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ARTSAKH BETWEEN HISTORY AND SOVEREIGNTY: THE DISPUTED IDENTITY OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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This article explores the contested identity of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) through historical and political analysis. Prompted by the Munich Security Conference (February 17, 2024), where Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev asserted that “Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan,” the study interrogates this claim against Armenian and Azerbaijani narratives. Using case study methodology, it examines historical timelines, cultural continuity, and linguistic evidence to highlight how history is mobilized politically to legitimize sovereignty. The analysis underscores the tension between de facto Armenian self-governance and de jure Azerbaijani sovereignty, situating Artsakh within broader debates on identity and international law. It also considers the humanitarian dimension, including the 2023 refugee crisis, which displaced over 100,000 Armenians. Ultimately, the article argues that reconciliation requires acknowledging contested histories while prioritizing peace and coexistence. Artsakh thus emerges as both historically Armenian and legally Azerbaijani, embodying the paradox of memory and sovereignty in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Aliyev, Nagorno-Karabakh, Pashinyan, political solution.*

Introduction

Panel discussions on the Azerbaijan – Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were convened as part of the Munich Security Conference (MSC), held in Germany on February 17, 2024. The session brought together Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan under the moderation of Celeste Wallander, President and CEO of the US–Russia Foundation. Opening the discussion, the moderator emphasized the guiding principle of the MSC: “Munich Security Conference has always focused on, and is working on, the peaceful settlement of disputes in the international system” (Munich Security Conference

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2024 Panel Discussions, 2024). Accordingly, both leaders were invited to deliver their perspectives on the conflict. President Aliyev, speaking first, recalled missed opportunities for dialogue in previous years. He noted that former Armenian President Serge Sargsyan had cancelled his participation at Davos at the last moment, thereby preventing an earlier exchange of views between the two sides. Aliyev then stressed the importance of historical context in any attempt to resolve the dispute, declaring: “Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan. This is the historical truth, and the territorial integrity is recognized by the whole world. Nagorno-Karabakh is an integrated part of our country” (Munich Security Conference 2024 Panel Discussions, 2024).

By foregrounding history, Mr. Aliyev framed the resolution of the conflict as inseparable from questions of territorial belonging and legitimacy. This raises two important questions that merit closer examination:

- How have historical narratives shaped the claims of both Armenia and Azerbaijan?
- What cultural and political sources inform these competing perspectives?

In the following analysis, I will seek to address these questions by drawing on diverse historical and cultural materials, in order to better understand the roots of the conflict and the positions articulated during the MSC panel.

Considering the fact that the vicious battles taking place on the highlands of the Country of Hayk, over the mountains of the Caucasian region between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan have caused immense suffering, it is time to seek answers based on historical facts, cultural evidence, and linguistic context. Ultimately, the goal is to assess the accuracy of President Aliyev’s statements and advocate for a mutual political solution, one that prioritizes peace over continued bloodshed and the loss of future generations. I believe that both nations have already shed too much blood. Thus, the urgent task is to move beyond cycles of violence and toward a framework of reconciliation, where historical truth is acknowledged but the future is built on peace and coexistence.

At the outset, since President Aliyev foregrounded history in framing the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh’s belonging, whether to Armenia or to Azerbaijan, I will examine the historical narratives of both countries. By consulting diverse historical and cultural sources, I aim to provide answers that clarify the roots of the conflict and evaluate the claims presented during the MSC panel.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict explained: history, facts, rights, and debates

Before we proceed, it’s important to examine what the ethnonym Azerbaijan actually denotes. Academic sources note that the Turkic people of Iranian Azerbaijan and the Republic of Azerbaijan were historically referred to as

Muslims, Turks, Turkmens, Persians, or Ajams (Swietochowski, 1995; Suny, 1993). This means Iranian and Caucasian Azerbaijanis' religious identification prevailed over their ethnic identification.

In ancient and early medieval times, eastern Transcaucasia was inhabited by various ethnic groups, including the Medes (ancient Iranians), Persians, then nomadic Turkic tribes, Kurds, and the Caucasian Albanians, who converted to Christianity in the 4th century and came under the cultural influence of the Armenians. After Arab incursions in the 7th century, the Islamic Empire was established and Islam began to spread throughout the area. Later, during the Seljuq invasions in the 11th century the composition of the local population was changed and the linguistic dominance of Oghuz Turkic languages was established. But, unlike the Ottoman Turks who came to dominate Anatolia, the Caucasian Muslims of Azerbaijan in the early 16th century became Shi'i, rather than Sunni Muslims, and they continued to develop under Persian social and cultural influence (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh Entries, n.d.). The Russian Empire which was first established in the region in 1721, sought to control the territory between the Black and the Caspian Seas. When Southern Caucasus became part of the Russian Empire in the 19th century, mainly between 1800–1864, the Russian authorities, who traditionally referred to all Turkic people as Tatars, defined those living in the Transcaucasian region as Caucasian Tatars in order to distinguish them from other Turkic groups (Swietochowski, 1995; Suny, 1993).

On 28 May 1918, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was proclaimed by the leading Azeri Musavat party, but it was incorporated into the Soviet Union only two years later. The country regained independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Zeynaloglu, 2020).

To know more about the area called Caucasian Albania (which is now called Azerbaijan), let's check its history starting from the 6th century Before Christ till the present days, according to world history timelines.

TIME	EVENT
550BC	Iranian tribes arrived to Caucasian Albania (Gippert and Dum, 2023).
After AD 4 th century	Christianity was adopted as the state religion of Caucasian Albania
7 th century	Due to the Arab conquest, Islamic religion was introduced to the area that is now known as modern Azerbaijan
11 th century	Seljuk Empire conquered the area and took it over
16 th century	The Safavid Dynasty took control and made it part of the Iranian Empire
19 th century	Treaty of Gulistan was signed and Azerbaijan was transferred from Persian to Russian control (ibid)

1918	Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was established
1967	The Aliyev family dominated over the Republic of Azerbaijan (Yavuz, Gunter, and Abilov 2024).
1982	Heydar Aliyev became a full member of the Soviet Politburo, important timing in Azeri history
1987	Heydar Aliyev left Soviet Politburo, the Soviet era ended in violence (International reporting and analysis on Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, n/d)
1991	After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan declared its independence
In the present day	Modern Azerbaijan is a republic with a president as the head of the state. It has a diverse economy, based on oil and gas exports, agriculture, and tourism.

After collecting historical data about Azerbaijan, let us check the history of Artsakh, also known as Nagorno- Karabakh. The region of Artsakh, historically known as Nagorno-Karabakh, occupies a central place in Armenian history. It was designated as the tenth province (*nahang*) of the Kingdom of Armenia from approximately 189 BCE until 387 CE, a period of nearly six centuries. Following the Peace of Acilisene (387 CE), Artsakh was incorporated into Caucasian Albania, which functioned as a vassal principality under the Sasanian Empire. Despite these political shifts, Artsakh retained a strong Armenian cultural and ecclesiastical identity, later emerging as the Principality of Khachen in the medieval period and eventually evolving into the Kingdom of Artsakh around the 10th–11th centuries. This continuity underscores Artsakh’s enduring role as a bastion of Armenian autonomy in the eastern highlands (Hewsen, 2001) According to a hypothesis advanced by David M. Lang, Professor of Caucasian Studies at the University of London, the ancient name of Artsakh may derive from King Artaxias I of Armenia (190–159 BCE), the founder of the Artaxiad Dynasty and the kingdom of Greater Armenia. Later, under Tigranes the Great (95–55 BCE), the region flourished with the construction of several cities bearing his name. Among these was Tigranakert, one of the most prominent urban centers of the era. The ruins of this ancient city are located approximately 50 kilometers northeast of Stepanakert, the present-day capital of Artsakh, underscoring the continuity of Armenian presence in the region from antiquity to modern times. (Lang, 1970).

According to the early Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi (5th century CE), Prince Arran (or Arhan), a descendant of the legendary Armenian patriarch Hayk through Sisak, inherited “the plain of Albania and its mountainous region,”

extending from the Araxes River up to the fortress of Hnarakert. Khorenatsi records that Arran’s descendants became the ruling families of Caucasian Albania, thereby identifying Arran as the founder of its original ruling dynasty. This account situates the origins of Caucasian Albania within the broader Armenian genealogical tradition, linking its dynastic roots to the patriarchal lineage of Hayk. (Khorenatsi 1978). The name Artsakh, in its turn, is derived from *Ar* (from *Aran*, the name of the Prince) and *tsakh* (woods, i.e., the woods/gardens of Prince Aran Sisakean (Hovannisian,1997).

Studying the early historical times, we find out that in early 4th century, in 301 to be more exact, when Armenia converted to Christianity under the rule of Arsacid dynasty of Armenia, Artsakh became a major stronghold for Armenian missionaries to proclaim the Christian Gospel to the neighboring countries. In 310 the grandson of Gregory/Grigoris the Illuminator, was ordained bishop of Caucasian Albania in the monastery of Amaras. After his martyrdom St. Grigoris became the patron saint of Artsakh (Bournoutian, 2002).

It is also worth noting that in the 5th century, around the year 410 CE, Armenian culture and civilization flourished in the early medieval Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) region. During this period, St. Mesrop Mashtots—the inventor of the Armenian alphabet—established the first Armenian school in the territory. This achievement not only advanced literacy but also strengthened the cultural and ecclesiastical identity of Artsakh, ensuring the preservation and transmission of the Armenian language and Christian tradition. (Garsoïan,1997)

Time	Event
331 BC – 428 AD For 759 years the area was called Kingdom of Greater Armenia	1- Orontes III 2- Artaxias I 3-Tigranes the Great 4- Artavazd II 5- Tiridat I & III 6- Vramshabuh 7- Artaxias IV
7th century	The Arab Caliphates dominated the area due to the Islamic conquest
9th century	Bagratid Dynasty took over
1000-1261	Kingdom of Artsakh was created
14 th century	Nomadic Seljuk tribes arrived and dominated
17th – 19th centuries (1600 - 1827)	Melikdom of Khamsa took over the place
20th century (1917)	Romanov Dynasty took over
27 June 1918	People’s Government of Karabakh was established
September 1918	Ottoman Empire dominated the area
1919	The British Empire took over
1920 – 1922	Azerbaijan Republic dominated

1922- 1991	Soviet Union dominated the area
1991	Karabagh War I- started
5-6 December, 1994 (CSCE Budapest Summit)	The situation created two parallel realities: De Facto: Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) functioned as a self-governing entity under Armenian control, while De Jure: Azerbaijan retained legal sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh in the eyes of the international community. (Waal T., 2021).
27 September, 2020	Karabagh War II started
10 November, 2020	The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War came to an end with a Russia brokered ceasefire agreement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia.
September 2023	The Demolition of the Republic of Artsakh took place due to the 2023 Azerbaijani military offensive, followed by a refugee crisis in which the entire population of Artsakh fled to Armenia

In addition to the above-mentioned historical facts, there is scientific evidence that cannot be overlooked. Genetic studies have demonstrated that Artsakh was part of the original proto-Armenian homeland, and that Armenians are direct descendants of the people who inhabited the region nearly 7,800 years ago. This continuity underscores the deep-rooted presence of Armenians in the South Caucasus, linking modern Armenian identity to ancient populations of Artsakh. (Margaryan, 2017)

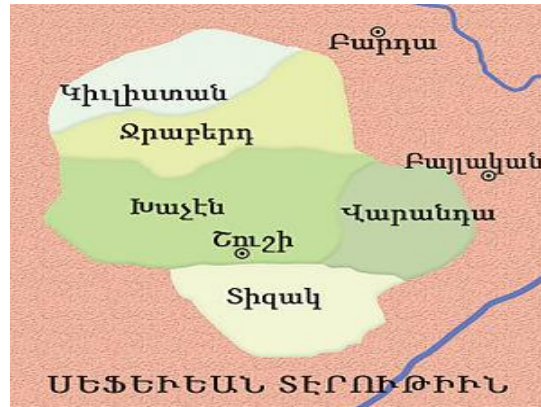
Melikdoms of the Khamsa Region: a direct reference to Artsakh

The Khamsa Melikdoms (provinces) were historically located in what is referred to as Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh. In around 17th century (during the years 1600 to 1827) five princes from five Armenian dynasties governed the Nagorno Karabakh area. These dynasties represented the descendants of the medieval kings of Artsakh. Their lands were often referred to as the *Country of Khamsa*, and the princes were called Meliks, thus the Nagorno Karabagh region was then called *Khamsayi Meikutyunner* or *Khamsa Melikdoms* (Chahin, 1987).

These provinces were called Gyulistan, Jraberd, Khachen, Varanda, and Dizak.

The most prominent and powerful Meliks were those of Karabagh (Artsakh) and Syunik. Meliks also ruled in Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Sevan, Lori, Northwestern Persia, and other areas. The Meliks of Karabagh saw themselves as the last bastion/supporters of Armenian independence in the region. However, after

the conquest of Eastern Armenia by the Russian Empire, these Meliks were generally not recognized as princes anymore, but only as untitled nobles who later became Russian generals. Let us check the history of Artsakh starting from the year 331 Before Christ till our days.



From antiquity to the present, Artsakh has been deeply tied to Armenian history and identity. Early chronicles such as Movses Khorenatsi trace its lineage to the patriarch Hayk, while in the 5th century St. Mesrop Mashtots established the first Armenian school in the region, fostering literacy and cultural flourishing. Modern genetic studies further confirm continuity, showing Armenians as direct descendants of populations inhabiting the South Caucasus for nearly 7,800 years. Politically, the 1994 ceasefire created dual realities: de facto, Artsakh functioned as a self-governing entity, while de jure, international law recognized it as part of Azerbaijan. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020) reshaped this balance, with Azerbaijan regaining territories and Russian peacekeepers securing the Lachin corridor. A comparative view highlights the persistent tension between historical-cultural claims and legal-political sovereignty, underscoring the complexity of Artsakh's status.

Conclusion

After studying the timelines of both countries in conflict (Artsakh and Azerbaijan), we can conclude that the history of the Armenian kingdom of Artsakh goes back to the year of 1000 and the history of the Republic of Azerbaijan goes back to the year of 1918. However, the actual truth is that today, Artsakh is a disputed and an arguable territory (Waal, 2021) and it is currently recognized by the international community as part of the Republic of Azerbaijan although it has historically been part of Armenia and inhabited by indigenous Armenians. Moreover, the sad truth is that today, over 100,000 Armenians have fled this homeland, many without anything but their clothes (Matevosyan, 2023).

Artsakh's story illustrates the enduring complexity of identity, history, and sovereignty in the South Caucasus. From ancient chronicles and the cultural legacy of Mesrop Mashtots to modern genetic studies confirming millennia of Armenian continuity, the region embodies a deep-rooted heritage that cannot be overlooked. Yet, the political reality remains contested: de facto, Artsakh functioned as a self-governing Armenian entity, while de jure, international law and UN resolutions recognize it as part of Azerbaijan. The 1994 ceasefire and the 2020 war reinforced this duality, with Russian peacekeepers now symbolizing the fragile balance between independence and sovereignty. Ultimately, Artsakh stands as both a cultural homeland and a disputed territory, reflecting the tension between historical memory and geopolitical law.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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**ԱՐՑԱԽԸ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԵՎ ԻՆՔՆԻՇԻՄԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԻՋԵՎ.
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Վիքի Չափաբեան

Այս հոդվածը պատմական և քաղաքական վերլուծության միջոցով ուսումնասիրում է Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի (Արցախ) վիճարկվող ինքնությունը: Մյուսիսենի անվտանգության համաժողովում (2024 թվականի փետրվարի 17) Ադրբեջանի նախագահ Բիլհամ Ալիևի «Լեռնային Ղարաբաղը Ադրբեջանի մաս է կազմում» պնդումը հաշվի առնելով՝ հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է պատմական ժամանակագրությունը, մշակութային շարունակականությունը և լեզվական ապացույցները՝ ընդգծելու համար, թե ինչպես է պատմությունը քաղաքականապես մոբիլիզացվում ինքնիշխանությունը օրինականացնելու համար: Վերլուծությունը ընդգծում է դե ֆակտո հայկական ինքնակառավարման և դե յուրե ադրբեջանական ինքնիշխանության միջև առկա լարվածությունը՝ Արցախը տեղադրելով ինքնության և միջազգային իրավունքի վերաբերյալ ավելի լայն բանավեճերի շրջանակներում: Այն նաև հաշվի է առնում հարցի մարդասիրական կողմը, ներառյալ 2023 թվականի փախստականների ճգնաժամը, որը տեղահանեց ավելի քան 100,000 հայերի: Վերջնական արդյունքում, հոդվածը պնդում է, որ հաշտեցումը պահանջում է ճանաչել վիճարկվող պատմությունը՝ առաջնահերթություն տալով խաղաղությանը և համակեցությանը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *Ադրբեջան, Ալիև, Լեռնային Ղարաբաղ, Փաշինյան, քաղաքական լուծում:*