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The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Social Cubism Analysis

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Introduction

A myriad of wars and protracted conflicts where two or more groups defining themselves along ethnic lines struggle over territory, resources, identity, and power continue to destroy lives and land around the world and threaten international and human security. Yet it remains unclear what role ethnicity plays in the formation and escalation of these conflicts. Ethiopia, Myanmar, Sudan, and Yemen are just some examples where intra-state violence and civil war between ethnic groups has cost thousands of lives (Uppsala Universitet, n.d.). Tensions in Northern Ireland have risen again after Brexit, and recent developments in the Balkans, are also reason for concern (Bechev, 2023). A wealth of research has been conducted on various causes of ethnic conflict in general and on concrete situations of conflict in particular (Horowitz, 1985; Senehi et al., 2022; Taras & Ganguly, 2016). The focus of this article is the decades-old conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) region in the southern Caucasus that on September 19, 2023, took a rather abrupt violent turn which led some journalists to assume that it was over (Zeit Online, 2023).

The roots of this conflict go back to when the Armenian and Azeri ethnic groups, or Azerbaijanis, shared a territory within one state, the Soviet Union (USSR). Today it shares similarities with the Cyprus and Northern Ireland conflicts: two ethnic groups backed by "external

ethno-guarantors," (EEGs) or regional actors with shared cultural, economic, and historical ties that are connected to respective internal ethnic groups' interests and are in conflict over a territory (Byrne, 2007; Ohanyan, 2020).

The EEGs model was applied to the Northern Ireland and Cyprus conflicts, where regionally powerful states (Britian and Ireland, and Greece and Turkey) were drawn into both conflicts in support of respective internal ethnic group allies. Cultural, economic, historical, and political ties and shared interests led to a dependent relationship between the EEGs and their conflicting co-nationals (Byrne 2000). These regional EEGs' involvement can, as Byrne (2007) noted, be both beneficial and detrimental to peaceful conflict resolution, depending on whether they are willing to cooperate with a shared interest in bringing conflicting ethnic parties to an agreement, or whether they escalate the conflict and prevent resolution by engaging in hostilities with each other by supporting nationalist and radical factions among the conflicting co-nationals. In this case, Armenia and Azerbaijan are the EEGs with close ties to the Armenians and Azeris of N-K, and they had not cooperated to resolve the conflict until they signed a peace agreement on August 8, 2025 to end the 37 years of protracted conflict. Both states' governments had fanned its flames by engaging militarily and using irreconcilable nationalist language toward the other. Russia was the regional "higher mediator" (Byrne, 2007) that had in the past intervened to end immediate warfare, while Moscow's interest in permanently resolving the conflict remained questionable (Ohanyan, 2020; Schumacher, 2016). Russian was recently replaced by the U.S. government as higher mediator as Presdient Trump facilitated the 2025 Track-one peace accord between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while Turkey has also begun to engage with both governments.

Scholars date the beginning of the N-K conflict back to 1988, although its roots were arguably laid much earlier within the Russian empire (Hasanli, 2023; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

Consequently, conceptual frameworks must pay tribute to the complexities, dynamics, and interrelations of this intractable ethnoterritorial conflict. Several frameworks to analyze ethnic conflicts do exist. Rothman's ARIA model highlights the fluidity of conflicts, structuring especially identity-based conflicts into four stages from Antagonism to Resolution (Rothman, 2012). In addition, Dugan's Nested-Foci-Model is often applied to issue-based conflicts by situating them in a larger systemic picture and highlighting interrelationships between different levels of analysis (Dugan, 1996). Lederach's understanding of conflict as originating in and being transformed through relationships is reflected in his inquiry model. It understands conflict through the lens of patterns and relationships across three components, from the presenting situation over imagining a desired future to a development of change process, where conflict parties transform their conflict from being destructive to informing constructive change (Lederach, 2003). That said, the analytical framework chosen here is Byrne and Carter's Social Cubism model (Byrne & Carter, 1996), extended with the ideas of Russ-Trent's Integrative-Inductive Social Cubism model (Russ-Trent, 2003). Social Cubism was first applied to the conflicts in Northern Ireland and Quebec. The model was explicitly designed to highlight the interconnectedness and multi-facetedness of longstanding conflicts involving ethnic groups. By providing a framework exploring different aspects and levels of conflicting societies over periods of time, Social Cubism is a useful analytical method that can shed new light on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Within this framework, analysis focuses on different facets of contributing factors, their interrelationships and the way those shape a conflict over time (Byrne, Carter, & Senehi, 2003). The six factors included by Byrne and Carter (1996, 2003) are demographics, economics, history, religion, political, and psychocultural factors. This analytical framework lends its structure to this article.

The first part explores the Social Cubism model and its implications, followed by an analysis relating the six factors to the N-K conflict. Limited extensive literature examining this specific conflict from different perspectives exists. Thomas DeWaal's (2013) and Yavuz and Gunther's (2022, 2023) work were mainly relied on for writing this paper, and other voices from the region were also included (Askerov & Ibadoghlu, 2023; Cheterian et al, 2023; Geukjian, 2012). To our knowledge, there has been no analysis of the conflict that considers the continuing interrelationship of the six dimensions of conflict addressed in this article. This analysis, therefore, allows a new holistic analytical perspective to emerge on the conflict that is essential in imagining a more inclusive approach for a lasting justpeace for the region and its people. Applying Social Cubism and the EEG third-party intervention model to the N-K conflict places it within a wider context of ethnic conflicts that share some similar characteristics, while also highlighting its unique trajectory and evolution.

The Social Cube Model

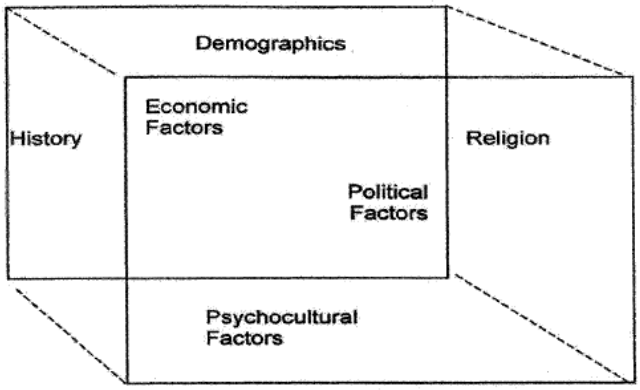
Labelling a conflict as "ethnic," "ethnoterritorial," "ethnoreligious," or "ethnopolitical" (Gurr, 1994) can be misleading as it implies that conflict is caused by ethnic differences. Although from the outside this is the form many of these conflicts take, focusing on ethnicity alone cannot sufficiently explain the genesis and development of a conflict. As Mac Ginty (2008) argues, ethnicity is more likely to be an instrument of conflict rather than its actual cause or content. Scholars also disagree on the nature of ethnicity (Gurr, 1994). Primordialists perceive ethnicity as a genetically based group identity underlying all other social identities, (Geertz, 1973; Shils, 1957; Van den Berghe, 1981) while instrumentalists contend that ethnicity only becomes salient when identity is instrumentalized by group leaders or "ethnic entrepreneurs" (Brass, 1979). Constructivists see identity as socially constructed and used by ethnic elites to mobilize

constituents (Anderson, 1983; Gurr, 1994). This article notes that it is important to blend an instrumentalist and constructivist understanding of ethnicity and its role in protracted conflicts (Clammer, 2017).

The Social Cube model highlights that both material and psychocultural factors cause and influence conflicts between ethnic groups, and that it is helpful to focus on how these factors relate to and interact with each other over time to create "patterns of intergroup behaviour" (Byrne & Carter, 1996, 2003). A protracted conflict can be understood through the prism of a Rubik's Cube® where each side of the cube symbolizes a factor and changing one side can change the other sides as well (Byrne, Carter, & Senehi, 2003). Only together and in interaction with each other does a holistic picture become possible (see Figure 1 below). This analytical framework provides a way of looking at a specific conflict from multiple perspectives at the same time, including both the interactions and simultaneity of the issues considered (Byrne, Carter, & Senehi, 2003; Byrne & Keashly, 2000). Such a deep and complexified understanding of a conflict is necessary if local and external peacebuilding intervention is to contribute to building positive peace and to avoid unintended adverse effects (Autesserre, 2021; Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997; Mac Ginty, 2008). Before applying the analytical Social Cube framework to the N-K conflict, the Cube's six sides are now explained in more detail. While each of the Cube's sides have their own focus and characteristics, no definitive lines can be drawn between them as all these dimensions relate to and overlap with each other. The clear distinctions drawn for the sake of this model need to be seen as to some extent artificial and permeable **(**Byrne & Carter, 1996).

Figure 1:

The Social Cube (Byrne & Carter, 2003, p. 765)



The **History** facet of the Social Cube considers which events led up to and have since shaped a conflict. It focuses on how each side interprets past events, and how the past is used to justify current claims to territory, to strengthen cohesion within one's own group while fostering fear, hostility, and mistrust towards other groups, and how (perceived) past victimization and suffering is used to justify future violence (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). Byrne and Nadan (2011) note that each group in a conflict typically recounts its own history as a "golden past" (Smith, 2009) by mythologizing the group's origins with national heroes and past events that become stylized as "chosen glories" or "chosen traumas" (Volkan, 1997) and are passed on intergenerationally via folklore, stories, and school textbooks (Senehi, 2002). The golden past narratives usually exclude the other group and its perspectives of the past, while at the same time the "transgenerational transmission of trauma" (Volkan, 1997) ensures continued feelings of victimization and threat, which in turn are used to justify and legitimize present and future violence (Byrne & Nadan, 2011, p. 64). The greater the disparity between interpretations of the past by the conflict groups, the more likely it is for these histories to increase hostility between these groups (Byrne & Keashly, 2000).

Religion as another side of the Social Cube explores how in the context of intergroup (ethnic) conflict, religion can become an instrument used as a clear marker of identity and culture, contributing to differentiation and segregation between conflict groups, both ideologically and materially (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). Byrne and Nadan (2011) show how the belief of being "God's Chosen People" (Smith, 2004) can entitle an ethnic group to control a certain territory. Having extremist notions of good and evil based on religious categories can reduce the chances for compromise between groups regarding sharing territory and peaceful co-existence, while differences between religious moderates and extremists often lead to intra-group conflict.

Demographics pays attention to how the tyranny of numbers can influence the trajectory of a conflict. In many conflicts considered ethnic, rival groups perceive themselves to be a minority, either in the specific territory contested or in the wider region. They often feel existentially threatened of being dominated and oppressed, if not annihilated by the majority; a phenomenon referred to as "double minority and double majority" (Byrne & Carter, 1996; Byrne & Nadan, 2011). Changes in population growth relative to the other group are often perceived as either a threat or an opportunity thereby influencing a group's perception of the conflict (Byrne & Keashly, 2000). Given that minority and majority groups might consider themselves a minority at risk and recall past traumatic events of violence, these groups tend to develop a "siege mentality," leading to a lack of security and trust and a reduced preparedness to compromise on issues perceived as existential (Bar-Tal, 2011). Further, the drawing of clear political and geographical boundaries between groups reduces opportunities for constructive encounters (Byrne & Carter, 1996; Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

The **Political** dimension considers how the exclusion from and unequal distribution of power between one group and another through "direct, cultural, and structural" or hidden violence

(Galtung, 1996) increases the potential for open conflict and exclusive nationalist ideologies to thrive (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). Often, a minority group in a territory is largely excluded from decision-making processes, as well as heavily policed by the state over which they have little control, often leading to their establishment of a parallel political structure and greatly diverging visions of political futures (Byrne & Nadan, 2011; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). The minority's lack of access to power combined with "structural violence" (Galtung, 1996) embedded in societal structures and institutions that divide people can contribute to the formation of violent extremist groups, claiming to protect their own group while also exercising violence against other groups, using an ethnonationalist ideology to foster in-group unity (Byrne & Keashly, 2000; Byrne & Nadan, 2011).

The **Economic** factors side of the Social Cube refers to unequal access to opportunities and discriminatory policies towards a minority group, leading to exclusion and poverty often forcing people to migrate (Byrne & Keashly, 2000; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). Political leaders often use economic discrimination by the dominant group to ensure the loyalty of the working class of their own group, while poverty and a lack of opportunities and perspective might encourage young men on both sides to join violent extremist groups (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). The dominant group's economic interests are often justified and protected via racist or sectarian institutions relying on force, in a dependent relationship like that of the colonizer and colonized (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). Diasporas can often play an important role in providing both financial resources and weapons to their kin groups or they can also play a deescalating role by providing valuable peacebuilding resources (Byrne & Nadan, 2011).

Finally, **Psychocultural** factors refer to the cultural symbols tied to cognitive and emotional nuances that shape a given conflict and become a central concern in many conflicts

whereby ethnic groups feel their identities are threatened (Byrne & Keashly, 2000). In the context of fear, insecurity, and trauma, individuals often tend to identify strongly with their group and see its interests as their own, while other groups are perceived as homogenous and depicted through stereotypes where the individual is no longer humanized (Byrne & Nadan, 2011; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). Combined with a "siege mentality" and the often-spatial segregation of both groups' members, this makes identification with and understanding of the other unequally harder, contributing further to dehumanization, misperceptions, and stereotyping of the other's actions and intentions (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). National symbols play an important role in strengthening in-group cohesion while marking clear boundaries and hierarchies towards the out-group (Smith, 2009).

These interrelated facets of the Social Cube are applied to the N-K conflict in the next section. Figure 1 illustrates the Social Cube model including the six key dimensions relating to the N-K conflict. Within these facets, it is important to pay attention to the different levels of analysis (structural, agent-structure, and individual), as Russ-Trent has demonstrated in the Integrative-Inductive model (Russ-Trent, 2003). That said, our focus remains with the six macro-level factors (Byrne & Carter, 1996, 2003) while keeping in mind the way different levels of analysis reciprocally influence each other (Russ-Trent, 2003). Given the limited scope of this article, we consider some of the central dimensions of each of the six factors that have remained influential during different stages of the N-K conflict and how they relate to other factors.

Two Histories of Nagorno-Karabakh

The region's history is complicated, a fact reflected in its changing name Nagorno or Nagorny-Karabakh, as the region was called during the Soviet era, Artsakh as it is called by Armenians, or just Karabakh, the name used by Azerbaijanis especially after their recent conquest of the

territory, to emphasize that N-K is now part of the wider Azerbaijani region of Karabakh (Aljazeera 2023; deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) is the name most widely used to refer to this mountainous region of Upper Karabakh and is used here because it connects to the more neutral historical Soviet name for the region, and replicates neither of the names used by the conflicting parties themselves (Artsakh and Karabakh). The history of the wider region and of N-K has been used by both sides to justify their exclusive claims to the territory (deWaal, 2013; Geukjian, 2012; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). It is this mutually exclusive definition of ethnic identity closely tied to a territory that can be observed in many ethnic conflicts that contributes to their intractability by making concessions or compromise appear impossible, as territory is tied to identity and becomes non-negotiable (Agnew, 1989; Northrup; 1989). Essentially, N-K has two histories, each bending facts to support the given narrative or interpreting events differently, highlighting only those fitting into their own ethnonational narrative and ignoring suffering inflicted on others (deWaal, 2013; Geukjian, 2012; Hasanli, 2023; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Each side has its "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories" (Volkan, 1997). To use Senehi's (2002) idea of "destructive stories," both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have over time created destructive national narratives of competitive suffering that are mutually exclusive and fail to recognize the other group and prevent an identification with and sympathy for the humanity and suffering of its members.

Ancient history is much referred to and manipulated by both groups yet proving who "was there first" is an almost impossible task due to a lack of reliable sources. For all that is known, the region has had an ethnically mixed population that over the centuries was ruled by diverse empires such as Arabs, Armenians, Mongols, Persians, Turks, and Russians (Geukjian, 2012; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Demographic, economic, and geographic changes led to the first ethnic tensions

that ended in the 1905 Armeno-Tartar war. Some scholars question whether these changes and ensuing tensions were part of an intentional Russian and later Soviet policy of "divide and rule" in the region, or rather the result of less coordinated, opportunistic policy decisions that fueled an already existing conflict (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Ethnic clashes continued during a short period of independence of both Republics between 1918 and 1920, fueled since the Armenian genocide committed by the Ottomans in 1915 by renewed Armenian fears of their Azerbaijani neighbors, who were perceived by Armenians as 'Turks'. Both Republics were conquered by the Bolsheviks in 1920 and became Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) within the USSR. The status of N-K, located within Azerbaijan with a majority ethnic Armenian population, remained contested until 1921, when Moscow decided that N-K should be part of the Azerbaijani SSR and it was granted the status of autonomous oblast (province or region). Both parties' central arguments – territorial integrity on the side of Azerbaijan and self-determination on the side of the Armenians – were supposed to be reflected in this decision (Geukjian, 2012; Hasanli, 2023). The N-K Autonomous Oblast was officially declared in 1923, and many see the seeds for future conflict beginning here (Geukjian, 2012; Hasanli, 2023; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). The Armenians of N-K never fully accepted this decision, as can be observed in the numerous letters sent over the decades to petition Moscow to join N-K with Armenia that were ignored by Moscow (DeWaal, 2013). The granting of autonomy arguably allowed for institutions and structures to be built that would eventually turn against Azerbaijan and aim for what the Karabakh Armenians saw as true self-determination by joining N-K with Armenia (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). The situation remained relatively peaceful until the 1980s, and with the weakening of the Soviet state, Armenians began to intensify demands for N-K's union with Armenia that were met with counter-protests by local Azerbaijanis. On February 20, 1988, the local N-K Soviet finally declared its will to join N-K with Armenia. Ethnic

violence at that point had forced the first Azerbaijanis from their homes in N-K and Armenian border regions. It appears to have been some of these displaced people who organized protests in the poor Azerbaijani town of Sumgait on February 26, 1988, which soon erupted into an anti-Armenian pogrom killing at least 26 Armenians and six Azerbaijanis (deWaal, 2013, Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

The Sumgait riots substantiated an Armenian fear of a second genocide, and it was evoked as proof that the Azerbaijani state cannot be trusted with protecting its Armenian population (Cheterian et al., 2023; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). The Soviet Union's last years were marked by intercommunal violence, insecurity, and pogroms on both sides of the border between both Soviet Republics, forcing almost all of Armenia's Azerbaijani population to flee to Azerbaijan and vice versa in what can be described as ethnic cleansing (Broers & Yemelinova, 2020; deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

When the USSR eventually dissolved in 1991 and both Armenia and Azerbaijan declared their independence, a full-out war erupted over N-K between Armenia-backed Armenians of N-K and Azerbaijan that lasted until 1994. During the First Karabakh war in February 1992, Azerbaijan experienced its Sumgait when Armenian fighters shot dead 485 unarmed Azeri civilians fleeing from the village of Khojaly (deWaal, 2013). The war ended with Armenia winning N-K, and occupying seven surrounding Azerbaijani districts, amounting to roughly 20 percent of all Azerbaijani territory and displacing all its Azerbaijani population (Broers & Yemelianova, 2020; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). This outcome of the war was perceived as a major humiliation in Azerbaijan and led to the young nation state finding itself enmeshed in a narrative of humiliation, victimhood, and the need for revenge (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). N-K was not recognized as a state

even by Armenia, yet between 1994 and 2020 it operated as a *de-facto* state connected to its EEG kinstate of Armenia via the Lachin-corridor leading through Azerbaijani territory (Broers, 2020).

The conflict continued to influence politics and relations in and between both states, and all attempts at a negotiated settlement failed (Askerov & Ibadoghlu, 2023; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). In September 2020, Azerbaijan started a military offensive against Armenian N-K and by November, when a ceasefire was brokered by Russia, it had retaken almost all its occupied territories, yet N-K itself remained largely under local Armenian control (Askerov & Ibadoghlu, 2023; Yavuz & Gunther, 2022). Border skirmishes continued, and Azerbaijan started blocking the Lachin corridor in 2022, leading to a worsening humanitarian situation for N-K's Armenian civilian population. Azerbaijan launched another attack on N-K on September 19, 2023, taking control of the whole region and causing virtually all its population to flee to Armenia within just a few days (United Nations, 2023).

In all this turbulent and often violent history, the role of past events being evoked to justify further violence and to seek revenge is striking. David Rieff highlights the role societies' collective memories, particularly those who perceive themselves as under existential threat, can play in understanding and shaping present-day politics and actions, especially when they are abused by leaders that use historical half-truths to justify their often-violent actions (Rieff, 2016). Armenian and Azerbaijani societies both embedded their memories of violence in their national history, creating sites of commemoration and national holidays like "Genocide Day" while never acknowledging the suffering of the other side (deWaal, 2013). The traumas remembered serve to justify revenge and violence today - as has been seen in Sumgait, Khojaly, and the second Karabakh war. It remained to be seen, until the recent 2025 peace accord was signed, how long Armenia would have accepted this most recent loss of N-K (Askerov & Ibadoghlu, 2023).

Reporters quoted an Armenian refugee from N-K saying, “We were there first, Karabakh is ours, we will take it back – and if I don’t live anymore then, it will be my grandsons going to the front” (Jeska, 2023).

Demographics

One aspect of this history of intercommunal and inter-ethnic violence is a deep-rooted fear on both sides of being outnumbered and dominated by the other group (deWaal, 2013; Geukjian, 2012; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022) by a “politics of the womb” (Thomas, 2003). Armenians see Azerbaijanis as “Turks” responsible for the 1915 genocide and are fearful of its repetition as confirmed, from their perspective, by the Sumgait riots and the recent attacks on N-K’s Armenian population (deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Armenian scholars called the recent blockade and subsequent conquest of N-K a “second Armenian genocide” (Cheterian et al., 2023), seeing it as a continuation of the events of 1915. In the words of Volkan (1997), this ongoing and authentic fear of Armenians of a renewed genocide can be understood because of the “transgenerational transmission of trauma,” where a collective trauma experienced by a society is not processed by the survivors and is instead passed onto following generations to resolve who themselves did not witness the event itself (Volkan, 1997). The anti-Azerbaijani sentiments resulting from this Armenian fear on the other hand made Azerbaijanis feel insecure and worried of being dominated by Armenians in their own country (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

This mutual insecurity and ensuing tensions from changing border demarcations can be understood through the lens of a “double-minority and double majority” constellation (Byrne & Carter 1996, 2003) as Armenians were a majority in N-K but a minority in overall Azerbaijan, whereas Azerbaijanis were a minority in N-K but a majority in overall Azerbaijan. N-K’s Armenians felt culturally and economically disadvantaged in Azerbaijan, and N-K’s Azerbaijanis

felt disadvantaged within N-K (deWaal, 2013). During the Soviet era, the N-K Autonomous Oblast was about 95 percent Armenian, yet with Armenian out-migration, falling birth rates and increasing Azerbaijani birth-rates politics started to shift in favour of Azerbaijanis. This was partly due to an intentional Azerbaijani policy of settling Azerbaijanis in N-K's larger cities, as well as to the outmigration of mostly educated Armenians (deWaal, 2013). As the region's autonomous status was justified with its majority Armenian population, this shifting balance is likely to have contributed to ethnic tensions in the 1980s and the increasing demand of N-K Armenians for union with Armenia (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

Demographics, along with history, have been used to justify the claims of both sides over N-K's territory. Yet the region had a mixed population for centuries, and numbers varied greatly over various time periods and even seasonally, as most Turkic peoples were nomads and came to N-K only during the summer (Broers & Yemelinova, 2020; deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Major displacements have taken place in the wake of the violence that emerged from the 1980s onward. Before the first Karabakh war, 120,000 Armenians lived in N-K, and roughly 800,000 Azerbaijanis were forced from their homes in N-K and the occupied regions during and after the war (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). At least for a while, this made Azerbaijan the country with the largest proportion of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) relative to its size (deWaal, 2013). At the same time, 200,000 Armenians were forced out of Azerbaijan in a process that ethnically cleansed each state of the other group (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). And now again, virtually all N-K's Armenian population fled the advance of the Azerbaijani military (Azerbaijan offered to integrate them into Azerbaijan; an offer Armenians said they could not trust) (Mirovalev, 2023), and might soon be replaced with those Azerbaijanis who had to leave the region in 1994 and have since lived as IDPs in Azerbaijan. DeWaal (2013) goes as far as to argue that this "mutual insecurity" caused by a lack

of trust in the other group's willingness to protect them, influenced by shifting demographics and "double minorities and double majorities" within both states and particularly in N-K, was a key factor in leading to violence, war, and intractable conflict (deWaal, 2013). Changing demographics influenced the writing of history on both sides, with each group implementing intentional policies to increase their own population, and the perception of being a minority led each group to turn to nationalist narratives offering them protection and securing their identities.

Religion

Although rarely evoked by either side as being a cause for enmity, religious factors enter the conflict as well. Armenians were portrayed as the first Christian nation located between Christian Europe and the Muslim states of Central Asia (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). This precarious geographical location inspired views of Armenians being at the "gates of protecting Christianity" (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022), a view apparently shared and perpetuated by Christian Russia in 1913, when it settled Armenians into a then majority-Muslim region to manifest its rule. Ronald Suny argues that Christianity is an integral part of Armenian identity because when Armenians embraced a Monophysite Christianity and developed a common language, it made them a distinct people in the fourth century AD (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). The Armenian diaspora sees Armenians in the homeland as "besieged Christians" (deWaal, 2013) constantly under threat by their Shi'a Muslim neighbors in Azerbaijan that they perceive as holding an irreconcilable position towards them. This perception was expressed by Armenia's second president, Robert Kocharian, when he stated that Armenian Christian culture and Azerbaijani Islamic culture and their peoples were incompatible (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). This "siege mentality" was observed in other ethnic conflicts involving majority-minority constellations like the Protestants in Northern Ireland, the Afrikaners in South Africa, and the Israelis in Israel (Bar-Tal, 2011; Byrne & Carter, 2003; Siniver, 2012). Armenian

and many Western and Russian media outlets employ a narrative that the conflict is at its core a confrontation between Islam and Christianity. In contrast, Azeris do not appear to perceive the conflict as containing any significant religious connotation and reject such a narrative as orientalist and often biased towards Christianity (and Armenia) (Shafiyev, 2022; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Religion does not appear to play a role in dominant framings of the conflict in Azerbaijan. However, the country's internal authoritarian repression in combination with the N-K conflict was used by Azerbaijan's Aliyev-regime to promote a nationalist identification with the state and the regime among Azeris, instead of with Islam, with the aim of strengthening the regime while potentially weakening opposing religious authorities (Altstadt, 2020; Todorova, 2023).

Different groups searching to stabilize their identity often frame and define their group (the in-group) in contrast and even in enmity with another group (the out-group) (Byrne, Carter, & Senehi, 2003; Russ-Trent, 2003). For example, Horowitz (1985) describes how ethnic identity and belonging to an ethnic group is often a more salient and crucial identity category than others as it is perceived as given by birth and therefore it is unchangeable. What further fuels the dichotomous and antagonistic in-group/out-group framing between ethnic groups is they "compete" not only in a certain area of society or at a given time, but in "lifelong games" where losing to the other group would equal "an apparently permanent disability" (Horowitz, 1985, p. 147). While neither side in this conflict makes it their main argument that the other group is trying to convert or assimilate their group to their respective religion, the idea of being "besieged" (deWaal, 2013) reflects an existential fear of losing out to the other group. The fact that Armenians are mostly Christians and Azerbaijanis are mostly Shi'a Muslims is used to highlight that both groups simply are not compatible and cannot share the territory (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). How much religion is tied to group identity, history, and territory further becomes evident in the repurposing or outright

destruction of religious sites in N-K by either side currently controlling the region to deny the other group's connection to the land while manifesting their own group identity (Horák & Hoch, 2023). Religion plays less of a role in the authoritarian state of Azerbaijan (Altstadt, 2020), and Azerbaijan rejects an Armenian narrative often adopted by Western media about the conflict being a standoff between Christianity and Islam (Shafiyev, 2022; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Yet in Armenia the Armenian church played an influential role in framing Armenian identity around victimization, as being Armenian in the church's reasoning meant being Christian, and Armenians were not safe at the hands of "Muslim Turks" (Yavuz & Gunther, 2022). This essentialist presentation of both cultures as inherently incompatible coupled with the conflict narrative as representing a greater competition between both religions made the possibility for finding common ground rather challenging.

Economic Factors

Economic considerations led the USSR in 1921 to decide that N-K should become an autonomous region within the Azerbaijani SSR as it is separated from Armenia by a stretch of mountains and is economically connected to Azerbaijan (deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Azerbaijanis used those connections as an argument for their claim to control N-K (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). However, during the later years of the Soviet Union, N-K Armenians argued that they were economically neglected and discriminated against by the Azerbaijani government (deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). However, the latter fact is debateable as official statistics point out that N-K had a higher standard of living than the rest of Azerbaijan (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). In addition, deWaal (2013) makes the argument that N-K Armenians, due to their overall minority status, were excluded from black market activities in the region so that only Azerbaijanis benefitted from the underground economy. Local disparities between wealthy Armenian families and poor displaced

Azerbaijani workers may also have contributed to the 1988 riots in Sumgait (deWaal, 2013, Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

It is important to explore economic factors to understand why the resolution of this conflict was so difficult to achieve. Besides internal factors, external actors and interveners in the N-K conflict were, and are, often motivated by economic and geopolitical interests more than by a desire to resolve the conflict. Azerbaijan is rich in oil, and a pipeline via Georgia and Turkey opened in 2006 that transports Central Asian oil to the borders of Europe without going through Russian territory (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). This reality has led Western countries, including Turkey, to keep good relationships with the Azerbaijani government (Altstadt, 2020; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). It was money from an oil-deal with British Petroleum (BP) in 2003 that allowed Azerbaijan to build up its army to eventually control N-K, and it recently benefited from the European Union (EU) turning away from Russian gas, making deals with Azerbaijan instead for access to its oil (Osborn, 2023).

Russia, arguably the most influential actor and third-party intermediary in the whole region, was seen as exploiting the conflict and intentionally "freezing" instead of trying to resolve it so that it can pursue its own economic and geopolitical interests (deWaal, 2013; Geukjian, 2012; Ohanyan, 2020; Schumacher, 2016; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Russia kept both countries in an insecure limbo by following a geostrategically informed realpolitik and selling weapons to both sides. Russia tried to tie Armenia economically tighter to the Russian state because it does not have the same natural resources and economy that Azerbaijan does as Armenia had closed its borders with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey (Schumacher, 2016). This becomes clear as many major and essential Armenian firms are owned by Russia (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). With at least one

higher mediator having an economic and geopolitical stake in keeping the conflict active rather than transforming it, reaching a negotiated agreement became unequally harder.

Finally, the importance of the conflict in both states is reflected in their military spending (deWaal, 2013; Schumacher, 2016; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Being prepared for war and keeping the "enemy" at bay was more important for the Armenian and Azerbaijan governments than caring for the welfare and development of the population. Azerbaijan's military expenditure relative to its GDP even exceeded that of the United States (US) in 2016, and Armenia has also invested significant resources in its military (Schumacher, 2016). At the same time however, foreign investors in the region were hesitant due to the continued risk of war, while borders between regional neighbors were closed for any (legal) trade, and welfare within both states decreased (deWaal, 2013, Iskandaryan, 2020; Schumacher 2016). Economic considerations influenced the conflict in its emergence, on the intercommunal as well as the international level and were a major hindrance to its constructive resolution.

Political Factors

Many see the fault line in the conflict beginning in 1921, when N-K was created by the USSR as an autonomous region within the Azerbaijani SSR (Geukjian, 2012; Hasanli, 2023; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). In the following years, its boundaries were drawn to include as many Armenian and as little Azerbaijani villages as possible (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Boundaries are important in segregating communities and fostering hatred instead of reducing sectarian tendencies (Byrne & Carter, 1996, 2003). Autonomy allowed the N-K Armenians to build institutions separate from those of Azerbaijan that later assisted in supporting their claim for self-determination and arguably allowed an underground movement supporting a union with Armenia to form and arm itself (deWaal, 2013). Segregation between both communities became even more entrenched after the

Armenian victory in 1994, and the policies of ethnic cleansing practiced by both sides during the first Karabakh war, that continues today. DeWaal (2013) addresses the dangers of segregation, as younger generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis have never lived in mixed communities, and all they are exposed to about the other group is a narrative of hatred and incompatibility.

Domestic politics in each state have also heavily influenced the course of the conflict. When both Soviet Republics gained independence in 1991, right at the onset of the first Karabakh war, the foundations of these states were built on the conflict itself – a story of victory for Armenians, and one of loss and humiliation for Azerbaijanis (deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). How much the fate of N-K influenced Armenian politics is reflected in the fact that many of its presidents were from Karabakh and were actively involved in the movement to unify N-K with Armenia (Iskandaryan, 2020). Armenian presidents such as Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharian were leaders in the Karabakh movement before entering Armenian politics. Armenia's current prime minister, Nikol Vovayi Pashinyan's public depiction as "traitor" after losing the second Karabakh war in 2020 almost cost him his political position (Iskandaryan, 2020; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Even though Pashinyan originally claimed he wanted to resolve the conflict, he soon shifted towards a more aggressive rhetoric threatening Azerbaijan and Turkey (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

Schumacher (2016) narrates that the N-K conflict has served leaders in both states to hold onto and legitimize their power in times of domestic economic and political tensions. Armenia and Azerbaijan have witnessed their economies decline, especially after 2008, which led to major demonstrations that were repressed by force in Azerbaijan and led to a regime change in Armenia in 2018 (Schumacher, 2016; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). The need to compensate for a lack of "performance legitimacy" (Schumacher, 2016) domestically can be observed as the reason for

Pashinyan's change in rhetoric, and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev's escalation of the conflict in 2016, 2020, and 2023. On a personal level, Azerbaijan's recent victory was described by the country's ambassador in Britain as "President Aliyev […] deliver[ing] the testament of his father" (Osborn, 2023). Heydar Aliyev, who was Azerbaijan's president until his death in 2003, had promised displaced Azerbaijanis that one day they would be able to return to their homes in N-K.

Finally, next to domestic politics and the personal motivations of leaders, international geopolitics and global events in general influenced the conflict. The state with the greatest geopolitical interests in the region is Russia. The decision to make N-K autonomous within Azerbaijan is interpreted by many analysts as a carefully planned Russian strategy of "divide and rule" to keep both Republics under control (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Even though there is no evidence that this was indeed part of a larger plan rather than just playing opportunistic politics, Russia, especially after 1991, benefited from the conflict in a geo-strategic sense. Russia signed a bilateral defense treaty with Armenia and has two military bases in Armenia, making the small state relatively dependent on Russian support (Schumacher, 2016; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

After border skirmishes in 2016 and 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it was Russian "peacekeeping" troops that were stationed in N-K (Schumacher 2016, Yavuz & Gunter 2022). As Nerses Kopalyan reveals, Russia did not intervene in the 2020 and 2023 Azerbaijani attacks on N-K because it felt Pashinyan's more pro-Western regime in Yerevan was slipping from its control and it hoped that an Armenian military defeat would lead to a pro-Russian regime change (Cheterian et al., 2023). On a global scale, Russia's distraction in Ukraine was certainly a motivating factor for Azerbaijan to strike in 2023 (Osborn, 2023). Additionally, Turkey's President Erdoğan pledged full support for Azerbaijan, arguably making it more unlikely for Russia or any Western states to intervene on behalf of Armenians and risk conflict with Turkey (Yavuz & Gunter,

2022). Further, Vicken Cheterian articulates that the US, instead of pushing harder for a peaceful resolution, had an interest in letting Azerbaijan take back its territories and N-K to remove the need for Russian peacekeepers in the region and possibly to lead to Armenia closing its Russian military bases, thereby limiting Russia's influence in the region **(**Cheterian et al., 2023). President Trump changed this equation to counter Iranian and Russian influence and to influence trade in the south Caucasus as part of the Trump route for international peace and prosperity (TRIPP).

The involvement of international actors pursuing their own interests in the region was a hindrance to a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Boban & Blažević, 2023; Rossi, 2017). After Azerbaijan's victory in 2023, the leaders of both countries engaged in bilateral negotiations, which in March 2025 led to a draft peace deal (Aljazeera, 2025a). However, the deal was signed in August 2025, as delicate questions like border demarcations as well as President Aliyev's demand for Armenia to amend its constitution were resolved (Aljazeera, 2025a). Given Russia's previous engagement and relatively close relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is noteworthy that its relations with both countries deteriorated over the last few years, and it was entirely left out of current negotiations. Instead, new actors like the United Arab Emirates have stepped up in facilitating meetings between both leaders, while Turkey has further strengthened its ties with Azerbaijan and is looking to improve its relations with neighboring Armenia (Aljazeera, 2025b; Vakulina, 2025). It remains to be seen whether the involvement of new third-party intermediaries can achieve what decades of international diplomacy could not – to implement the signed agreement that can lead to lasting peace and stability in the region.

Psychocultural Factors

The physical separation of Armenians and Azerbaijanis following the ethnic cleansing during the first Karabakh war manifested in one of the world's most militarized border zones that

arguably began in people's minds (Babayev et al., 2020). In times of political insecurity and social upheaval, people tend to look for identity security by creating clear "us" and "them" group boundaries that can be exploited by "ethnic entrepreneurs" (Russ-Trent, 2003; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022) for their own goals. This construction of an "ingroup" and an "outgroup" is generally achieved through intentional rhetoric denigrating each side, using the commemoration of symbolic or mythicized events as cultural symbols to create a homogenous group or national narrative perpetuated through folklore, stories, and myth as well as "chosen trauma" and "time collapse" where the past becomes as important as the present and a past trauma is reinforced through rituals and symbols (Russ-Trent, 2003; Smith, 2009; Volkan, 1997). All these elements can be found in the Armenia and Azerbaijan conflict.

A striking fact deWaal (2013) uncovered in his meetings with people from both sides of the N-K conflict was that hardly any of those who remember living in mixed communities have any personal feelings of hatred against individuals from the other group. He recounts stories of people not shooting an enemy because they recognised a friend or neighbour from childhood days (deWaal, 2013). It is not their personal experience or feelings that perpetuate violence and hatred, but their identification with a group that is constructed as "incompatible" (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022, p. 115) with the other group. This incompatibility highlights the role community (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022) as well as political leaders can play beyond structural elements in fueling conflict as Russ-Trent's (2003) inclusion of the individual level of analysis shows. Both groups' national identities were constructed around the N-K conflict and are in dichotomous antagonism with each other. There is also the symbolic meaning of the region of Karabakh itself. Azerbaijani's see N-K as the "cradle" of their culture and "birthplace" of their national identity (Schumacher, 2016). In contrast, Armenians believe that N-K represents the endurance and ancient origin of the Armenian people

throughout history (Schumacher, 2016). This conception of identity made it hard for either side to make concessions about a region and territory that is perceived as crucial to national identity. Anthony D. Smith (2009) points out the essential role cultural symbols as well as what he labels "mythomoteurs" or myths of common ancestry constitutive of an ethnic group, play in forming and keeping a group's shared ethnic identity over generations. These symbols can be national like flags and national anthems (Smith, 2009) as well as the land itself, rendering it basically non-negotiable for both sides.

Consequently, the Armenian original trauma story lies in the 1915 genocide, an event remembered annually and deeply engrained in Armenian collective memory. The events surrounding N-K have been interpreted in the framework of genocidal intentions against Armenians by "Turks," including Azerbaijanis who were not involved in the 1915 Ottoman massacres, justifying Armenian's hyper vigilance and pro-active measures of self-defence (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). When Russia and the West failed to intervene in 2020 and 2023, many Armenians saw their national identity as that of a chronic victim and "loneliest state" (Jeska, 2023) confirmed, and perceived Azerbaijan's actions as a second Armenian genocide that the international community did not recognize (Cheterian et al., 2023). In contrast, Azerbaijani national identity is often traced back to more recent times and as having been heavily shaped by the loss of N-K and surrounding territories in 1994 and the ensuing humiliation of displacement, the Khojaly massacre, and the N-K border as an ongoing reminder of its defeat (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

Azerbaijan has its own "Genocide Day" to remember the suffering of the Azerbaijani people at the hands of Armenians, engraining in people's minds the vulnerability of Azerbaijani independence and sovereignty that is ultimately challenged by Armenia's claims on N-K (deWaal, 2013). By labelling the killings and displacements of Azerbaijanis throughout the 20th century as

genocide, then-president Heydar Aliyev made it clear that "Genocide Day" was at least as much about commemoration as about the conflict with Armenia in a "duel of martyred nations" (deWaal, 2013).

Both nations constructed a national history with N-K as its symbolic origin, based on martyrdom and suffering at the hands of the other (Iskandaryan, 2020). Historians on both sides wrote treatises based on fiction or half-truths intending to prove that their own nation was there first, that Armenians were really Azerbaijanis or that Azerbaijanis were settlers with no right to the region (deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022). Even when people had no immediate personal reasons to hate or fear members of the other group, these aggressive narratives of ethnic incompatibility and each group's need for revenge among other factors led to an escalation into intercommunal violence that finally ended in a "war between neighbors" (deWaal, 2013). Framing the conflict as an existential crisis between both groups and not over material issues internalized the belief in each group that they are ancient enemies leaving little space for commonality and a middle ground to emerge on which to build and reach peaceful agreement (Altstadt, 2020; Yavuz & Gunter, 2022).

Conclusion

To conclude, the application of the Social Cubism model indicates that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over N-K cannot be reduced to questions about territory, regional and economic power, or ancient hatreds and trauma. Instead, the Social Cubism analytical model provides a holistic picture of six continually integrated parts below (see Table 1 below).

Table 1*: Key issues in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*

Conflict Factor	**The Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh**
Historical Factors	Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have constructed divergent ethnonational narratives, claiming exclusive historical rights to N-K and excluding the other side's perspective. Past suffering is engrained in national memory as "chosen traumas" and used to justify further violence.
Demographic Factors	"Double minority" and "double majority" describes how both groups perceive themselves as a minority under threat of domination and oppressed by the other perceived dominant group. Ethnic cleansing has created clear boundaries between both groups. Population decline increased Armenian fears of domination and genocide. In contrast, Azeris felt threatened in their independence and territorial integrity by the presence of an armed border within their state and the occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory after 1994 and the resulting displacement and loss of N-K.
Religious Factors	Religion is used by ethnic entrepreneurial leaders as a marker of difference and incompatibility. Armenians perceive themselves as "besieged Christians" surrounded by hostile Muslims, while Azeris largely reject a framing of the conflict in religious Christians-vs-Muslims terms and do not see religion as being a driving factor in the conflict.
Economic Factors	Economic considerations contributed to the Soviet Union's decision to make N-K a part of Azerbaijan. Economic interests of outside powers like Russia and Turkey prevented constructive engagement. Differences in prosperity have contributed to inter-ethnic hostilities and claims of discrimination.
Political Factors	Domestic leaders gained political capital from the conflict and have used it to silence internal criticism. Boundaries contributed to segregation. Geopolitical interests of outside powers prevented constructive

	engagement between the people of N-K until the recent U.S. intervention.
Psychocultural Factors	Ethnonational narratives of incompatible identities, fear and insecurity incited by ethnic leaders, and the construction of clear "us" and "them" boundaries using cultural symbols contributed to a climate of hatred and irreconcilability.

Adopted from Byrne & Carter (2003), p. 766.

These six dimensions figure into the causation and ongoing development of the conflict, yet it is really their interaction and simultaneity across different levels that help us understand the complexity of the conflict. Histories passed on within each group and institutionalized memory shaped psychocultural perceptions of the "other" as an enemy. Demographic fears influenced political decisions and were in turn instrumentalized by leaders. Economic status and prospects became intertwined with demographic and political struggles, as current economic, political, and religious oppression were justified with past inequities.

Applying the Social Cubism analytical model therefore allows a multi-perspective, multi-level, and multi-modal examination of the N-K conflict that highlights the different contributing factors to the conflict, and most importantly their interactions over time. This analysis reveals some striking similarities with other ethnic conflicts like Cyprus, Kashmir, and Northern Ireland (Byrne & Carter, 1996, 2003) and the role of higher mediators and EEG third party intermediaries (Byrne 2000, 2007). This is not to say that one conflict is like the other. However, using this analytical model does highlight certain shared general features like (1) the involvement of a colonial power, (2) two groups defining themselves as nations continually threatened by each other, (3) each group tied to a different neighboring nation state or "EEG," with an external third-party intermediary acting as a "higher mediator" (Byrne, 2000, 2007), (4) an antagonistic ingroup and outgroup, (5) double minorities and double majorities, and (6) the physical, institutional, and economic

separation of people. While context limits direct transferability of peacebuilding practices, lessons from similar conflicts can to a limited degree still inform new peacebuilding approaches, as well as help develop preventative strategies. While the situation in the N-K conflict may have significantly changed with the recent Azerbaijani military intervention and the ethnic cleansing of the region's ethnic Armenian population and the peace accord signed by both state's political leaders in 2025, our analysis shows that none of the underlying issues – distrust, fear, structural separation - have been fully resolved. Using a Social Cubism analysis, allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding that may guide third party intermediaries (local people, states or internationals) to use more holistic peacebuilding approaches to reach a just resolution.

A thorough analysis of this conflict is not a goal in itself – rather, as recent peacebuilding and conflict transformation literature has argued (Autesserre, 2021; Lederach, 1997; Mac Ginty, 2008), a complexified understanding of a given conflict is necessary to design well-informed multi-dimensional, multi-modal, and multi-level peacebuilding methods and processes that are based on local needs, practices, and perspectives and avoid unintended negative outcomes often caused by applying what Mac Ginty (2008) has called the external one-size-fits-all "IKEA model of peacebuilding." A long history of failed peace negotiations in the N-K conflict has demonstrated that any proposal that ignored any of the factors discussed in this article was likely to fall victim to the interests of internal or external actors or to be rejected by the population (Babayev et al., 2020; deWaal, 2013; Yavuz & Gunter 2022).

The current peace negotiations between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Pashinyan and Aliyev, are once again largely limited at the moment to elite level track one negotiations about the future status of N-K and peaceful relations between both countries. Civil society will need to engage both communities in meaningful peacebuilding ways to address deeper underlying issues

that have fueled the conflict in the past. While a peacebuilding proposal lies beyond the scope of this paper, a complexified understanding as encouraged by this analysis is essential for designing locally grounded, multi-level interventions that avoid the pitfalls of one-size-fits-all solutions and better support durable conflict transformation.

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