
TIME FOR PEACE IN THE CAUCASUS

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Nasimi Aghayev

It has been just a few weeks, but 2017 is already turning out to be a hugely tumultuous year in global geopolitics. In this very short time period, we have witnessed significant changes, tensions and uncertainty on an international scale.

With the United States facing unprecedented political winds, and with Georgia, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Iran, Israel and others being confronted with long and arduous shadows of today and unpredictability of tomorrow, the pressures are intensifying across the globe.

The world is watching to see where the new U.S. Administration will put its diplomatic resources and energy. The stakes are particularly high, as new or revived tensions have driven peaceful nations into an era of instability, and for some, hostility and aggression remain unchecked. There are so many important areas that need attention, but the dangerous Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, long in the news and often forgotten, may offer a great opportunity for this new administration. The resolution of this long-standing conflict in the strategically important Caucasus region could foster numerous strategic, political, economic and cultural benefits.

Nagorno-Karabakh remains the longest running and most dangerous conflict in the former Soviet Union. The outbreak of deadly violence last April, which was the largest since the ceasefire of 1994, vividly showed the huge vulnerability of the current status quo and the need for the conflicts soonest resolution.

And the resolution is possible. The legal foundations for it are there. All major international organizations, including the UN Security Council, UN General Assembly, Council of Europe, European Parliament, NATO, OIC, NAM and many others have condemned the occupation and expressed support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Even the European Court of Human Rights in its ruling from 2015 confirmed the facts of occupation and ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijan's territory.

Yet the occupation continues, undisturbed by denunciation. The reason? Lack of international pressure on Armenia to force its compliance with the international law. The current international legal system was established following the World War II to ensure the peace and security in the world by banning use or threat of force for territorial acquisitions and making it impermissible to continue with medieval-style land grabs. The principles of territorial integrity and inviolability of state borders are therefore the most important bedrocks of this legal system. What we have been observing however for the last few decades is a dangerous trend to upend these principles and

erode the international law, in favor of illegal territorial expansions and invasions, which are inevitably accompanied with ethnic cleansings and tremendous human sufferings.

Feb. 26, 2017 marks the 25th anniversary of the Khojaly Massacre, a tragedy referred to by Human Rights Watch as the largest massacre to date in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 1992, 613 Azerbaijani civilians, including 300 children, women and elderly, fleeing the town of Khojaly in Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region, were ambushed and brutally murdered by the armed forces of Armenia.

This tragedy was the worst atrocity of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, which resulted in the occupation and ethnic cleansing of around 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory by neighboring Armenia. Over 800,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from their ancestral lands in Azerbaijan's occupied territory, which is, for the sake of comparison, much larger than the entire state of Connecticut.

It is the responsibility of not only international organizations, but more importantly of major global powers to ensure the compliance with the international law and to stop this devastating erosion of the international legal system.

The United States is one of the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group alongside Russia and France tasked with mediating the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. It is to be hoped that with the new Administration in Washington, D.C. the United States will intensify its efforts as a conflict mediator to bring about a long overdue resolution of this conflict firmly based on international law, ending an illegal occupation and allowing the refugees to return to their homes and lands.

The current status quo is detrimental not only to the development of the region, but also has wider global implications. Today Azerbaijan is at the helm of significant geostrategic developments, such as the TANAP/TAP Gas Pipeline that will soon deliver huge amounts of Caspian natural gas to Europe diversifying the Old Continents energy sources, or the New Silk Road with the construction of transcontinental network of highways, railways, waterways and airports connecting China and India with Europe.

The majority-Muslim secular and tolerant Azerbaijan has been a key partner to the United States in trade, fighting terror, and securing peace in vulnerable nations, such as Afghanistan, where Azerbaijan has continued to send troops to aid the U.S. and international effort. Azerbaijan's role as a rare ally in an unpredictable region offers enormous opportunity for positive change on a global scale and yet the potential success of these many factors is threatened by the continuing occupation of its territory.

With so much at stake, it is time for the United States and other global powers to act to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and finally bring lasting peace to the Caucasus. It should be a priority for this new administration, with so much at stake in the region. Because, tomorrow could be too late.

Nasimi Aghayev is Azerbaijan's Consul General to the Western United States, based in Los Angeles.