

# Peace-Building and Conflict Resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh

Stuart Kaufman

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Efforts to resolve ethnic conflict often run aground of the passionate public hostility that underlies them, as the recent Israeli-Palestinian violence illustrates. These popular passions are often the biggest obstacles mediators face. To fight back, mediators need to make better use of a frequently-overlooked tool: long-term peace-building efforts by non-governmental organizations, which need to be made a key part of mediators' conflict resolution strategies. Like the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process is a prime candidate for such efforts.

A lack of sophisticated analysis of the problem of ethnic violence is not the problem. If asked, the experienced diplomat can enumerate a litany of causes of violence in places such as Bosnia, the Middle East or the Caucasus. The list will typically include economic grievances, disputes over political power, self-interested extremist leaders, histories of conflict that remain alive as potent political symbols, violent prejudices, political dynamics that undermine leaders' attempts at compromise, absence of trust between the parties, extremist splinter groups, feelings of deep insecurity on both sides, and idiosyncratic problems in each case.

To address these complex problems, mediators can employ a range of policy tools. They can provide a negotiating process, suggest formulas for power-sharing or autonomy, or suggest confidence-building measures. They can offer economic reconstruction packages or other carrots and sticks to provide incentives for peace. And they can offer peacekeepers or observers to help maintain cease-fires and verify implementation of any agreement, among other options.

What is harder to do is to alter the political processes inside each group that feed the conflict--the prejudices, the flag-waving extremist leaders, violent propaganda, and so on. This is the rock on which diplomatic efforts so often founder. Leaders who take steps toward compromise are charged by opponents with selling out, while the public is reminded of the other side's atrocities and perfidies (real or alleged), and the media resonate to the emotional charges. The fate of Armenia's President Levon Ter-Petrossian, who was ousted when he tried to pursue a compromise peace in the Karabakh conflict, provides an object lesson for would-be peacemakers who get too far ahead of public opinion. Because of this constraint, ethnic wars are more often settled by military victory than by negotiations. Worse, when negotiated settlements are reached, they usually collapse into renewed fighting.

There is, of course, a reason why mediators do little to change these dynamics: should they try to do so, their attempts would be rejected by the parties as unwelcome interference in their internal affairs. *A key to promoting breakthroughs, however, is long-term support for NGOs skilled in peace-building activities. Peace-building could change the regional political dynamics over time so that, if local government cooperated, the political atmosphere could be made friendlier to peace.*

### **What is Peace-Building?**

Peace-building activities are often dismissed as either naive or ineffective, but doing so is a mistake. If ethnic hostility and fear, harnessed by political symbols, are what keep the conflict going, conflict resolution is possible only if those problems are addressed. What peace-builders do is bring together people from opposing sides of a conflict to replace the myths about the other side with better information, and replace the hostility and fear with enough understanding to make a compromise peace look attractive. Such efforts among grassroots leaders can build a political constituency for the diplomatic peace process so leaders can persuade their people to ratify a compromise settlement, then keep it on track during the implementation stage. At the level of middle-range officials, Track II diplomacy (informal talks between unofficial representatives of both sides) can be helpful in generating creative ideas for mutually acceptable conflict resolution formulas.

Peace-building can change attitudes. The usual approach is to bring together people from the groups in conflict at a neutral site, often to live together for a period of time, to discuss in detail the issues that divide them. What peace-builders find time and again is that after heated arguments and initial resistance, most participants come to an increased mutual understanding, often moving on to efforts to resolve their conflict. An example is the "Seeds of Peace" program, which brings together Israeli and Arab teenagers (mostly Palestinians, including stone-throwing intifadah participants), for a three-week summer camp program in Maine. Exposed for the first time to the humanity of the "enemy," most participants go home with an increased belief in the desirability of peace. In Mozambique, a much larger grass-roots effort including church-sponsored dialogues and a UNICEF-funded "Circus of Peace" helped to create the environment in which top leaders' peacemaking efforts succeeded.

At the level of Track II diplomacy, peace-building's proudest accomplishment is the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Oslo accords. The process began as an informal series of discussions among people with access to top-level officials. The participants worked together intensively, getting to know each other personally and learning enough about the concerns of the other side that they overcame their suspicions and developed mutually acceptable compromise formulas. The discussions then evolved into the formal negotiations that yielded the Oslo accords.

## How Does it Work?

Some other peace-building techniques include:

- grass-roots dialogue groups similar to "Seeds of Peace," but designed for adults;
- training in conflict-resolution techniques, aimed either at group leaders, or at "training trainers" to spread knowledge of such techniques more widely;
- truth commissions, as in South Africa, which help victims accept reconciliation by formally acknowledging the harm done to them; and
- capacity-building efforts aimed at the formation of networks of local NGOs, including important grass-roots or mid-level leaders, with a commitment to conflict resolution. Alumni of dialogue groups can play important roles in such networks.

One problem with such efforts is that when participants in workshops return to their polarized societies, they find few people receptive to hearing their new insights. Peace-building thus often seems ineffective. But this is so only because peace-building efforts now operate on too small a scale, and with too little coordination. Hence my key recommendations:

- The US government should fund a larger, coordinated set of peace-building efforts for resolving high-priority conflicts. A few million dollars per year per conflict would substantially increase the scale of current peace-building programs, allowing them to reach larger audiences and achieve a significant impact.
- Peace-building should be made an important part of overall conflict resolution strategies, and be linked to mediation efforts. A key role peace-building can play is to prepare the ground for peace among the populations at the grass-roots level *before* true negotiations begin, as well as while negotiations are ongoing.
- In the NIS, the priority for such efforts should be the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where popular opposition is the major obstacle to progress in negotiations.

To make these efforts work, governments and NGOs should form a partnership in the peacemaking area similar to the growing government-NGO partnership in delivering humanitarian assistance. A first step is to secure support from the groups or governments in conflict, through diplomatic approaches explaining how peace-building will help incumbent leaders by building support for their peacemaking. Since participation in peace-building dialogues essentially involves a free visit to a resort (where conflict issues are discussed), leaders might offer participation as a perk to lower-level officials who support their peace policy. Such officials are an appropriate target of peace-building efforts, and offering the perk would give them an incentive to be vocal in support of peace. Funding might best be handled through autonomous groups such as the US Institute of Peace or the Eurasia Foundation, which are skilled at identifying and monitoring NGOs on the ground who can carry out such work.

Peace-building, however, changes attitudes only at the individual level; such changes must be leveraged to alter the overall climate of opinion as well. Mediators need to emphasize the importance of conciliatory rhetoric from governments engaged in negotiations. Peace-building tools such as truth commissions can help by countering false charges with accurate facts. Most of all, leaders must develop alternative tools for gathering support, and develop a language for talking publicly about peace and reconciliation that resonates emotionally with their followers, so they can counter emotional nationalist appeals. The US failure to insist on such public peace-building is a key reason why the Israeli-Palestinian peace process so visibly failed to develop public support, especially on the Arab side.

Relatedly, leaders must be convinced of the need to turn their media into promoters of peace before an agreement is reached. A first step would be to support the creation of television programming featuring peace-building efforts, and intervening diplomatically to gain access for such programs on local government-sponsored broadcasts.

Another set of policies should be aimed at recasting ethno-nationalist myths into cooperative and tolerant ones, especially by promoting the writing and teaching of fair-minded history instead of the ethnocentric and scapegoating kind. Again, this may seem unnecessarily intrusive, but it is necessary. If children are taught in school that their group's demands are unquestionably justified, and that opposing claims are threatening and unjustified, then it becomes impossible later for national leaders to defend a settlement of the conflict based on compromise.

To address this problem, *governments and international organizations must routinely assess school curricula, and criticize and pressure countries that teach hostile myths to their schoolchildren.* For example, histories that obscure the past crimes of one's own group--including Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the 1915 Armenian genocide--should be condemned as incompatible with normal participation in the international community. Similarly, novels and poems that encourage ethnic hostility should be removed from schools' literature curricula. In Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could usefully take on this job, institutionalizing a process of evaluating the national histories and literatures appearing on school curricula.

Many of these tasks are, to be sure, long-term ones that would take decades to fully bear fruit. That is as it should be. Conflict resolution is not only about reaching agreements, but about reaching agreements that can hold permanently. No one should consider satisfactory the 1972 settlement in Sudan that came undone a decade later. The job of peace-building is to create an atmosphere in which a settlement can be reached, and be sustained once reached. In ethnic conflicts, characterized as they are by deep fear and hatred, the job realistically takes decades to be completed. Peace-building is the only tool that can do that job.

## **Peace-Building in Nagorno-Karabakh**

The stalled peacemaking process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict illustrates the need and potential for peace-building efforts of this kind. In 1997-98, talks mediated by OSCE's Minsk Group advanced until Armenian President Ter-Petrosian's endorsement of the proposed compromise led to his ouster. In 1999, a promising series of bilateral meetings between new Armenian President Robert Kocharian and Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliev remained barren of results, in part because the October assassination of Armenian Premier Vazgen Sarkisian weakened Kocharian's political base, crippling his ability to garner domestic support for his efforts. While the full details of the Aliev-Kocharian talks were not published, every concession allegedly offered was excoriated by the political opposition in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In short: the peace process is not progressing because political support for compromise is weak on both sides.

The problem is that the political debate on both sides is dominated by hard-liners only timidly opposed by government officials. One way to promote a more balanced debate would be peace-building efforts. While some such programs exist now, pursued by a growing network of NGOs, they are few and small in scale; the US government should fund many more such efforts coordinated through the US Institute of Peace or the Eurasia Foundation, both of which have expertise in the region. These efforts should include:

- funding of Armenian- and Azerbaijani-language documentary and dramatic films (for TV and cinema) that promote reconciliation and humanize the "other;"
- funding and publication in both languages of studies detailing the economic costs to both sides of continued conflict, and the likely economic benefits of a peace agreement;
- establishment of grassroots dialogue groups, ideally aimed at veterans of the Karabakh war, who are among the most vocal opponents of the peace process (especially on the Armenian side);
- capacity-building efforts aimed at helping the network of pro-peace NGOs in the region to expand; and
- international academic conferences aimed at assessing the historical literatures in both countries, including academic writings and history and literature texts used in schools.

While there are numerous reasons for urgency in the pursuit of peace in Nagorno-Karabakh--not least Aliev's advanced age and uncertain health--this is not a reason to overlook these medium- and long-term efforts. On the contrary: the sooner they are undertaken, the sooner they can begin to have an effect.