broader threats of isolation and insignificance for these countries.

Facilitating Back-Channel Communications: in the face of a unilateral decision by Azerbaijan to end the back channel line of communication and “hotline,” there is an obvious need to restore such communication in order to prevent any miscalculation and to facilitate more regular contacts behind the scenes.

Leveraging the Synergy: it is helpful to better leverage the synergy from other more positive trends in the broader region, such as the process of civil society efforts to sustain the momentum in support for the “normalization” of relations between Armenia and Turkey and, to a lesser degree, the re-engagement of Iran as a result of the important nuclear deal with Iran.

Pressing for More Intolerance: despite shortcomings in democracy and the general lack of tolerance in these still immature political systems, there is a need for a degree of “selective intolerance,” whereby public resignation and civic apathy over corruption and the lack of political will among the governing elites is no longer as tolerated or acceptable.