

# Fighting for the Caliphate? Not Really.

**Dr. Gayane Novikova**

**This article intends to analyse the combined influence of internal and external factors that promoted and contributed to the direct involvement of Islamists in the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict in 1993-1994 and 2020 and, in a broader context, the danger posed by this precedent.**

**The Azerbaijani authorities have denied any participation of Islamists in both Karabakh wars.**

The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan (1989), the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia (1992-1995), the collapse of the Soviet Union, the proclamation of the Republic of Ichkeria (Chechnya; 1991) and the first Russian-Chechen war (1994-96) – all triggered the spread of Islamic radicalism. The establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) greatly contributed to Islamists' global jihad against the rest of the world. The ISIS branches in Afghanistan, the Northern Caucasus, Central Asia, and several African states, Islamists' mobility and ability to mobilize the most vulnerable segments in the different societies, the increasing numbers of terrorist attacks against civilians, and the involvement of Islamist militants in the international conflicts and civil wars – all are sources of concern for governments and societies dealing with unconventional threats. The Nagorniy Karabakh (NK) conflict provides a unique example of how the internal utilization of the Islamic factor by the Azerbaijani leadership has intertwined with a long history of involvement and participation of Islamist mercenaries on the side of Azerbaijan.

## The Utilisation of the Islamic Factor

A revival of the religious self-identification in Azerbaijan was marked by the strong influence of geopolitical factors. Azerbaijan, as the second – after Iran – Shia-majority country belongs to the Turkic world through its ethnic, linguistic,

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*The village Shoshin in Nagorniy Karabakh on 15 November 2020*

and cultural identities. After independence, it adopted a secular model of governance, following Turkey's state structure as a model. However, a politicization of the religion has gradually become an important factor in Azerbaijan's domestic and foreign policies.

Among the internal factors that have contributed to a radicalization of Islam in Azerbaijan have been:

- the unresolved NK conflict and flow of refugees from Armenia and an internal displacement of people as a result of the Armenian-Azerbaijani hostilities that began in 1988 and ended with the defeat of Azerbaijan in the first Karabakh war (1991-1994);
- a disillusionment in the West, which was incapable of settling the conflict;
- a growing totalitarianism and authoritarianism along with regular violations of human rights;
- a drastically increased level of corruption and a decreased level of social security.

Among the external factors should be mentioned the multidimensional activity – from philanthropy and humanitarian

aid to a training of militants – of Islamic and Islamist organisations supported by the Iranian, Turkish, and some Arab governments. Applying for their diplomatic and military support for the resolution of the NK conflict, as well as for substantial humanitarian aid, Azerbaijan welcomed – to a different degree – their presence. A differentiated approach to these organisations was strongly defined by Azerbaijan's strategic interests.

## Iranian Influence

Initially, Iran was welcomed in Azerbaijan as a first provider of humanitarian aid in the areas of the refugee and IDP resettlement. Its influence and presence was increasing in Nakhichevan, in the southern regions mainly populated by Talishes and Tatas, and on the Apsheron peninsula. Some radical Shia clergy were criticizing Azerbaijani authorities as corrupt and even calling for a jihad – against them and against Armenians. Simultaneously, owing to a series of sensitive security issues, Iran kept its border with Armenia open, thereby on the one hand diminishing the

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consequences of the Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade of Armenia and on the other hand stimulating anger and mistrust among the Azerbaijani political leadership and the population.

## Turkish Activities

Turkey's activity in the religion sphere was significantly less than that of Iran. It was concentrated in the cities of Baku, Gyandja, and Sumgayit, as well as along the borders with the Russian Northern Caucasus (in the areas dominated by Lezgins and Avars, traditionally practicing Sunnism), and in the central regions. It was carried out by state and non-governmental channels in full accordance with Azerbaijani legislation and with support from the Azerbaijani government. Turkey's absolute political, diplomatic, and economic support of Azerbaijan, including the closure of the border with Armenia in April 1993, provided to Turkey the opportunity to drastically increase its presence and role in Azerbaijan.

## The Salafi Movement

In parallel with official Islam, the Salafi movement in the early 1990s was also finding its place in Azerbaijan: in 1993-94, 15 Arab philanthropic foundations – mainly from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia – were operating in the north of the country, as well in Baku and Sumgayit. They were providing humanitarian aid, building and renovating mosques (63 in total by 2003), and in the meantime intensively introducing a radical religious education and recruiting militants (many of whom later fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya). Salafi imams sharply criticized the authorities and called for jihad against the Karabakhi Armenians and Armenia. At various international fora, especially at the Organisation of Islamic Conference, Azerbaijan has been introducing itself as a Muslim country victimized by Christian Armenia's aggression. Through an artificial identification of Azerbaijan with the 'dar al-harb' (the "territory of the war"), thereby including a religious component into the ethno-political conflict, the Azerbaijani elite attempted to acquire maximum external support. In particular, in 1993-1994 a desperate need for help on the battlefield led to the recruitment of several hundred fighters from Chechnya and several thousand mercenaries from Afghanistan to fight in the Karabakh war. The reasons for participation of (mainly Arab) mercenaries in the 2020 Karabakh war were slightly different.



Photo: president.az

**Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev speaking to the military leadership of Azerbaijan on the Armed Forces Day**

## Islamist Foreign Fighters in the First Karabakh War

Contacts between the Azerbaijani and Chechen leaderships were established in late 1991 when both Azerbaijan and Chechnya proclaimed their independence. Azerbaijan was already a party to the NK conflict, and the unrecognized Republic of Ichkeria (Chechnya) was enjoying its short, relatively peaceful period of existence. A visit by A. Elchibey, the leader of the "Popular Front of Azerbaijan" (the President of Azerbaijan from May 1992 to September 1993) aimed to establish close – including military – relations with a brotherly Muslim state entity. By July 1992, according to some sources, around 300 Chechens were fighting alongside Azerbaijanis in Nagorniy Karabakh. They were paid approximately 600-1000 Russian Rubles (1000-1700 USD). It is worth mentioning that the Chechen leadership and field commanders viewed the war in NK as an ethnic-based rather than a religious war. After the eruption of war in Abkhazia (1992-93), Chechens and other fighters from the Northern Caucasus joined the Abkhazians in their war for independence from Georgia. From 1994 until 2000, the majority of them returned to Chechnya to fight against Russia. Some of these mercenaries later fought in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Many then joined the ranks of ISIS.

In mid-1993, the Azerbaijani government directly initiated the recruitment of Afghan Mujahedin after unsuccessful attempts to acquire direct military support from any of the foreign actors interested in the South Caucasus and, in particular,

in Azerbaijan's oil reserves. After a trip by the Azerbaijani Interior Deputy Minister R. Jivadov to Afghanistan, and after his negotiations with Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (then Afghanistan's Prime Minister), in August 1993 the Mujahedin (who were associated with Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami fraction) began to arrive in Baku on charter flights from Peshawar and Kabul. The financial aspect of this deal is unknown; one source mentioned Saudi Arabia as a sponsor. The most probable promised payment was \$500 per month (some sources provided an estimated payment as high as \$700 and even \$1,000).

The number of Afghan Mujahedin fighting in Nagorniy Karabakh varied between 1,500 and 3,000. In an article, "The future is for the professional army," published in Baku's newspaper "Zerkalo" (August 10, 2002), a spokesperson for the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence in 1992-1993 stated that "about 2,500 Afghan mercenaries fought for Azerbaijan." The most significant participation of Afghan Mujahedin in the battle was their attack on Armenian forces on October 21, 1993, in the outskirts of the city of Zangelan on the border with Iran. According to T. Goltz, a war correspondent who was in Azerbaijan during the entire period of warfare, "a group of Afghan mujahedeen brought into the sector decided to launch a jihad against Armenians. The Azeri command... did not back them up, and the Armenians hit back hard..."

After signing a ceasefire agreement with the Armenian armed forces on May 9, 1994, the Azerbaijani government tried

to reach another deal with Hekmatyar. However, owing to the special mission of G. Libaridian (then the Senior Advisor to the first President of Armenia, L. Ter-Petrosyan) to Jalalabad in late May 1994, deployment of a new group of the Mujahedin in Azerbaijan was prevented. In his letter to the Armenian President in June 1994, the President of Afghanistan B. Rabbani wrote: "Regretfully I must indeed say that certain adventurous groups, endangering the socio-political stability of Afghanistan and in the meantime pursuing personal financial gain, are worsening the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Afghanistan is making every effort to prevent the inhumane activity of the extremists."

Contacts between the Azerbaijani leadership and Islamic philanthropic and Islamist radical organisations continued and deepened after the end of the first

undertake any coup d'état attempts or armed uprisings against the Azerbaijani authorities. It should be emphasized that Chechens and supportive Arab organisations brought the Wahhabi ideology to Azerbaijan.

In general, the activity in Azerbaijan of Islamist terrorist organisations, including al-Qaida, since 1995 has been well-documented and lies beyond the scope of this analysis. However, manipulating the Islamic factor at home, the Azerbaijani authorities could not ignore that further radicalization of their society would constitute a threat to their power. A law banning the activity of foreign missionaries was adopted in 1996 and the status as "traditional confessions" was granted to Shiites, Sunnis, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Jews. It was followed by the demolition and closure of several radical mosques, the arrest of their imams, and repression against their followers. These actions contributed to a further radicalization of certain segments of the population, especially youth. Furthermore, they did not prevent Islamist terrorist organisations either from operating inside Azerbaijan or coordinating their activity from there.

### Islamist Foreign Fighters in the Second Karabakh War

The Arab Spring generated a systemic crisis in the Middle East. ISIS has become a home for different terrorist and jihadist organisations. Among thousands of Islamist radicals there are citizens of Russia (mainly from Chechnya and Dagestan) and Azerbaijan (who converted into Sunnism) already experienced in fighting global jihad. According to the October 2017 report of the US-based global intelligence and security consultancy Soufan Group, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," the number of foreign fighters from the republics of the former Soviet Union in ISIS was 8,717; among them were 3,417 from the Northern Caucasus. On March 7, 2017, Azerbaijan's State Security Service Lieutenant General M. Guliyev reported at a conference in Baku that up to 900 Azerbaijani citizens had joined the ranks of ISIS.

The Syrian civil war enabled a huge flow of refugees primarily into the neighboring countries. Turkey hosts approximately 1,5 million Syrian refugees, including jihadist fighters and their families. President Erdogan has chosen two options aimed to reduce this burden: He blackmails Europe by releasing refugees and utilizes thou-

sands in proxy wars in Libya, Afghanistan, and, most recently, Azerbaijan.

Rumours that 50-70 Islamist fighters of Azerbaijani descent left Syria in April 2016 to fight in Nagorniy Karabakh were actively circulating in the Russian and Iranian mass media. However, evidence for their participation was lacking. Four years later, in 2020, the situation changed. Information about the presence of Islamist fighters in Azerbaijan and their participation in the battles of the 2020 Karabakh war (September 27 – November 9) was confirmed by French, Russian, American, Iranian, and Armenian intelligence services, as well as by war journalists on the frontlines, by independent human rights organisations, and by multiple selfies and videos posted by mercenaries online.

If available sources are compared, the most reliable number of Islamists in the area of the NK conflict appears to have been between 2,700 and 3,000. They were primarily members of the Sultan Murad Division, the Hamza Division, and the Suleiman Shah Brigade. With diverse ideological allegiances all are associated with the Syrian National Army (SNA) established by Turkey in 2017 with the aim to support military factions opposed to the regime in Damascus. Although their primary motivations for fighting in NK were different, all endorsed and maintained a religious language.

The recruitment of Islamists began in July-August 2020 in the refugee camps. Four-month contracts (for guarding borders or oil and gas pipelines, or serving peacekeeping mission) included a monthly salary up to \$2,000 and \$7,800 in life insurance, both paid in Turkish lira. One source reported that Turkish citizenship was guaranteed for fighters and immediate members of their families. One of the SNA commanders, Ziyad Haci Ubeyd speaking on the Rûdaw TV News Bulletin from Antep on September 28, stated that Turkey provides economic support to more than 70,000 fighters. They therefore "have to pay [their] debts to the support Turkey has given" and "are ready to fight everywhere for Turkey's national interests and security." He added, "The fighters have to go to war in Azerbaijan to provide [support] for their families due to bad economic conditions."

Only a thin line separates the mercenaries and jihadists in the Karabakh war is thin. In accordance with the morale of devout jihadists rooted in religious fanaticism, Shias are heretics. Therefore, according to one of the most influential jihadist ideologues, Abu Muhammad al-



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**Azerbaijani soldiers during the first Nagorno Karabakh war in 1992**

Karabakh war and especially with the beginning of the Chechen war. Azerbaijan provided a shelter to Chechen refugees (by the beginning of 2001 their number exceeded ten thousand). It factually became a transit country for weapons supplies mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan for Chechen militants (a significant number of whom were trained in camps in these countries) and for humanitarian aid for the population of Chechnya and Chechen refugees inside Azerbaijan. Y. Bodansky (Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare of the US House of Representatives from 1988 to 2004) mentioned that, according to an agreement reached in 1997 between then President of Azerbaijan H. Aliyev and the Chechen Islamist leadership, the Chechens gained a right of free movement of mercenaries and weapons through Azerbaijan's territory in exchange for a promise not to



Maqdisi, fighting alongside Azerbaijanis is a sin and dying in the Karabakh war will not guarantee martyrdom. However, some Sunni clerics directly involved in recruiting have introduced a war against “infidels” – Armenians – as an “enforced sufficiency” of global jihad. To avoid confusion among the “devout” regarding the Sunni – Shia rivalry, and to justify this war, one of the sheiks stated on October 9, 2020: “Our nation is being tested in the East and the Maghreb. Our battle is in Azerbaijan now as it is our battle in the Levant. They became Shiites in Azerbaijan under the weight of the sword, otherwise the country of Azerbaijan was a Sunni country par excellence.”

The logistics were handled, among other private and security companies, by Sadat International Defence Consultancy (SADAT), a private Turkish company owned by President Erdogan’s former chief military consultant, A. Tanriverdi. Fighters were flown into Azerbaijan in Turkish cargo airplanes and deployed in the five camps proximal to the Iranian border in the Horadiz and Hadrut areas.

The issue of mercenaries in NK was addressed on November 11, 2020 in the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries Report: “The alleged role of Turkey is all the more concerning given the similar allegations ... in relation its role in recruiting, deploying and financing such fighters to take part in the conflict in Libya. In this context, it is even more worrisome that the Syrian fighters deployed to Azerbaijan are allegedly affiliated with armed groups and individuals that, in some cases, have been accused of war crimes and serious human rights abuses during the conflict in Syria, thus seemingly perpetuating a cycle of impunity and risking further abuses of international law.”

## Quo Vadis?

Unresolved conflicts and small wars have become the fertile ground for radicalization of some strata of the directly involved population. Meantime, they have been attracting diverse groups of foreign Islamist militants.

The participation of Afghani Mujahidin and the Chechen fighters on the battleground in NK in 1993-94 did not change the military balance in favour of Azerbaijan. However, a large flow of Chechen refugees significantly contributed to the strengthening of Sunni Islam.

A manipulation of the Islamic factor by Azerbaijani authorities brought into the spotlight its dual utilization. On the one hand, they welcomed the presence and

Photo: Diana Ananyan



*Shahumyan Region in Nagornyi Karabakh*

activity of different Islamic and Islamist organisations. The jihadist network has begun spreading across Azerbaijan since the mid-1990s. On the other hand, Azerbaijan introduced itself after 9/11/2001 simultaneously as a potential target of jihadists and terrorists and as a barrier on their pathway to Russia and Europe.

Cultivating its image as a victim of the Armenian aggression, Azerbaijan gradually infused a religious component into the NK conflict. Bellicose rhetoric became intertwined with an appeal to Islam as a source of strength, especially during – and immediately after – the 2020 Karabakh war.

Turkey skilfully uses the Middle Eastern mercenaries in its long-term proxy wars in Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan. Azerbaijan has also used Islamist foreign fighters. By bringing them into the 2020 war in NK, Azerbaijan and Turkey mainly intended to reduce casualties in the Azerbaijani army. It should be noted that Azerbaijani ethnic minorities (both Shia and Sunni), for different reasons, were reluctant to fight against Armenians.

There is no information that mercenaries from Syria left en masse the conflict zone; only a few reports refer to a transfer of bodies (in total around 300-500) back to Syria. However, taking into consideration Erdogan’s attempts to change the demographic configuration of Turkey (through granting to Syrian Sunni Arabs Turkish citizenship and settling them in areas populated by Alevites and Kurds), it is possible to assume that the same scenario can be implemented by Azerbaijan in the territories which were under the Armenian control from 1993 to 2020.

In this case, the Armenian population of Nagornyi Karabakh will be under a permanent threat of physical elimination.

In the mid-term perspective Islamists can challenge the authorities of Azerbaijan with the prospect of becoming a serious security threat in the long run. Presumably, Azerbaijanis and Chechens, who fought in Syria and had problems with both ISIS and another militant Islamist organisation, Tahrir al-Sham, could use the war in NK as an opportunity to return to Azerbaijan and the Northern Caucasus. Russia and Iran have articulated their serious concerns regarding the presence of Islamists in the South Caucasus. In the short-term perspective the territories of Russia and Iran, as well as that of Georgia, can be used by Islamists as transit zones to move out of the Caucasus – into the Middle East and/or Europe, or somewhere else – to continue to fight jihad.

Turkey’s full-scale support of Azerbaijan in the 2020 Karabakh war has enhanced its role in the South Caucasus, its influence in the Middle East, as well as in the Turkic world. It will continue to utilize mercenaries and jihadists in its far-reaching plans. ■

**This article is based upon the testimonies of several war correspondents, the memoirs of Western diplomats deployed in Baku and Yerevan, reports from the independent human rights organisations, resolutions of the international organisations, as well as different printed and social media resources, documents, and photographs captured in the battlefields.**