Azerbaijani Sociological Association
Armenian Sociological Association

Comparative Sociological Analysis of the Potential of Azerbaijani and Armenian Peoples For Peace-Building and Post-Conflict Cooperation

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Introduction

This essay summarizes the results of surveys conducted in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The aim of the research is to evaluate what perceptions citizens of the two countries have towards each other in order to identify some of the conditions of a peaceful reconciliation to the current conflict and to discover areas of compatibility that can support cooperation after peace is achieved. The main hypothesis is that there are overlapping attitudes and perceptions towards the conflict capable of defining mutual areas of interest in regard to which contact points can be identified for a sustainable peace and future cooperation between the nations.

Section One-Methodology

1200 respondents were surveyed in each country. The Multi-Stage Random Area Sampling procedure was used to select representative samples of the populations. Random sampling was achieved through selecting one respondent from each household by birthday closest to the date of the interview. The survey was conducted face-to-face with individuals in their households, and confidentiality was protected by assuring complete anonymity. The survey was conducted by respondent’s own volition. After coding, the questionnaires were quantified using the SSPS program.

In Armenia, 67.7% of the sample was from urban centers and 32.3% were from rural communities. Median age was approximately 40 years old, and 94.4% had secondary or higher levels of education, but 37.9% were unemployed (other than students, housewives, and pensioners). Females slightly outnumbered males (53% to
In Nagorno-Karabakh, the sample is similarly divided as to age, education, though income is higher, on the average in NK; in NK, 46.5% earned 36,001 and or more per month, while only 16.0% of the RA sample earned the same amount. Thus, the Armenian sample, including NK, is skewed towards those most likely to be involved in thinking about policy (urban and educated).

Section Two-Interpretation of Survey Results

2.1 Past experience and Current Relations

Before the present conflict, most contact between citizens of the two countries was concentrated in the spheres of business, education and shared military experience. Reciprocal trade was common along the border. Many Azeri IDPs and refugees say that they had past relations with Armenians through work experiences and other common social interactions. Post-conflict attitudes reflect a drastic change. Contact has sharply decreased due to the escalation of conflict. A small number of respondents in Armenia admitted that they maintained a modicum of contact, but on the whole, and especially in Nagorno-Karabakh, communication has virtually ceased. In Azerbaijan, the most complete termination of contact is found primarily in the inner regions of the country, while over half of respondents along the border admit to continued contact through trade. Much of this trade is either of a discreet nature, or conducted in neutral areas such as regions of the Southern Caucasus and Georgia. Trade relations and business interactions seem to resist the structures of nationalism. Moreover, in Baku, a number of respondents reported that contact continues through co-education, shared scientific work and the
Internet. Azeri refugees are particularly resentful of the Armenians due to the deportations, but over half of the IDPs expect to have future relations with the Armenians. IDPs feel this way because they see Nagorno-Karabakh as their Motherland where they will return in the future. This expectation hinges on a further expectation, more than just a hope, that Nagorno-Karabakh will be returned to them.

2.2 Mutual Perceptions and Attitudes

Both Azerbaijanis and Armenians recognize certain cultural traits that they share, including music, cuisine, historical ties, solemnities, aspects of national character, and other traditions. Nagorno-Karabakh respondents hold a markedly less hospitable perception of Azeris, although some acknowledge common cultural traditions. Despite recognizing these differences, many respondents on both sides claim no common areas of interest and, indeed, many young Azeris claim that the national interests are opposed, due to their identification of Armenia as an aggressor who forcibly occupied Azeri territory.

On the whole, Armenians see Azeris as having positive qualities, such as cosmopolitanism, internationalism, a disposition towards peace, a capacity for mercy, reliability, honesty, and responsibility. Armenians see themselves as having qualities compatible with those they attribute to Azeris, notably hospitality, diligence, a peaceful disposition, enterprise, and friendliness. While most respondents wanted peace, few believed it was likely, though many conceded that it is most likely in the areas of business and commerce. Respondents from NK are exceptional among the Armenians in that while they see Azeris as diligent, honest, reliable, and having a peaceful disposition, they do not see them as cosmopolitan, accurate, enterprising, friendly, and hospitable. In
other words, the NK portion of the sample seems to believe that, while peaceful relations are possible they are not likely to be socially and culturally extensive. Armenians in general believe that Azeris have mostly negative sentiments towards them, despite recognizing predilections toward hospitality, diligence, friendliness, and enterprise. Armenians also believe that Azeris see themselves as possessing only positive traits, yet only a handful of Armenians see themselves as having negative qualities, most notably a capacity for cruelty. Azerbaijanis tend to see themselves as kind, hardworking, patriotic, honest, reliable, accurate, responsible, hospitable, and compliant. On the other hand, Azeris see Armenians as cruel, hostile, lazy, less than honest, easily enraged, careless, irresponsible, ruthless, lacking a willingness to compromise, stubborn, and inhospitable. Nevertheless they recognize in Armenians a capacity for hard work and enterprise.

It is important to note that religious differences are not a major factor in the perceptions both national samples have of each other. More important is geographical location. In both countries, the further away people are from the border, where conflict is visible and intense, the less negative are mutual attitudes and perceptions. This accounts, in part, for the results in NK, where the conflict is close at hand. NK respondents see Azeris as possessing more positive traits than the Armenian subsample is willing to ascribe to Azeris, though they are more pessimistic about the prospects for peace, as are the Azeris who live near the border.
2.3 Opportunities and Conditions for Reestablishment of Relations

In the current state of conflict, the citizens of both sides feel that immediate reestablishment of relations is unrealistic without some settlement of territorial disputes. A significant number believe that normalization will never occur. Most respondents on both sides believe that specific conditions must be met before any real possibility for peace is feasible. Among these, for Armenians, are recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent region, a halt of the Azerbaijani blockade and a concerted attempt by both countries governments to resolve the conflict. For Azeris conditions include the return of occupied lands, the return of IDPs to occupied regions and freedom for refugees to return to their homes. Azeri respondents see trade, student exchange, inter-governmental cooperation, social programs, and cooperation among NGOs as possible areas for diminishing conflict. Most of the respondents on both sides recognize that real and lasting peace must be generated by political means. In Armenia, the main obstacle to establishing peace is deep resentment cultivated by past violence, while Azeris see territorial disputes, memories of past violence, and Armenian hostility as major obstacles to peace. NK respondents see independence as the only way to resolve the conflict, and relatively few of them were willing to support any policy not predicated on independence.
2.4 Opinion of Respondents about the History and Cause of the Conflict

The overall response in both countries was that the current conflict is fundamentally territorial. NK respondents responded differently in that they reason that the conflict is a national liberation effort on their part, that is, they see the conflict as essentially about freedom. Thus, there are differing accounts of the history of the conflict as well as conditions of its resolution.

Most Armenians see the conflict as stemming from the late 1980’s, when violence was used against Armenians in Baku, Karovabad, and Sumgait, while some cited violence by mustafatists and Turkish troops in the Shushi and Karabakh reagions in 1918, and others identified violence against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1967 as the primary cause. In general, they agree that the conflict began as a culmination of a long series of provocations and causes of resentment.

Azeris identify several different causes of the conflict, each different from those cited by the Armenian respondents. Some feel it began in the early twentieth century, and others believe it originated with territorial divisions created in the 1920s. Most respondents believe the conflict is a result of perestroika, in the late 1980s, and conditions that followed the process of the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent Russian sphere of influence. Others cite the deportations of and violence used against Azeris in 1998-99. One-third responded that the cause of conflict rests squarely on the shoulders of Armenian attempts to liberate the NKAA. Few Azeris see the conflict as stemming from an accumulation of historical resentments. There is general agreement that, whether
or not territory is at the heart of the conflict, resolution of territorial differences is a crucial condition for conflict cessation.

2.5 Image of the Opposing Party and Striving for Peace

Although both sides have deep resentments over the conflict, respondents on each side do not seem to place blame on the citizenry of the other side, though this is more true of the Azeris than the Armenians. Azeris primarily ascribe responsibility to what they see as Armenia’s aggressive politics and mass media system, which they believe generates a climate of hatred. Armenians, on the other hand, focus on Azeris as an ethnic unity in which national identity is the problem. There are obvious dangers from any such simplification and objectification. Yet, Armenians still say that cultural, economic, and social cooperation could help reestablish peaceful relations, and therefore assume it is possible. They also believe that educating younger generations to respect others will help provide support for a lasting peace. Azeris believe that halting military activity, opening the border to trade, reestablishing economic relations based on mutual interest, and encouraging information and cultural exchanges are potential areas for establishing a basis for peace. Both sides desire peace, yet they see it as far away unless key issues are addressed in a reasonable manner so as to satisfy the best interests of the citizens of both countries. Undoubtedly, the situation calls for a more immediate political solution that begins to address the status of NK and the accompanying territorial disputes.
2.6 Conditions for Cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Both Armenians and Azeris realize the benefits of sustained peaceful relations. Both Armenians and Azeris see economic stability, political stability, national security, and cultural enrichment as positive effects of peace. Contact points are identified by both sides as border trade, student exchange, government cooperation, shared business arrangements, and joint scientific, social, and ecological programs. It seems that the more globally respondents view their situation, the more open they are to finding relatively straightforward solutions to the conflict. Central to any such process are territorial disputes. The Armenian survey suggests that public opinion will be important in the effort to find a peaceful solution. The majority of Armenian respondents cite three factors which might steer public opinion towards peace and consequentially support government initiatives in that direction. First is a fair solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Second is a need for an active governmental policy focused on cooperation in areas where it is known to be possible. Third is the termination of territorial claims by both sides. This is complicated by the ways in which each population defines its interest. Azeris believe that termination of territorial claims and a fair solution to the NK issue is paramount to achieving peace, but they also support returning IDPs and refugees to permanent locations of residency and an end of what they see as Armenian media propaganda hostile towards Azeris. Azeris identify conditions that they consider inimical to peace. Among these is an unwillingness of Armenian political leaders to pursue policies that might lead to peace. They also refer in this regard to a lack of commitment to peace among Armenians and the interference of third parties in the conflict. Armenians cite unsuccessful attempts by their government to gain agreement by
Azerbaijan on terms of a peaceful resolution. They also agree that third party interference is important.

2.7 Counteracting factors and Peace Building Potential

The research supports the hypothesis that the two governments are ‘out of sync’. When one side feels it is ready to begin a process aimed at achieving peace, the other believes it is not yet ready. This is partly due to the complexity of the causal picture of the conflict and the difficult task of achieving conditions that are not clearly compatible with one another. But in the background are deep resentments over the current conflict, rooted in historical acts of violence and oppression. Many of these acts occurred in isolated cases and were not collectively violent, but some have been, as in NK’s fight for independence. Many respondents on both sides believe that resentments are the greatest hindrance to peace. Some Armenians see this conflict, somewhat cynically, as serving the interests of political and military elites. Both sides agree that educational, information and cultural communication may prove to be rich areas for cooperation as a peace process gets underway. Trade on the border and other types of commercial exchange are also identified as potential areas for expanding cooperation, and it seems that both countries media systems can contribute as well.
Conclusion

To some extent, the current conflict is at an impasse due in part to political apathy towards the sorts of action necessary for establishing conditions of a peace process. Nevertheless, the citizens of both sides desire peace. Both sides recognize that the active parties in the conflict are not individuals but governments and national agencies, yet they also recognize that action by citizens and non-governmental agencies is essential if there is to be progress. Unfortunately, as the conflict proceeds, the structures that operate in regard to it become stronger and more resistant to citizen action. There are many areas for hope but political will is necessary to activate change. In its absence, however, it is clear that cooperation can grow, as it were, from the ground up - - in the expansion of already existing areas of contact and exchange such as education, science, and trade. That may be the most important implication for policy of this research.