

# The Gordian Knot of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict and the Second Karabakh War: Conclusions and Reflections

---

Esmira Jafarova\*

The year 2020 was to become a decisive time for the three-decades-long Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The 44-day-long war between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulted in the liberation of the Azerbaijani territories that had been under occupation by the armed forces of Armenia for nearly 30 years. The negotiation process, under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group since 1992, did not yield any tangible results in terms of facilitating a final resolution of the conflict. This commentary will focus on the most recent events in the run-up to the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan that lasted from September 27 to November 10, 2020, and will offer some thoughts on the war itself and the myths and misperceptions associated with the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The war was brought about by the unconstructive position and denialism of the leadership of Armenia across the entire duration of the peace process, which over the last two years, since the ascension to power of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, acquired a new dimension as he ramped up purposeful political and military provocations against Azerbaijan. The 44-day war undermined many myths and changed perceptions in regard to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, some of which will be highlighted in this work.



---

\* **Esmira Jafarova** is Board Member of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) based in Baku.

*Azerbaijan's 44-day-long Patriotic War*

September 27, 2020, was the very fateful day and the tipping point in the history of the almost 30-year-old, lingering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan declared that it had launched a counteroffensive in response to provocation by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia, which, using large-calibre weaponry, mortars, and all kinds of artillery, initiated an intensive shelling of the positions of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces along the front line as well as the populated areas of Qapanli village of Terter, Chiragli and Orta Garvend villages of Aghdam, Alkhanli and Shukurbeyli villages of Fuzuli, and Jojuq Merjanli village of Jabrayil districts.

*The negotiations towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict that started in the early 1990s under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group were unsuccessful, owing to the maximalist and unconstructive position of Armenia, which refused to liberate Azerbaijan's occupied territories and feigned engagement in the peace talks.*

Azerbaijan substantiated the legitimacy of its counteroffensive according to its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter—fighting a foreign threat within its internationally recognized territories.

It should be remembered that Armenia continued to occupy the Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan for about three decades, in blatant disregard to the norms and principles of international law, including the four UN Security Council Resolutions (822, 853, 874 and 884) that, in 1993, demanded an immediate, unconditional, and full withdrawal of all occupying forces from the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan.

The negotiations towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict that started in the early 1990s under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group were unsuccessful, owing to the maximalist and unconstructive position of Armenia, which refused to liberate Azerbaijan's occupied territories and feigned engagement in the peace talks.

Over the preceding two years, after Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan came to power, Armenia did everything possible to destroy the negotiation process and embraced ever-stronger militaristic rhetoric. At a rally in the occupied Azerbaijani territories, specifically in Khankendi, he declared that “Karabakh is Armenia and period”<sup>1</sup> and then embarked on numerous political and military provocations against Azerbaijan that, among others, included the revival of a dangerous

1 Jafarova, E., “What is Happening with Peace in Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict?” *Columbia Journal of International Affairs*, 5 April 2020, available at: <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/what-happening-%E2%80%9Cpeace%E2%80%9D-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict> (accessed: December 14, 2020).

*miatsum* (unification) ideology<sup>2</sup> in regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan; the organization of so-called “parliamentary and presidential elections” in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan; and Pashinyan’s visit to the historic Azerbaijani city of Shusha in May 2020 to conduct the so-called “inauguration” ceremony for the illegal regime established therein. These provocations, doubtlessly also inspired by Armenian (now former) Defence Minister David Tonoyan’s vow in early 2019 to wage “new wars for new territories,” acquired more dangerous proportions with the attack against the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan in July 2020, the expansion of illegal settlements of foreign people in Azerbaijan’s occupied territories and the rejection of the Madrid Principles that demanded the return of the occupied territories to Azerbaijan—principles that had been endorsed by both sides and the mediators.

From the outset of the 44-day-long war, lasting from September 27 to November 10, Azerbaijan’s military superiority was clear. Within the first couple of days the Azerbaijani army managed to break the defences of the Armed Forces of Armenia around Fuzuli and overcame the so-called “Ohanyan Line,” considered to be one of the strongest fortifications installed by Armenia’s army in the occupied Azerbaijani territories.

Moreover, from the early days of this war, Azerbaijan demanded that Armenia must finally withdraw its military forces from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, fully and unconditionally; and, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 853, issue a timetable for the de-occupation of Azerbaijani lands. This was laid down as an important precondition for Azerbaijan’s suspension of its military counteroffensive. Armenia, however, resisted and opted for the continuation of military operations instead.

One of the most heart-rending parts of this war became Armenia’s behavior toward Azerbaijani civilians. The country’s leadership opted to avenge its losses on the battleground on peaceful civilians and cities far beyond the theatre of military hostilities. Repeated, indiscriminate attacks against Azerbaijan’s cities, including Ganja, Barda, Tartar,

*Azerbaijan demanded that Armenia must finally withdraw its military forces from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, fully and unconditionally; and, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 853, issue a timetable for the de-occupation of Azerbaijani lands.*

2 Kucera, J. “Pashinyan calls for unification between Armenia and Karabakh,” *Eurasianet*, August 6, 2019, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh> (accessed: November 27, 2020).

*One of the most heart-rending parts of this war became Armenia's behavior toward Azerbaijani civilians. The country's leadership opted to avenge its losses on the battleground on peaceful civilians and cities far beyond the theatre of military hostilities.*

Gadabay, Beylagan, Goranboy, Aghjhabadi, and Khizi using SCUD, Tochka-U, and Smerch-type missile systems and multiple rocket launchers killed more than 90 and injured over 400 civilians.<sup>3</sup> The attacks against Ganja and Barda were the deadliest, with the former suffering three bombardments and the latter two, including the single most deadly attack on civilians of the war. These attacks also inflicted damage on Azerbaijan's civilian infrastructure, and Armenia made further attempts to strike and demolish Azerbaijan's critical energy infrastructure. This persistent intent was vividly highlighted in Armenia's

missile attacks on the city of Ganja. In addition to killing civilians, these also posed a threat to strategic energy infrastructure in the famous "Ganja Gap."<sup>4</sup>

There were three humanitarian ceasefires—on October 10, 17, and 26—negotiated in Moscow, Washington, and Geneva, respectively: all three of which were immediately violated by Armenia, followed by the latter's missile attacks against Azerbaijani civilians.

*The coda to this war, therefore, also came very fast. In the early hours of November 10, a trilateral peace declaration was signed by the Russian Federation, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The declaration, which reflected Armenia's practically complete capitulation*

Azerbaijani armed forces managed to liberate over 300 population centers, cities, villages, and strategic heights. The liberation of Shusha on November 8 became the tipping point that broke the back of Armenia's resistance. Shusha, besides wielding immense emotional and cultural significance for Azerbaijan, is also located on a strategic height, a plateau that is elevated above the surrounding residential areas. There is a saying: "Whoever controls Shusha, also controls Karabakh."

The coda to this war, therefore, also came very fast. In the early hours of November 10, a trilateral peace declaration was signed by the Russian Federation, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The declaration, which reflected Armenia's practically complete capitulation, obliged Armenia to return to Azerbaijan all remaining occupied territories, while peacekeepers from the Russian Federation were to be deployed along the line of contact

3 Prosecutor General's Office of Azerbaijan, "Latest News for 30.11.2020 Crimes Committed Against the Civilian Population of Azerbaijan", November 30, 2020, available at: <https://genprosecutor.gov.az/az/post/3234> (accessed: December 14, 2020).

4 Coffey, L. and Nifti, E. "Why the West Needs Azerbaijan," *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2018, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/28/why-the-west-needs-azerbaijan/> (accessed: December 14, 2020).

between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan that existed at the moment of signing.

The peacekeeping forces are to be deployed for five years—with a possible extension for another five—in parallel with the withdrawal of the armed forces of Armenia, and this will be monitored by a Joint Center where both Russian and Turkish military personnel will be present on an equal footing. Azerbaijan’s Kalbajar, Aghdam, and Lachyn districts were to be returned to Azerbaijan on November 15 (later extended to 25), November 20, and December 1, 2020, respectively. All Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) had to be returned to the liberated areas under the supervision of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. At the time of writing, Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachyn districts were already liberated; Russian peacekeepers had been deployed; and the Turkish parliament had approved sending military personnel to start their work in the Joint Center. The Center will be located in Aghdam district of Azerbaijan.

### *Myths and changed perceptions*

The war debunked myths around the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, thereby changing some perceptions in this regard. First, the myth that “*there could be no military solution to the conflict*” was shattered altogether. This mantra was repeated throughout the peace process mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, which unfortunately played into Armenia’s hands as it maintained its occupation of Azerbaijani territories and enjoyed impunity due to the lack of international pressure for its violation of international law.

Azerbaijan, in contrast, always emphasized that, if the peace process did not yield results, it would also attempt to regain its territories through military means. President Ilham Aliyev reiterated many times, in numerous interviews with the world’s media during these 44 days, that the inability of the international community to pressure Armenia to de-occupy Azerbaijani lands and the absence, across three decades, of a tangible solution through peaceful means to this persistent conflict warranted this military solution. Moreover, the behaviour of Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan over the last two years, which involved clear political and military provocations against Azerbaijan, ushered in this war.

*Azerbaijan, in contrast, always emphasized that, if the peace process did not yield results, it would also attempt to regain its territories through military means.*

Above all, the failure of diplomacy and peace process mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group stands as an unfortunate example of the inability of international mediation efforts, good offices, and facilitation work to live up to expectations regarding peaceful solutions to conflicts; instead, they gave way to military action that proved to offer a more effective shortcut to achieving the final resolution of the most intractable conflict. The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict was certainly an intractable one that lingered for over three decades; one that witnessed the triumph of military means over diplomacy and negotiations to deliver a tangible conflict resolution. The statement issued by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs on December 3, 2020, added little to the already sealed *fait accompli* brought by the trilateral agreement of the leaders of Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Having had to embrace the new reality, the statement by the Co-Chairs stressed that “the Co-Chair countries of the OSCE Minsk Group call upon Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue implementing fully their obligations under the November 9 statement, in Nagorno-Karabakh region and the surrounding districts, as well as their previous ceasefire commitments.”<sup>5</sup> Later, in mid-December, the three OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs also visited the region and their meeting with the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, was rather sobering. The President openly stated that, over the 28 years of Minsk Group mediation, the latter unfortunately failed to deliver a final solution to the conflict and the new reality created in the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s successful military counteroffensive has to be accepted by everyone.<sup>6</sup>

*Another myth, widespread in Armenia after the first Karabakh war of 1988–1994, was that “Azerbaijanis cannot fight.” This was also utterly destroyed.*

Secondly, another myth, widespread in Armenia after the first Karabakh war of 1988–1994, was that “Azerbaijanis cannot fight.” This was also utterly destroyed. In particular, the capture of Shusha ended all speculation about the combat capability of the Azerbaijani soldier. On December 3, 2020, Azerbaijan announced that its military personnel losses during the military operations 2,855 by January, 18, 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Although the number was higher than ever experienced by Azerbaijan since the first Karabakh War in 1988–1994, including during the four-day war in 2016 and the Tovuz provocation in July,

<sup>5</sup> OSCE, “Joint Statement by the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries,” December 3, 2020, available at: <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/472419> (accessed: December 14, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> President.az, *Ilham Aliyev receives OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs from France and U.S.*, December 12, 2020, available at: <https://en.president.az/articles/48908> (accessed: December 14, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Azertag.az, *Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defense discloses updated list of servicemen martyred in Patriotic War*, January 18, 2021, [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijans\\_Ministry\\_of\\_Defense\\_discloses\\_updated\\_list\\_of\\_servicemen\\_martyred\\_in\\_Patriotic\\_War-1661379](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijans_Ministry_of_Defense_discloses_updated_list_of_servicemen_martyred_in_Patriotic_War-1661379)

experts concur that the number of martyrs incurred by the Azerbaijani armed forces were moderate for such a vast counteroffensive, mostly owing to the usage of drones that guaranteed superiority in the airspace. For comparison, Armenia's losses stood, in a preliminary estimate, at 2,996.<sup>8</sup> However, this number could change following the process of exchange of bodies and identification of burnt corpses.

This war, which international military experts often refer to as a “fifth generation war,” will therefore also be remembered because of the widespread use of military drones by Azerbaijan that enabled the minimization of casualties among military personnel. The use of drones against Armenia's military positions in many ways predetermined the outcome of the war. The myth about the invincibility of Armenia's army that was born after the first Karabakh war and persisted through three decades was thus also undermined. Armenia underestimated Azerbaijan's military might.

Last, but not least, the myth about “*time is working against Azerbaijan*,” since the younger generation would not have ownership over Karabakh, also proved to be utterly wrong. During these 44 days Azerbaijanis, including the generation born after the First Karabakh War, demonstrated an unprecedented level of unity and solidarity that surprised many onlookers. All political forces within the country were also united around the purpose of restoring the country's territorial integrity. Time did not work against Azerbaijan: quite the contrary, thirty years of occupation consolidated Azerbaijanis' sense of national unity and self-preservation.

Many perceptions regarding the conflict resolution process, and generally about the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, also changed as a consequence of the destruction of these myths. Azerbaijan finally restored its territorial integrity and its victory on the battleground, as well as on the diplomatic front, was celebrated by jubilant crowds all over Azerbaijan.

### ***Conclusions and Perspectives for the Future***

The 44-day war exposed entrenched myths and misperceptions that for years had persisted around the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. The three myths— (1) “*there could be no military solution to the conflict*”, (2)

<sup>8</sup> Armedia.am, *Provedena sudmedekspertiza tel 2996 voyennosluzhashikh: minzdrav Armenii*, December 11, 2020, available at: <https://armedia.am/rus/news/90405/provedena-sudmedekspertiza-tel-2996-voennosluzhashchikh-minzdrav-armenii.html> (accessed: December 14, 2020).

“*time is working against Azerbaijan*”, and (3) “*Azerbaijanis cannot fight*”—were all proven irrelevant. The war also opened a new page in the history of independent Azerbaijan and the entire South Caucasus region. However, for these opportunities to be fully explored, the dark pages of the past should be fully closed. A fresh start requires fresh thinking as a starting point.

In the coming years, Azerbaijan has pledged to embark on demining, reconstruction, and the return of IDPs. Armenia, quite the reverse, is in the midst of political tumult and confrontations, accompanied by public discord and cabinet resignations in the wake of its capitulation. Azerbaijan has also vowed to hold Armenia accountable for all war crimes, ecological terror, and damage inflicted on Azerbaijan for the entire duration of the conflict and to demand reparations. It seems that there are still many pending issues to be solved before security and harmony finally settle on the region.

On December 10, 2020, Azerbaijan celebrated its military victory over Armenia in a solemn parade ceremony that was also attended by the president of the Republic of Turkey, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Apart from being a wonderful and prideful moment in the history of independent Azerbaijan, the messages delivered by the Presidents of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the parade heralded the dawn of a new era in the South Caucasus. More specifically, both presidents announced that they are ready for a constructive post-conflict engagement with Armenia. This new cooperation platform announced by the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey may include all six countries in the region, including Armenia, provided that the latter also demonstrates equal willingness to give a chance to fresh thinking and build trustful and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey and Azerbaijan, having abandoned its expansionist and irredentist aspirations.<sup>9</sup>

The ghosts of the past should, at last, be turned into opportunities for development and cooperation and Armenia should also be interested in embarking on this journey and finally reject the militaristic, nationalistic, and revanchist ideology that for decades denied the South Caucasus any chance for peace and prosperity.

---

9 Jafarova, E. “Expanding Regional Partnerships Following Second Karabakh War,” *Anadolu Agency*, December 15, 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan-front-line/analysis-expanding-regional-partnerships-following-second-karabakh-war/2077665> (accessed: December 16, 2020).