

## **The Armenian diaspora and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh**

The Armenian diaspora comprises communities around the world. The two largest ethnic Armenian populations are found in the USA, where an estimated one million Armenians reside, principally in California, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, and in France, where an estimated 500,000 Armenians live, principally in the Marseille and Paris areas (Shain and Barth, 2003: 468).

Soon after the implosion of the Soviet Union, the area of the former semi-autonomous Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, became an independent state in 1991. Similarly, the neighbouring former Soviet area became the internationally recognized state of Azerbaijan. The territory of the new Azeri state encompassed an area with mixed populations of ethnic Armenians and Azeris called Nagorno-Karabakh. A conflict ensued and Armenian forces seized Nagorno-Karabakh and other Azeri territories. Volunteers from the Armenian diaspora played a key role in the fighting which resulted in the creation of hundreds of thousands of Azeri refugees, most of whom lost their homes and livelihoods and subsist as IDPs in areas still controlled by the Azeri government or found safe haven in neighbouring Iran which has a large ethnic Azeri minority population.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and other Azeri territories now under Armenian military occupation has largely remained frozen since the early 1990s. However, the first democratically elected president of the new Armenia, Ter-Petrossian, opposed recognition of the self-declared Karabakh. This put Ter-Petrossian at odds with influential elements of the Armenian diaspora which favoured both recognition and annexation and generally a hard line towards both Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Ter-Petrossian's disfavour increased with Armenia's economic collapse. The downturn made Armenians all the more dependent on assistance from the Armenian diaspora. In the USA, the pro-Armenian lobby succeeded in increasing US foreign assistance to Armenia and in instituting a ban on aid to Azerbaijan (Shain and Barth, 2003: 471). The recovery of Armenia's sovereignty and independence led to significant inflows of ethnic Armenians from the diaspora who established political parties in Armenia. Among these was the Dashnak Armenia Revolutionary Federation which fiercely criticized Ter-Petrossian's policies. Eventually, by 1998, Ter-Petrossian was forced to resign and diasporic opposition figured centrally in this outcome. His

successor Kocharian embraced an Armenian foreign policy orientation which was much more pleasing to hard-line elements in the Armenian diaspora. According to Shain and Barth (2003: 472), the weight of the diaspora ‘...manifests itself most powerfully regarding the possibility of a peace settlement with Azerbaijan’.