The Unbearable Cost of Azerbaijan's Territorial Integrity

written by Vicken Cheterian Viken Çeteryan

On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijani army launched a full-scale attack on the defensive positions of the de facto republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. The attack came without any apparent justification, as negotiations were ongoing between the authorities of Azerbaijan and the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, parallel negotiations were ongoing between Azerbaijan and Armenia. With this attack, Azerbaijan violated numerous previous agreements, including the November 9, 2020, trilateral document, under which it agreed to end hostilities while the Armenian side returned the remaining Azerbaijani provinces occupied during the First Karabakh War, except for the five-kilometre-wide Lachin Corridor. There was no evident military reason to launch the onslaught, yet it did not come as a surprise: for more than nine months, since December 12, 2022, Azerbaijan had imposed a total blockade on Nagorno-Karabakh, bringing its entire population to the verge of starvation.

The Azerbaijani military attack was intense – several hundred soldiers from both sides were killed in less than 48 hours[i] – and quickly led to the encirclement of major urban centres such as Stepanakert, Martuni, and Martakert, making resistance meaningless. What followed was the most efficient ethnic cleansing of the 21st century: in a matter of days, the entire ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was forced from its land. In September 2023, more than a hundred thousand people crossed the Lachin Corridor to seek safety in Armenia, leaving behind fewer than two dozen Armenians under Azerbaijani rule, most of them elderly and ill.

The way Nagorno-Karabakh fell sheds light on the history and evolution of the Karabakh conflict itself. First, throughout the history of this conflict, Azerbaijan predominantly privileged the use of force. Throughout the thirty-five-year conflict, Azerbaijan repeatedly took the initiative in resorting to violence. The immediate reaction to Nagorno-Karabakh's demand for secession was the pogroms in Sumgait, which transformed the Karabakh conflict into generalized intercommunal violence during the final years of the Soviet Union. In April-May 1991, Operation "Ring" led to the ethnic cleansing of more than 15,000 Armenian villagers from Shahumyan District and Nagorno-Karabakh itself. During the First Karabakh War (1991-1994), at the time of the Soviet collapse, Azerbaijan also employed blockade, starvation, and continuous military attacks;[ii] in April 2016, Azerbaijan again initiated the four-day war; on September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched what became known as the Second Karabakh War; and finally came the 2023 assault and the ethnic cleansing of Karabakh's Armenian population.

Second, except for the final years of Heydar Aliyev's rule, when a genuine effort was made to reach a diplomatic, negotiated solution based on a mutual understanding of each side's security fears, such a solution was never seriously pursued.[iii] Azerbaijan not only failed to seriously address the security dilemma of the Karabakh Armenians – their fear of new attacks from Azerbaijan and mass deportations – but also used that fear as a constant threat. Since Ilham Aliyev came to power, and especially since petrodollars began flowing into Azerbaijani state coffers, Azerbaijan has invested more than USD 50 billion in war and privileged a military solution. A brief review of the chronology of the conflict would refute the now-popular belief that the Second Karabakh War was provoked by a speech by Nikol Pashinyan in which he said, "Karabakh is Armenian, that's it!" For years, Azerbaijani policy had already been seeking a military solution to the conflict. Pashinyan later said that "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!"

but this had little effect, neither stopping further wars nor preventing the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh.[iv]

The violent fall of Karabakh also shows that Azerbaijani offers of autonomy during the era of negotiations from 1994 to 2020 were rhetoric without substance. Azerbaijani authorities – whether during the rule of Heydar Aliyev or after 2003, when his son Ilham Aliyev came to power – never provided any details about what Heydar Aliyev called "the highest possible level of autonomy", a formulation also repeated by Ilham Aliyev.[v] When Azerbaijan was in a position to offer anything concrete to the Karabakh Armenians, the Azerbaijani offer ended up being "the highest degree of ethnic cleansing", and nothing else.

The Azerbaijani state could not grant autonomy to one entity – Nagorno-Karabakh – when the state structure itself was moving towards the centralization of power and consolidation around the autocratic rule of a family dynasty. Autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh was impossible because there was no autonomy anywhere else in the Azerbaijani political system. The opposite argument is also valid, and has become much more visible since the Second Karabakh War: any external victory against Armenia would further consolidate the concentration of power inside Azerbaijan.

Destruction of Meaning

The normative reference invoked by Azerbaijan to justify this series of wars is "territorial integrity". International law insists on territorial integrity in order to achieve a broader goal: avoiding wars, which is a central aim of the international legal system. But the Azerbaijani state and its apologists turned the spirit of international law upside down; repeatedly, "territorial integrity" was used not to avoid wars but to justify mass violence. In the Azerbaijani state's legal framework, there seems to be no law alongside "territorial integrity". There appears to be no law protecting human

rights, minority rights, religious rights, property rights, freedom of expression, the right to organize unions and political parties, the right to one's honour, and, most importantly, the right to life. If this legal framework was applied against Nagorno-Karabakh, the same state structures follow the same practices internally, against all subjects of the Azerbaijani state.

In its struggle for "territorial integrity", the Azerbaijani state did not limit itself to deforming the basic understanding of law; it deformed a series of other concepts as well. One evident example is the destruction of any meaningful sense of historical scholarship. The Azerbaijani authorities, with the support of important segments of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, are engaged in a revisionist history in which sites and symbols of the Armenian past – from monasteries and cemeteries to maps and manuscripts – are claimed to be Caucasian Albanian, and hence Azerbaijani rather than Armenian. But even such a deformation of history saved neither the Jugha cemetery in Nakhichevan nor numerous churches in Karabakh from destruction.[vi] By deforming the history of the other – the Armenian – the Azerbaijani state is also imposing a deformation of its own history. This process can occur only by co-opting, censoring, or repressing any Azerbaijani scholar who expresses divergent opinions.

This practice of deforming reality has become routine. As Azerbaijan was preparing to host COP29 back in 2024, it had imposed a blockade against Nagorno-Karabakh with purported environmental activists demonstrating against mining activities in Karabakh. But when Soyudlu villagers protested actual mining pollution affecting their village water sources, they were violently repressed and placed under police siege, a repression that continues to this day.[viii] Azerbaijan hosts the COP29 climate summit but has an economy entirely dependent on burning hydrocarbons, which looks like a game of shadows rather than a serious engagement with the number-one threat facing humanity. If the Azerbaijani state uses environmental

activism as a weapon for ethnic cleansing, is that same state qualified to tackle the climate crisis – the number-one problem facing humanity today – or the structural dependence of the Azerbaijani economy on hydrocarbon exports?

Consolidation of Autocratic Power

Contrary to the assertions of Nurlan Huseynov[ix] in an article published four days before Azerbaijani "eco-activists" initiated the second siege of Karabakh, which argued that the conflict was driven by the continuing Armenian occupation of Karabakh, the chronology of the conflict reveals that the choice of violence has consistently been made by the Azerbaijani side. There are numerous reasons for this. First, Azerbaijan is the stronger country in this conflict in demographic, military, and economic terms, and therefore considered, both in the 1980s and in 2020, the use of mass violence to be an advantageous and viable means of conflict resolution. But there is a second factor: the broad consensus within Azerbaijani society in favour of the use of violence and the view of the Karabakh conflict as a primordial struggle between two ethnic groups. During the First Karabakh War, only a handful of Azerbaijani intellectuals gathered around the Helsinki Committee of Azerbaijan and expressed pacifist and anti-war principles. Akram Aylisli stood virtually alone when he wrote a novel about mass violence against Armenians in Nakhichevan, and he and his family received threats of violence, including a threat to cut off his ear.[x] During the 2020 war, only a handful of young Azerbaijani dissidents expressed their opposition to the war. In September 2023, only five Azerbaijanis expressed their opposition on social media to the attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, and all five were immediately arrested.[xi]

While the courage of these dissidents should be underlined, they remained isolated individuals, while most of the population demanded a forceful solution to the conflict. This popular demand became a major source of political capital and

made it possible to undermine and even dismantle other sources of legitimacy and institutions within Azerbaijan, paving the way for autocracy. Many Azerbaijanis who supported the 2020 war hoped for a transformation of the regime after military victory. But the opposite occurred: internal repression only increased. In 2019, before the Second Karabakh War, the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan was between 112 and 135;[xii] this number increased to 254 in 2023,[xiii] to more than 306 political prisoners in 2024[xiv] and reached 328 by May 2026.[xv]

What has been happening since 2020 is a further concentration of power. The most visible consequence of this centralization is the dismantling of what remains of independent media, human rights defenders, and legal advisers. The repression has even reached academics, such as the economist Gubad Ibadoglu. The Azerbaijani state is dismantling the last remaining possibilities for Azerbaijani society to reflect on itself.

More significant, and less reported, is the advancing centralization of political as well as economic power. The most evident case is Vasif Talibov, the longtime feudal lord of Nakhichevan from 1995 until his fall in December 2022. Under Talibov's rule, the population of Nakhichevan was strictly controlled, and visits from outside were limited to such a degree that the region became known as the "Dark Island" or "Azerbaijan's North Korea".[xvi]

Political centralization is accompanied by economic centralization as well. The "resignation" of Vasif Talibov was followed not only by the dismantling of his network of nepotism but also by the transfer of property from the Talibov clan.[xvii] This is part of a larger consolidation of economic power in the hands of the ruling Aliyev family. For example, in the banking sector, the four largest Azerbaijani banks have increased their market share while 22 competitors have been eliminated from the financial markets over the last eight years. Now, "three of Azerbaijan's top five banks by assets –

Pasha Bank, Kapital Bank, and Xalq Bank – are controlled by Aliyev's two daughters along with relatives of the first lady, Mehriban Aliyeva", and the ruling family now controls "63 percent of all private banking-sector assets."[xviii]

What comes next?

Despite the continuing talk about "Western Azerbaijan", the holding of the Karabakh leadership hostage and their subjection to show trials, the continuous xenophobic discourse, and "victory parks", anti-Armenian discourse has reached the limits of its political usefulness. During the September 2022 attack on Armenia, this became noticeable for the first time, as Azerbaijani public opinion did not mobilize in support of the war. Increasing segments of Azerbaijani society are making the connection between external war rhetoric and internal repression. Moreover, many sectors of Azerbaijani society are dissatisfied with deteriorating social conditions, a malaise expressed by the large number of suicides among war veterans.

The arrest of Bahruz Samadov, a PhD student at Charles University in Prague, revealed something new in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. His arrest prompted a broad solidarity movement demanding his release from captivity, in which Azerbaijani and Armenian academics and activists took part side by side. This development is the outcome of a growing awareness of the direct relationship between foreign policy and domestic policy, between war against "external enemies" and repression against the "internal enemy" – academics, lawyers, and all kinds of dissident thinkers.

Yet the source of future instability for the Aliyev regime – and with it, the state and society of Azerbaijan – will come neither from Armenia and Armenians nor from a handful of Azerbaijani dissidents. It will come from the internal contradictions of the Aliyev regime itself. The centralizing trends observed thus far will continue and intensify in the

future, since there are no counterweights or checks and balances capable of opposing them.

The same is true of the regime's paranoid behaviour: by repressing critical thinking, it will divorce itself from the real issues facing its society and react harshly to the slightest expression of dissent. The repression in Soyudlu is one such example. The continued closure of land borders under the pretext of Covid is another expression of paranoia. When Azerbaijani society faces its next crisis, it will not be enough to talk about the Karabakh War and military victories. Yet the rigid system created for war, nationalism, and autocratic rule – along with the armies of tanks and drones designed to fight the last war – may prove ill-equipped to face future risks.

Notes and References

---

[i] Official Azerbaijani count is 192 Azerbaijani servicemen had died during the fighting, while there is no accurate Armenian count, but figures are put at more than 200 military casualties. See: https://apa.az/en/domestic-policy/192-azerbaijani-servicemen-martyred-during-the-local-anti-terrorist-measures-412834

[ii] I have addressed in detail the First Karabakh War in my *War and Peace in the Caucasus, Russia's Troubled Frontier,* Hurst, 2009, chapter three, pages 87-154.

[iii] This criticism refers also to policies of the Republic of Armenia, and the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh, yet it is outside the scope of our article.

[iv] Gayane Hovsepyan, « Nagorno Karabakh Is a Part of Azerbaijan, Says Pashinyan", *Hetq*, May 22, 2023: https://hetq.am/en/article/156343

[v] See:

https://www.rferl.org/a/Armenian_Azerbaijani_Leaders_Meet_On_Karabakh_In_Moscow/1779102.html

[vi] On the destruction of the Nakhichevan Armenian cultural heritage, see Amos Chapple, "When The World Looked Away: The Destruction of Julfa Cemetery, *RFERL*, December 10, 2020: https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-julfa-cemetery-destruction-unesco-cultural-heritage/30986581.html

[vii] See: https://mod.gov.az/en/armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-599/

[viii] Aytan Farhadova, "Soyudlu protest poster printer imprisoned on drug charges", *OC Media*, August 13, 2024: https://oc-media.org/soyudlu-protest-poster-printer-imprisoned-on-drug-charges/

[ix] https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/why-is-there-no-peace-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia-a-response-to-vicken-cheterian/

[x] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Azerbaijani Party Leader Offers Reward for Writer's Ear", February 11, 2013: https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-novelist-reward-cutting-off-ear-aylisli/24899021.html

[xi] See OC Media: https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-arrests-anti-war-figures/

[xii] State Department, "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan": https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/

[xiii] State Department, "Azerbaijan 2023 Human Rights Report": https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/

[xiv] See:

https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/call-to-stop-hosting-conference-of-parties-cop-annual-climate-summits-in-authoritarian-countries

[xv] See report by the Council of Europe, https://pace.coe.int/en/files/36048/html

[xvi] *RFE/RL*, "In 'Azerbaijan's North Korea,' Journalist Crackdown Continues, December 7, 2007: https://www.rferl.org/a/1079243.html

[xvii] *Meydan TV*, June 15, 2023: https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/after-vasif-talibov-left-office-family-properties-changed-hands/

[xviii] *RFE/RL*, "Relative Wealth: Banks Controlled By Azerbaijani First Family Soar To Dominance", January 24, 2024: https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-aliyevs-banking-dominance/32790142.html