Lessons from Nagorno-Karabakh for Israel and Palestine:
Does Unresolved Conflict Destroy Democracy?

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A. Introduction

Azerbaijan and Armenia exited the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, putatively for a future of democracy. Twenty years later, both are on the opposite path. Over two decades of unresolved, highly militarized, ethno-nationalist territorial conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK, or "Karabakh") have come to dominate aspects of society in both states. Whether active or dormant, the constant threat of military escalation and solid resistance to political resolution places a significant burden on democratic political development in both places.

With its combination of competing ancient narratives and modern injury, the NK conflict shares various factors with Israel and Palestine. These factors are worth exploring not for the sake of inspiration. Rather, in comparing two stubbornly unresolved and often violent conflicts, I seek to identify aspects that contribute to political stagnation, escalation or other negative developments, with some distance. This paper seeks applicable lessons to mitigate the effects of conflict, even when a peace process is absent.

The main contours shared by both Israel-Palestine and NK involve conflicts in which one side, in word or deed, is ultimately unwilling to accept self-determination of the other. In each of the two conflicts, the geopolitical status of the land areas under dispute is unstable, eroding the political status-quo – Israel expands settlements, and Armenians deepen their grip over occupied regions of Azerbaijan. Social echo-chambers on both sides of each conflict commonly reinforce hardline positions.

The democratic character of the entities in these two conflicts appears less comparable at first glance. Azerbaijan and Armenia are former Soviet republics, struggling with transition; Israel proper has a culture of democracy. But a close look at each region shows protracted conflicts that are increasingly incompatible with democratic norms, even when such norms appear strong on the surface.

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This paper examines the link between the unresolved conflict and internal political/social life within each of the two societies involved in the NK conflict, and what insights this holds for Israel and Palestine. It focuses mainly on internal dynamics, and only minimally on the international dimensions of both conflicts, because this appears to be a particularly pertinent area of comparison, as I seek to demonstrate below.

B. Background to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

NK is a small territory of just under 150,000 people that lies within the internationally recognized sovereign borders of modern Azerbaijan.[1] Armenians have been a majority there since before the 20th century, with a significant Azeri minority until the 1990s.

In a series of complex negotiations in the early 1920s, Josef Stalin gave Karabakh to Azerbaijan rather than Armenia, with the unique status of an "autonomous oblast" within the Azeri republic.[2] Armenians view Stalin's decision as an intolerable historic mistake, and throughout the 20th century have advocated, sometimes violently, for unification with Armenia. NK holds extraordinary emotional force as a spiritual, religious and mythical center of Armenian national identity. In the late 1980s, rising nationalism in the region led to massive Armenian demonstrations in both Yerevan and NK for unification, as the Soviet Union began to unravel. Violence broke out against both sides, resulting in early ethnic flight (Azeris fled Armenia and vice versa). Chaos rose, Karabakh's Armenian community declared independence unilaterally, and full-fledged war broke out from 1991 to 1994. About 25,000 people were killed and over one million became refugees, three-quarters of them Azeris. With Russian military equipment,[3] Armenian forces won de facto control over Karabakh and captured seven adjacent territories, which are widely considered to be occupied.[4] To this day, no country recognizes NK's self-declared independence.

Following the truce in 1994 there have been regular escalations along the "Line of Contact" between Karabakh and Azerbaijan. In April 2016, the most severe such violence broke out; it appears that Azerbaijan mounted a planned incursion, rather than spontaneous outbreak; up to 200 people were killed on both sides.[5]

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[1] National Statistical Service of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, *Statistical Yearbook of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic 2008-2014*.

[2] Svante E. Cornell. "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. Report No. 46," (Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, 1999), p. 10.

[3] The role of Russia has been disputed and Russia did not openly acknowledge it as policy. Evidence seems to point to arms sales to both sides. For Armenian forces the military equipment was considered a substantial factor in the eventual Armenian control. See Thomas Goltz, "Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand," *Foreign Policy* 92, Autumn 1993, pp. 92-116, and Michael P. Croissant, *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Causes and Implications* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 80.

[4] From the Azerbaijani perspective, the entire de facto autonomy of Karabakh is viewed as an Armenian occupation, since Azerbaijan does not distinguish NK authorities from Armenia's regime. Rather, Azerbaijan views the entire situation as a state-to-state irredentist conflict. However, the international community mainly views the seven additional territories as "occupied" – leaving the situation in the historic territory of Karabakh rather undefined.

[5] International Crisis Group, "Nagorno-Karabakh: New Opening, or More Peril?," Report N°239. International Crisis Group, 4 July 2016., pp. 2-6

Both bilateral negotiations and longtime international mediation led by the Minsk Group, in the framework of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have failed.[6] Azerbaijan refuses any compromise of its sovereignty in NK (despite de facto control of Armenians there), while Armenians demand independence at the least – while some long ultimately for unification with Armenia. Like Israel-Palestine, Karabakh has fallen into a political stasis, or "conflict management," rather than resolution, while violence threatens, mostly around the "Line of Contact" regions.[7] Moreover, the conflict dominates the political life of both Armenia and Azerbaijan – both of which are suffering from varying levels of political and institutional dysfunction, in many ways related to the conflict.

C. Themes for Comparison

Although both regions involve an ethno-national/religious conflict, as well as land and sovereignty disputes, there are many differences. The Caucasus conflict is being fought between two sovereign states; and the history of the contested land differs from the occupied Palestinian territories, which were never part of sovereign Israel. But this section focuses on comparable points, specifically the obstacles to resolution, and the effects of non-resolution. The obstacles include disagreements over core conflict issues, and the complex role of international actors. The effects of non-resolution include ongoing armament, mission creep regarding Armenian entrenchment in the additional occupied areas, and nearly single-minded orientation of each society towards winning the conflict which I argue contributes to a major deficit, or erosion, of democracy.

1. Core conflict issues: self-determination, refugees, occupied territory

The status of Karabakh is the most fundamental and intractable problem: Azerbaijan completely rejects full secession from its sovereign territory, viewing it as a step towards Armenian irredentism. The argument thus differs from Israel's reasoning for ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, but the obstacle to resolution is common to both.[8] Azerbaijan's position has been to offer wide autonomy to NK within the framework of Azerbaijani sovereignty.[9] Similarly, right-wing Israeli politicians advocate explicitly against Palestinian statehood, speaking instead of localized autonomy and municipal-level self-governance. Azerbaijan's

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[6] The Minsk Group was established in 1994 by the then-CSCE, responding to the war in NK from 1991-1994. The group is co-chaired by France, Russia and the US; its permanent members include Belarus, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, and Turkey, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan. See: "Who We Are," Minsk Group/OSCE website.

[7] Thomas de Waal. "Nagorno-Karabakh: Crimea's doppelganger," *Open Democracy*, 13 June, 2014. Since the widespread ethnic flight of both groups in the 1990s, there is less direct friction or violence in Karabakh or in Azerbaijan (though some Armenians remain in Azerbaijan). The sporadic escalations are mostly around the "border" areas – geographic, if not political boundaries.

[8] Since the Madrid negotiations in 1991, Israel nominally accepts the principle of Palestinian self-determination, but broadly insists that security needs preclude independence.

[9] For a very detailed review and analysis of the various formulations, see Ali Abasov and Haroutiun Khachatrian, "The Karabakh Conflict: Variants of settlement – Concepts and reality," (Third edition revised and updated) *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South-Caucasus Co-ordination Office*, 2006.

position has not led to any progress in negotiations; it is also worth noting that for years, Serbia used almost identical wording as Azerbaijan for its [Serbia's] vision regarding Kosovo. The latter did not prevent Kosovo's widely-recognized independence today.

Another key issue is the problem of over three-quarters of a million Azeri refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), who fled Karabakh and Armenia during the war. The basic plans for resolution generally include the principle of return for the displaced Azeris.[10] The notion of return for Palestinian refugees from 1948 is of course a particularly thorny obstacle in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; in both cases the tension between international law, and the intra-communal desire for ethnic-majority societies makes such return into a conceptual threat (for Armenians in NK, and for Israeli Jews).

A third overriding issue is the status of the seven occupied territories adjacent to the region of Karabakh, captured and held by Armenian forces since the war. The general assumption among outside observers (and obviously for Azerbaijan) is that these regions must be returned to Azerbaijani sovereignty. UN Security Council resolutions were declared even during the war, through to recent principles proposed in 2015 by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.[11] Yet Armenian historicization and increasing entrenchment in these regions makes future return increasingly complicated.[12]

The observations related to these overlapping core issues can be summed up: offering autonomy short of self-determination for Armenians in Karabakh has not advanced resolution, and failed in the case of Kosovo. Refugees are understood to have the right of return, in a way that can be negotiated. And territories that international actors understand to be occupied are expected to be returned.

In the Israeli-Palestinian context, the observation is that partial-birth autonomy for Palestinians is unlikely to work, as it did not work for Kosovo and so far not for NK. The principle of refugee return must be incorporated, even if not fully implemented, or negotiated to reach other solutions rather than full implementation; it cannot be dismissed. There are precedents in past rounds of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for finding a range of solutions, even including some symbolic number of returnees; but Israel's hardline environment appears heading towards a rejectionist direction. Further, the international community will never drop the expectation that areas under military occupation will either be returned to sovereign control, or given full civil rights and governance.

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[10] International Crisis Group, *ibid*, p. 6. Note that over 1 million people in total were displaced during the war, including Armenians, but the vast majority were Azeris.
[11] *Ibid*, p. 8. The Lavrov principles have not been made completely public, but are rumored to encourage concessions and return of some of the occupied regions in order to boost the peace process, according to the ICG authors.
[12] Laurence Broers, "Nagorno-Karabakh's Summer of Violence," *World Politics Review* 12, August 2014, p. 7.

These elements are the heart of the NK conflict; they are not exhaustive, but presumably if an agreement were reached over these, drafts proposals for resolving numerous other aspects could be agreed.[13]

2. Diplomacy, negotiation, international mediation = unsuccessful

The international community has invested extensive energy in an exhaustive series of mediations; led by the Minsk Group under the auspices of the OSCE. UN Security Council resolutions have passed but remained at the declarative level (four such resolutions demand the return of the occupied territories), yet there have been few consequences of non-implementation. But the basic parameters have been laid out, loosely and informally named for various initiatives: the Madrid principles (2007), the Kazan plan (2011), and most recently the Lavrov plan (2015).[14] They tend to be variants on the themes observed earlier: a measure of autonomy or "interim" status for Karabakh – pushing off decisions about independence; return of the occupied territories (i.e., withdrawal of Armenian forces) and refugee/IDP relief and possibly international guarantees or a peacekeeping mission. In other words, the basic outline is "known" – as often heard in Israel and Palestine with relation to the two-state solution, where the Clinton parameters (2000), the Quartet Road Map (2003), and the Geneva Initiative (2003) have also led many to presume that the solution is basically "known", if the sides would only find their way through the process. But there appears to be insufficient incentives or political will of political leaders on either side to get there, bolstered by zero-sum public attitudes (observed below).

Further, international intervention holds a major contradiction: on the one hand, the meta-state bodies support and call for peace. At the same time, external actors have contributed significantly to the military brinkmanship through arms sales (in the case of Russia, a single actor has done both).[15]

It is hard to avoid comparing the international contradictions to US policy in Israel and Palestine. The US advocates peace and a two-state solution. Yet at the same time, it provides massive ongoing military aid to Israel that helps the latter to maintain the political status quo. Like Russia's military supply to Karabakh (in that case, to both sides) alongside its negotiation efforts, the inherent contradiction appears unlikely to advance peace, nor generate a clear and consistent policy approach.

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[13] Other core issues include NK isolation due to Azerbaijan's restrictions on travel and entry; mechanisms to prevent escalation, regional stability and security, for example.

[14] These are not so much formal plans as sets of principles, based on discussions held in previous years and building on one another, with larger or smaller innovations in each. See for example "The Madrid Principles: Full Text," Armenian Research Center, Madrid, 2007; Anna Hess Sargsyan, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Obstacles to a Negotiated Settlement," *CSS Analysis in Security Policy* 131, April 2013; Thomas de Waal, "Peace for Our Time in Nagorno Karabakh," *Moscow Times*, 24 June 2011; and for the Lavrov plan, discussed more seriously following the flare-up in 2016: Thomas de Waal, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Resolving the Karabakh Security Dilemma," Carnegie Europe, 16 June 2016.

[15] Eduard Abrahamyan, "Armenia's New Ballistic Missiles Will Shake Up the Neighborhood," *National Interest*, 12 October 2016.

Concerning the (lack of) political will of the parties to resolution, Israelis and Palestinians – at least the leadership, but many people as well – both seem to believe they have time on their side. Israel's position has been to expand and deepen its control over land under military occupation, historicizing and infusing settlements with deep religious meaning, on the presumption that it will be ever-harder to force concessions with such deep connections. Palestinians have often expressed the sense that as their population grows, Israel will fall under ever-greater pressure to end military rule and move to a one-person, one-vote system, like South Africa. In both cases, these broad conceptions have contributed to a sense of low urgency helped to perpetuate conflict for decades, though the shape of a solution exists, and has even won putative agreement.

3. Culture of rejectionism

All conflicts involve negative views of the enemy. But in the Caucasus, typical conflict attitudes appear almost universally embraced; each side displays strict rejectionism of the other, with little variation. Dissenting, self-critical or conciliatory attitudes are rare.

Armenians view the Azerbaijanis as a "young nation" with no significant national claim to Karabakh other than a historic mistake.[16] The Armenian narrative commonly associates Azerbaijan with Turks, linking them with the 1915 genocide and interpreting modern Azerbaijani violence during the 1980s and 1990s as an extension of this history. Self-criticism, sympathetic understandings of the enemy and most recently, talk of territorial concessions, are almost totally rejected.[17] Diaspora politics, specifically among the well-organized Armenians, are hardline, largely monolithic and often contribute to the nationalist narrative at home.

Azerbaijan views the Armenians as occupiers violating international law and destroying their sovereign integrity; citing Armenian acts of violence before and during the war as proof of terrorism. Stirrings of dissent or conciliatory attitudes are met with harsh reactions. In 2013, an Azerbaijani novelist of national acclaim was excoriated for a book that looked self-critically at the conflict. He was stripped of his prizes, family members lost their jobs; politicians made derogatory and even violent threats.[18] Alex Grigorievs, who worked for the US National Democracy Institute in the South Caucasus, said that anti-Armenian sentiment and attitudes of revenge have replaced communism as a government ideology of Azerbaijan.[19]

The Armenian approach mirrors Israelis, whose collective historic trauma is a filter for viewing current injuries as an existential threat. Like the Azerbaijanis, Palestinians view Israeli occupation as an overriding factor of life. This can lead to reductionist approaches, focusing on Israel as the source of all that ails their

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[16] Author interview with David Babayan, Deputy Foreign Ministry of NK, December 2012.
[17] On closed attitudes regarding territorial concessions, author conversation with Anna Hess Sargsyan, senior program officer with the Mediation Support Team at the Center for Security Studies, Zürich, 18 August 2016.
[18] Damien McGuinness, "Azeri writer Akram Aylisli hounded for 'pro-Armenian' book," *BBC News Tbilisi*, 15 February 2013.
[19] Author conversation, 26 August 2016.

society, and the target of all hostility. All sides seek evidence, and interpret developments, in ways that prove their worst images of the others.

However, by contrast to the Caucasus, both Israeli and Palestinian society show significant diversity of political communities. In politics, there are hard-liners and moderates, advocates of military force versus diplomacy; correspondingly, society on both sides has hawks, doves, extremists, moderates, and independent-minded thinkers, with lively debates among each camp through a range of media outlets and civil society activities both in the region and abroad.

Thus, while neither side has excelled at conflict resolution, it appears that Israelis and Palestinians have a more fertile environment for cooperation and creative thinking: people who wish to do so can self-identify and find each other through numerous existing frameworks; there are many ways to take action in favor of peace, or de-escalation. Sometimes citizen action contributes to policy change or legitimize policy options – such as the Israeli civil society group Four Mothers, which helped pressure the Israeli government to end the occupation of Lebanon; or the Geneva initiative, which popularized the "two-state parameters," throughout the worst years of the Second Intifada; through to the recent Israeli and Palestinian initiatives advocating a confederation model for the region.[20] Azerbaijanis and Armenians may benefit from realizing that Israelis and Palestinians have a social and political space to advocate conciliatory attitudes, concessions needed for an eventual peace, and new strategies for breaking the status quo.[21] These could empower any future political leadership in favor of change. However, the condition for such diversity of views is a measure of free discourse that is largely lacking in the Caucasus; and may be increasingly threatened in both Palestine and Israel.

4. Militarization, escalation, and "mission creep"

Both sides are deeply engaged in a cycle of violence. The war in NK ended in 1994 with a ceasefire, and each actor committed to eventually winning. Following the war, oil resources off the Caspian Sea gave Azerbaijan an inflated sense of economic strength, which the leadership has used to pour money into armament; it is not yet clear what the fall in oil prices will mean.[22] Russia has and continues to sell arms to both sides.[23] Similarly, Israel has famously invested tremendous social and economic capital in its military. The military industry is integral to

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[20] See the "Two States, One Homeland" project for more on the confederation initiative.
[21] Israeli and Palestinians do not have identical conditions to undertake such activities. Many Palestinians have adopted (or are constrained by) "anti-normalization" attitudes or face social opprobrium for cooperation and dialogue; they also face a more restrictive political and media environment from both Palestinian authorities and the ongoing constraints of Israeli military, compared to Israelis. However, the diversity of approaches among Palestinians finds expression despite this, and abroad as well; although this is not a systematic measure, both Israeli and Palestinian societies appear to express more diversity of public attitudes than Azerbaijanis and Armenians.
[22] Youri Smakouz, "Azerbaijan: Falling Economy, Rising Karabakh War Risk," *EurasiaNet Commentary*, 15 May 2015.
[23] Abrahamyan, *ibid.*

Israel's economy, and arms sales rise following each major escalation (including to Azerbaijan).[24]

The militarization, and social capital and finances invested in it, do not only contribute to a mindset prepared for escalation; they also place a burden on democratic development, which is explored in the next section of this paper.

Both conflicts have seen recent escalation (2014 for Israel-Palestinians; 2016 in NK). Further, as I have argued elsewhere, no conflict is truly frozen, and no status quo is static.[25] Armenian authorities are working consistently to incrementally settle and historicize the occupied regions, what Laurence Broers calls "mission creep" – clearly overlapping, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with settlement expansion or "creeping annexation" in Area C of the West Bank.[26] In both cases, this form of escalation involves deep nationalist and/or religious investment in the lands meant for concessions. The common observation is almost banal: as long as both sides prioritize the military aspect of the conflict so exclusively, more and more elements of society and the economy become dependent on the military component: from political and financial priorities, to social capital and cohesion. And as long as each side invests emotionally in owning the very land meant to advance peace, there can be no question that they are not planning on concessions; and the opposing side of the conflict is justified in perceiving such moves as anti-peace.

5. The impact on democracy

Azerbaijan is becoming the archetype of post-communist authoritarian societies. In 2016 Freedom House has bluntly rated it "not free," noting severe deterioration in 2015.[27] Surveys in Azerbaijan from 2011-2013 showed that a majority of the public agreed that democracy was the best form of government;[28] at present Azerbaijan no longer allows the organization to conduct surveys.[29] Azerbaijan's long-running President, Ilham Aliyev, won an international 'prize' for the most corrupt politician of 2013.[30] Journalists and human rights activists and opposition figures are commonly jailed – sometimes on charges of "spying for Armenia." The situation in Armenia is only marginally better. Freedom House rates it as only "partly free."[31] In fact, corruption and government incompetence is generating waves of dissatisfaction there too. The current president, Serzh Sargsyan, has

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[24] For a good account of this point, including data on arms sales, see "The Lab" documentary film by Yotam Feldman, 2013.
[25] Dahlia Scheindlin, "Lessons from Cyprus for Israel-Palestine: Can Negotiations Still Work?" *Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, September 2016.
[26] Broers, *ibid.*
[27] "Freedom in the World: Azerbaijan," *Freedom House*, 2016.
[28] Caucasus Barometer: Time series data, 2011-2013, *Caucasus Research Resource Center*.
[29] Author conversation with Koba Turmanidze of the Caucasus Research Resource Center which conducts the Caucasus Barometer, 30 August 2016.
[30] Robert Coalson, "Azerbaijani President Aliyev Named Corruption's 'Person of the Year'," *Radio Free Europe*, 2 January 2013.
[31] Freedom on the World: Armenia, *ibid.*

nurtured an increasingly authoritarian political culture since his election in 2008, including a disputed re-election in 2015.[32]

To what extent is this situation the result of the conflict? A decade ago, it was becoming clear that the nascent democratic direction of Azerbaijan following the break from the Soviet Union, were falling prey to the conflict. Executive power was consolidated; politicians were competing over hardline positions for how to approach the conflict. "The Karabakh issue was…exploited by the authorities to justify harsh measures repressing protest at the conduct of the elections. The regime consistently invoked the need for social stability, claiming that Azerbaijan's defeat in the war had been due to domestic turmoil."[33] A decade later, these processes have only deepened. The conflict dominates public consciousness: Azerbaijanis say "unresolved territorial disputes" is the top problem, in all the years it was tested (2008-2013), far ahead of unemployment or poverty.[34] "Anti-Armenian sentiment at present justifies their non-democratic regime - [the government] says, 'we have a war, our territory is under threat,'" says Grigorievs. Falling oil prices in the last two years have led to severe economic consequences. In response, "Instead of developing other industries, they're spending on the military, and fomenting conflict," he said, referring to the April 2016 escalation. The conflict therefore appears to prop up non-democratic governance; while corrupt, ineffective governance believes the conflict can prop up its rule.

In Armenia, president Sargsyan has sought to balance his incompetence at home by nurturing relations with Russia. Escalations in Karabakh – including Armenian provocations – have been exploited to seek Russian support: "The economic aid and coercive capabilities the Armenian regime has received from Russia depend in part on Armenia facing credible security threats. Creating an atmosphere of perpetual crisis in the South Caucasus therefore plays right into Sargsyan's hands."[35] Yet in the summer of 2016 thousands of people rallying around ultra-nationalist Armenian political opposition took to the streets. "The narrative used to be: 'The government is weak but at least the army is strong against Azerbaijani attacks,'" said an expert on the conflict.[36] Then the war in April sparked rumors that territories may have slipped from Armenian control, cracking this narrative and prompting open discontent. Yet there is little reason to believe that opposition to the current Armenian government indicates a desire for more conciliatory leadership: by most accounts, the public in both Azerbaijan and Armenia are angry with their governments for not going *further* in the April 2016 confrontation; the atmosphere in Armenia is heavily against territorial concessions at present.

In one analysis, the conflict has been viewed as hampering democratic development in *both* societies, through excessive power consolidation in the hands of individual leaders; excessive militarization; and perpetuation of ethnic

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[32] Elen Aghekyan and Ani Karapetyan, "Armed Standoff in Armenia: Why It Happened and What It Could Mean," *Freedom House*, 2 August 2016.
[33] Rasim Musabayov, "The Karabakh Conflict and Democratization in Azerbaijan," *Accord* 17, *Conciliation Resources*, p. 63.
[34] Caucasus Barometer: Time series data, 2008-2013, *Caucasus Resource Research Center*.
[35] Samuel Ramani, "Democracy Derailed: How Armenia Has Become the Post-Soviet Region's Model Dictatorship," *Huffington Post*. 18 December 2015.
[36] Ana Hess Sargsyan interview, August 2016.

politics rather than civic principles.[37] Caspersen (like others) notes that the war happened in the context budding democratic leanings, but shows how both sides have seen "reversals" following the war through similar process cited: consolidation of power, relegating reforms to secondary importance due to the urgency of unresolved territorial conflict, and outbidding among political competition.[38]

Is this reciprocal relationship between protracted conflict and poor, declining or non-existent democracy at all comparable to Israel and Palestine? At first glance, it is not obvious. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia began life as Soviet republics, with little meaningful culture of democracy, almost immediately suspended for the sake of war. Israel was established from the start with a Western social-democratic character and a vibrant, rambunctious political life. The Palestinian nation was born into violent foreign dominance.[39] The Palestinians have experienced phases of progress towards democracy and its people may yearn for such a system, but lacking de facto or de jure independence, democracy has become more remote. The 2007 Hamas takeover in Gaza has effectively ended democratic norms. In recent years Fatah, the party with putatively greater democratic inclinations, has become increasingly authoritarian in the West Bank, jailing and intimidating journalists and political critics, and deferring elections of any kind for a decade and counting.[40] Corruption is rampant. The ongoing decimation of Palestinian society through Israeli occupation and barely-functional, highly circumscribed Palestinian governance is unlikely to cultivate democratic norms that would surely contribute to conflict resolution.

Israel too has a darker side to its democratic history, bound tightly to its life in conflict. In fact, this country too was established and immediately went to war; Israel too implemented a state of emergency that actually formally continues to the present; after the first war in 1948 it enacted martial law over its largest minority of citizens for 20 years. About six months after this regime ended, the occupation of Palestinian people began. After three generations of Israelis have served in (or lived with) non-democratic military occupation regimes, Israel is now increasingly, if very incrementally, compromising democratic norms even within its civil society. A spate of legislation from roughly 2009 onwards has been tailored almost exclusively to suppress political expression related to the conflict, or to target the perceived enemy.[41] These measures have been accompanied by

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[37] Tigran Mkrtchyan, "Democratization and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 3, Fall 2007, pp. 79-92.
[38] Nina Caspersen, "Regimes and peace processes: Democratic (non)development in Armenia and Azerbaijan and its impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45 (1-2), March 2012, pp. 131-139.
[39] This is not to take a position on when the Palestinian people evolved as an identity or an ethnicity; rather, the national goal of political independence happened in the 20th century, under the shifting rule of empires or occupiers.
[40] Occasional agreements and plans to hold elections over the years since 2006 have invariably been postponed indefinitely. The most recent includes preparations for municipal elections in late 2016, which like most other attempts, fell victim to the political split between Hamas and Fatah and were, yet again, postponed.
[41] Such legislation includes the anti-boycott law, the law targeting those who mark the *Nakba* (destruction of Palestinian life), a law to intimidate left-wing and human rights NGOs, a standing law against family reunification for Arab citizens in Israel, and related developments. See for example "Overview of Anti-Democratic Legislation in the 20th Knesset," *Association for Civil*

nationalist and often racist rhetoric from the political elite on conflict related themes – which in turn rallies the public to sacrifice democratic norms to strengthen the Jewish nationalist position.

D. Lessons and Recommendations

The similarity of core conflict issues first of all reminds us that neither side is particularly unique. The overriding problem of status and sovereignty between Azerbaijan and the Armenians of Karabakh has proved intractable so far through notions of "partial autonomy" and this is unlikely to bring about an end to the conflict or claims of Palestinians too, despite the desire of certain Israeli leaders to dismiss the notion of full independence. In both cases, certain parties have expressed openness to the idea of a confederation, a looser notion of separation that maintains some association of the entities, which could help to satisfy the sovereign power; but the idea has not received widespread attention from policymakers in either place.[42] One option is to continue exploring how this might work in practice.

In both areas, the international community has sought to de-escalate and has invested in advancing peace. But despite multi-country participation in the Minsk Group, the issue tends to fall off the international radar. Lack of consequences for failure to abide by UN resolutions, alongside individual state interventions that help perpetuate the conflict, creates an ongoing contradiction to the goal of de-escalation. Since the actions of individual states are interest-based and unlikely to change, the meta-state bodies of the international community apparently need to develop better mechanisms for implementing its own policies. This is particularly relevant at the time of this writing, with some anticipation of new UN Security Council resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it also reflects on the relevance of previous UN resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (such as 194 and 242), which have conceptual importance but have never been implemented. Such situations seem destined to eventually erode the legitimacy and authority of that body.

The next observation pertains to the highly polarized public attitudes and discourse within the conflicting parties. Most Azerbaijanis and Armenians are deeply locked into nationalist narratives and opposition to concessions, let alone conciliation, appears almost impenetrable. While Israel and Palestine have not reached peace, diversity of opinion and social discourse have led to healthy shifts of policy over the years: both sides have at least rhetorically accepted the two-state solution, rather than insisting on total negation of the presence of the other. The lesson for the Caucasus is that a culture of critical discourse is necessary; if this proves impossible in less democratic societies, then diaspora groups should allow for greater dissenting discourse.

Rights in Israel, August 2016; (and previous reports) See also "Challenges to Democracy and Social Cohesion: Summary of an Israeli-American-German Trialogue," *Mitvim Institute, Middle East Institute, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, April 2016.
[42] Cornell notes that Armenian Karabakhi voices have raised this possibility in the mid-2000s, while new civil society initiatives in Israel and Palestine have also brought this option into public discourse recently. Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethno-Political Conflict in the Caucasus*, (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2001), p. 109

A culture of critical discourse depends on cultivating a democratic culture. Yet political evolution in all parties to both conflicts revolves heavily around militarization and armament. Economic life in Azerbaijan and Israel at least, is intertwined with such conflict-oriented industries. This contributes to periodic military escalation. It would clearly advance long-term social and political life by cultivating economic life that is not so deeply tied to the military industry.[43]

Finally, the democratic culture is heavily stunted or deteriorating in the Caucusus, and it is increasingly threatened in Israel – possibly waning altogether in Palestine. There is little question that heavy militarization, exclusive leverage of the conflict that either distracts or actively obfuscates government failures, justifies further military escalations and an overriding security narrative is not conducive to democratic norms. The population maintains a siege mentality and justifies governments that perpetuate siege policies. Even a society with a strong democratic tradition such as Israel must learn that it is not immune to the dangers of protracted conflict for democratic culture.

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