



## SHUSHA'S PIVOTAL ROLE IN A NAGORNO-KARABAGH SETTLEMENT

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## PREFACE

In an attempt to better understand how the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia could be advanced, we asked Elchin Amirbayov of the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry what he thought Azerbaijanis would consider to be the chief necessary element of an accord between the two countries. His answer is that **control of the Shusha region is of the greatest importance to Azerbaijanis**. In the next brief, we will publish an Armenian analyst's answer to a similar question.

It is my sense that Shusha (referred to by Armenians as "Shushi") is something like the Jerusalem of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Thus, its final status is the crucial element of the settlement, and, like Jerusalem in the Middle East, it is a highly contentious issue for people on both sides of the conflict. Considering that Jerusalem is the crux of the Middle East peace question, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators might have fared better if they had not left this question to the final stages, which only encouraged radicals to derail the peace in efforts to influence the final status of the city. In a similar fashion, the negotiators handling the Nagorno-Karabagh settlement would do well to consider the question of Shusha during the earlier stages of negotiation rather than leaving it until the end.

We hope that this policy brief will help raise the awareness of U.S. policymakers, other negotiators, and people in the Caspian region to the centrality of the Shusha question as part of a successful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict.

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# Shusha's Pivotal Role in a Nagorno-Karabagh Settlement

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Peace in Nagorno-Karabagh will demand painful compromises from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. A “winner’s peace”—one that only reflects the military gains of one side—will not foster long-term resolution of the conflict. The Shusha region of Nagorno-Karabagh has special symbolic meaning for Azerbaijanis. A key element in obtaining Azerbaijani acceptance of a peace agreement is the return of the Shusha region to Azerbaijani control and the guaranteed right of internally displaced Azerbaijani persons to return to the Shusha region.

## SHUSHA AND A SETTLEMENT FOR NAGORNO-KARABAGH

During the first half of 2001, intensive activity connected to the process of resolving the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia took place, including a number of meetings between the presidents of these two states. This activity has so far produced no concrete results. However, expectations have risen for a possible change in the status quo in the region.

It is obvious that a successful conclusion of an agreement will demand painful compromises from both of these countries. A “winner’s peace”—reflecting mainly the current military situation between the two countries—would leave a lasting residue of

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\* This brief represents the private views of Mr. Amirbayov, and is not intended to represent an official statement or document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Azerbaijan.

resentment and could serve as a basis for renewal of hostilities in the future. This policy brief is an attempt to identify, from the Azerbaijani perspective, one of the crucial elements that would need to be a part

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of the peace settlement of the conflict in order for it to have good chances for long-term success. It highlights the critical role of the Shusha region in the Nagorno-Karabagh peace process.

The Shusha region, consisting of the city of Shusha and more than ten surrounding villages, ceased to be under the control of Azerbaijan on May 8, 1992, when it was occupied by the regular armed forces of Armenia. According to the census held in the USSR in 1989, the total population of the Shusha region was 23,156; there were 21,234 Azerbaijanis living there (92 percent) and 1,620 Armenians (7 percent). As a result of the war, no Azerbaijanis are living in the Shusha region today and the region itself is under Armenian occupation.

It should be said from the outset that Shusha has special symbolic meaning for Azerbaijanis. Return of the Shusha region to Azerbaijani control could contribute greatly

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to Azerbaijanis' willingness to accept certain concessions as part of a comprehensive peace settlement, and it seems to be a *sine qua non* for many Azerbaijanis.

The following is a composite of Azerbaijani perceptions regarding the status of the Shusha region, and an attempt to explain to the outside observer why Shusha is important to the Azerbaijani population. I believe that the content of this brief reflects the perceptions of a broad section of the public in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

#### **THE AZERBAIJANI VIEW OF SHUSHA**

Most Azerbaijanis view Shusha as a historical symbol of Azerbaijani statehood. The region embodies Azerbaijan's independent past and is viewed as one of Azerbaijan's major ancient scientific and cultural centers. Children in Azerbaijan are raised on stories about how Shusha has been a center of Azerbaijani "resistance to foreign occupation and domination." These history lessons endow Shusha with pivotal meaning as part of a future settlement on Nagorno-Karabagh. While borders and populations have constantly shifted in the Caucasus, Shusha has been a center of Azerbaijani settlement and political organization during many different periods in the history of the region: as part of the ancient Caucasian Albania (Arran), the Khanate of Qarabagh, the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920), the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, and as part of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan at the time of independence.

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#### **Shusha has been a center of Azerbaijani settlement and political organization during many different periods in the history of the region.**

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In Azerbaijan's schools, Shusha is presented as a unique place that served as the capital

of the Qarabagh Khanate. This khanate, despite the extremely complicated internal and international situation of the eighteenth century, was one of the few Azerbaijani feudal states that managed to withstand constant enemy attacks and retain its sovereignty and independence. Azerbaijanis study in schools, for instance, the siege of Shusha, and how the city held out against the troops of Iranian Shakh Agha Mohammed Khan Qajar in 1795.

Shusha is especially endeared to Azerbaijanis as a center of Azerbaijani culture. Among the Azerbaijani cultural figures who originate from the city of Shusha are the following: Uzeyir Hajibayov (founder of Azerbaijani National Opera); Bul-Bul (founder of Azerbaijani opera vocal); Jabbar Garyaghdy oglu (Azerbaijani Mugham Art virtuoso); singer Rashid Behbudov; composers Ashraf Abbasov, Suleyman Aleskerov, Fikret Amirov, Farhad Badalbeyli, Seyid and Khan Shushinski, writers Abdurrehim bey Haqverdiyev, Mirmohsum Navvab, and Najaf bey Vezirov; poetess Khurshudbanu Natavan; and many other cultural figures.

While many Azerbaijanis recognize the need for certain mutual concessions as part of any peace settlement and the need to ensure the security of the Armenian population of the region, they also believe that the rights and security of the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabagh should not be forfeited just because this population was forced to leave their homes almost ten years ago. Since the majority of the Azerbaijani population of the disputed Nagorno-Karabagh region originates from Shusha city and the surrounding villages of the Shusha region (such as Malybayli, Qushchular, Khalfeli, Turshsu, and Shyrlan, Imamgulular, Zarisli, Khanligpeye, Geybali, Goytala, etc.), many Azerbaijanis would view the return of the region to Azerbaijani control as an act of fair treatment toward the Azerbaijani population ousted from Nagorno-Karabagh. While the Republic of Azerbaijan has declared its readiness to

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accept mutual compromises and mutual recognition of needs and rights, it is difficult to envision Azerbaijanis consenting to a settlement in which they did not regain control of the Shusha region, or in which the previous Azerbaijani residents of the district were not offered the opportunity to return to their homes there.

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In order to be successfully implemented, a settlement should take into account and

accommodate the security concerns of the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations of Nagorno-Karabagh, both of which used to inhabit the region before the start of the conflict. Both communities are defined by the Helsinki mandate of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Conference of March 1992 as “the interested parties of Nagorno-Karabagh.”

Many people in Azerbaijan are convinced that no settlement is possible without restoration of Azerbaijani sovereignty over the Shusha region. In addition, they believe that the Azerbaijani people evicted from Nagorno-Karabagh, including the people from the Shusha region, should be given the right of return and provided with the same security guarantees that will be provided for the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabagh.

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