

# THE ANATOMY OF GENOCIDE

## KARABAKH'S FORTY-FOUR DAY WAR

**International Christian Concern**

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INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

# THE ANATOMY OF GENOCIDE: KARABAKH'S FORTY-FOUR DAY WAR

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## INTRODUCTION

War erupted in the South Caucasus on 27 September 2020 when Azerbaijan and Turkey launched a joint military operation named Operation Iron Fist into the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenian: Artsakh). A truce was brokered by Russia forty-four days later which ceded significant parts of Karabakh to Azerbaijan.

During those forty-four days, Azeri and Turkish-paid Syrian mercenaries published multiple accounts and footage demonstrating possible war crimes against the local community. Following the truce, Turkey entered a peacekeeping role alongside Russia. Nevertheless, Turkey demonstrates biased support to Azerbaijan, who persists in violating the truce's terms and the basic principles of human rights.

The dynamics of this conflict are deeply complex, but have strong religious freedom implications impacting the future of Karabakh's local community. The strategic planning by Turkey and Azerbaijan show an intent of mass extermination, thereby genocide, of Karabakh's Armenian residents because of their combined faith and ethnic identity.

These identities are important to the Pan-Turkic ideology driving Azerbaijan and Turkey's activities in Karabakh. This ideology is hidden behind highly symbolic language. Tactics used to promote this ideology include erasing Christianity from the historical memory of Karabakh, dehumanizing local residents, dismantling their identity, and using a variety of impression management maneuvers to limit the ability of international observers to name this war for what it is: genocide.

## ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

- That the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom designate the Grey Wolves as an Entity of Particular Concern.
- That members of Congress insert into the congressional record a statement condemning war-crimes committed in Nagorno-Karabakh and urging the protection of ethnic and religious diversity.
- That language be included within FY2022 Intelligence Authorization Act acknowledging Turkey's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.
- That [H.Res.190](#) be reintroduced from last Congress and include language encouraging USCIRF and the State Department's IRF Office to open a line of communication with the Republic of Artsakh regarding the religious freedom elements of the conflict.
- That Congress should support the European Court of Human Rights in their investigation into the status of Nagorno-Karabakh's POWs.

Please reach out to [advocacy@persecution.org](mailto:advocacy@persecution.org) for more information or to collaborate on these recommendations.

## HISTORY OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH

During 301/314 AD, Armenia became the first country to establish Christianity. Its boundaries included significant parts modern-day Turkey and the Caucasus, including the historic provinces of Artsakh and Utik which correspond to a large part of modern Nagorno-Karabakh. However, following the Seljuk Turkish invasion, the geography's dominant religion shifted towards Islam in the 11th century and the environment changed. The history of the Karabakh area pre-dating the advent of Islam is important for understanding the context of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both religions have a history here. Any attempt to erase the religious history in Karabakh sends the message that it is not safe to have that religious identity. It erases the capacity of choice.

The present situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has the characteristics of a protracted conflict and territorial dispute that results from a Soviet-era oblast system of "divide and rule." Although Karabakh is predominantly Armenian Christian, the Soviets transferred it to the control of the Muslim Azerbaijani Soviet Republic. When the USSR dissolved, the international community acknowledged the continuity of the Soviet oblast system by recognizing Karabakh as belonging to Azerbaijan.

In regards to Karabakh, Azerbaijan has never taken steps to assume the caretaker responsibilities each government has over its citizens. During Soviet Azerbaijani rule, Armenians in Karabakh were systemically deprived of access to economic development opportunities. Their religious and cultural freedoms were greatly restricted. Over the same period, another Azerbaijani-controlled exclave – Nakhichevan – was depopulated of virtually all of its Armenian residents. In the last days of Soviet Azerbaijan, Karabakhi Armenian demands for greater autonomy and cultural freedom were met with violent pogroms and discriminatory policies against Armenian Christians effectively eliminated that community. Some would subsequently resettle in Karabakh, others in the Republic of Armenia.

In the post-Soviet era, Azerbaijan only further escalated its anti-Armenian policies. Because Azerbaijan assumed a hostile rather than caretaker role towards Armenian Christians, residents of Karabakh petitioned for their independence and established their own government. This government has no international recognition. Karabakh's Armenian residents were never given a pathway to Azeri citizenship and – like all other Armenians – are not allowed to travel into the main territory of Azerbaijan. Karabakhi Armenians were thus essentially rendered stateless. Thus when Karabakh's residents are in a position of needing international recognition of having some type of citizenship, this is done under the auspices of belonging to the Republic of Armenia.

## PAN-TURKISM AND ISLAM

The Turkic identity originates from Central Asia. According to folklore, the Turkic identity is descended from a wolf (*Asena*) whose children spread through invasion into areas now known as the modern Republics of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

However, in large part because of the Ottoman Empire, the concept of Turkishness has evolved far beyond ethnic identity. As one famous nationalist saying (credited to Ozan Arif) explains, "*your doctor will be a Turk and your medicine will be Islam.*" In other words, the pursuit of Turkishness cannot be divorced from the pursuit of Islam. A goal presented in the name of Turkishness is pursued through the means of Islam.

Such a concept puts ethnic non-Muslim communities at an immediate disadvantage.

The concept of Pan-Turkism arose during the 19th century in response to the fracturing of the Ottoman Empire and growth of Russian influence. The Armenian Christian communities located in geographies where those two areas intersected, such as Karabakh, paid a high price for Pan-Turkism. Geographically, Karabakh prevents the territorial unification between the Republic of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Ethnically, Karabakh prevents their ethnic unification. Religiously, Karabakh prevents their faith unification.

During the 20th century, Pan-Turkism embraced new nomenclature with the advent of the organization in Turkey known as the Grey Wolves (Turkish: *Bozkurtlar*). The name references the folklore myth regarding the creation of the Turkish identity. They became known as a death squad and were involved in multiple serious religious freedom violations. This includes the massacre of over 100 Alevis and the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II. They are affiliated with Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), who established an alliance with Turkey's ruling AKP party in 2018 known as the "People's Alliance" (Turkish: *Cumhur İttifakı*).

During the forty-four-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, both Turkey and Azerbaijan messaged their invasion as a liberation. However, this messaging included cloaked language common to the Grey Wolves and easily understood by promoters of Pan-Turkism.



*An example of a Grey Wolf hand sign exhibited by an Azeri military member which circulated on Telegram*

## **SHUNNING THE ROLE OF CARETAKER**

The power dynamics exhibited throughout the war are an important feature for accessing the role of religious freedom violations. Geographically and demographically, Karabakh is smaller than either Turkey and Azerbaijan. Since it has no internationally-recognized government, its capacity for self-defense is limited. Necessity requires a reliance upon the Republic of Armenia, but Yerevan is also geographically and demographically smaller than both Turkey and Azerbaijan. How these two Turkic countries choose to jointly exercise their clear position of physical power speaks about the content of those who are exercising it. In other words, how an entity responds when confronted with vulnerability speaks volumes about that entity.

Azerbaijan claims that they have a caregiver role over the territory of Karabakh, but in the years leading up to the forty-four-day war, Azerbaijan had shunned this position. Nevertheless, a stated desire to exercise this caregiver role was given as justification for the invasion. When confronted with the presence of complete vulnerability, that caretaker role was again shunned and human rights abuses were excused. While these abuses were perpetrated, they were often done using the cloaked language familiar to those associated with the Grey Wolves. For example, Armenian Christian POWs were beaten and then forced to pose next to the Grey Wolf hand signal. These abuses were then justified, rationalized, and characterized as stemming from a lack of a sense of reciprocity. When these abuses were named by international observers,

Azerbaijan and Turkey used the tactic of attempting to discredit the source rather than facing the content of those claims.

Turkey's role in this is very important, as they not only wield great influence with Azerbaijan but have also negotiated their way into a peacekeeper position following the truce. As such, Turkey has embraced the trappings of a caretaker role, which includes a responsibility of calming the conflict. However, Turkey's presence at Azerbaijan's victory military parade showed a bias towards the aggressor rather than the neutral stance needed by peacekeeping forces. Turkey's President Erdogan's subsequent speech also included cloaked language which showed an intent towards further conflict by citing references to the 1915 Armenian Genocide and Pan-Turkism. The tactics used by Azerbaijan to dismiss claims of human rights abuses are tactics successfully modeled by Turkey, as documented in the report [Turkey: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020](#).



An Azerbaijani general was [spotted](#) during the Dec 10 Baku Victory Parade flashing the Grey Wolves sign

Holding Karabakh's Christian cultural sites hostage is an example of the reciprocity demanded by Azerbaijan. During the war, multiple videos surfaced of Azerbaijan intentionally destroying Christian sites. This not only includes churches such as the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral, but also other sites important to Christianity such as khachkars, also known as cross-stones. Khachkars are often centuries old, are individually and uniquely crafted, and tell the story of Christianity in that specific location. Destroying a church prevents corporate worship. Destroying a khachkar erases Christian history.

UNESCO requested permission from both Armenia and Azerbaijan to enter Nagorno-Karabakh to inventory sites in need of protection. Azerbaijan, however, refused and instead demanded that UNESCO investigate Armenian war crimes against Azerbaijan's cultural assets. Soon after, Azerbaijan's state media circulated photos of the President and First Lady (who was designated UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador in 2004) visiting Karabakh soon after an Azeri cease-fire violation. The power dynamics are important in this situation. Azerbaijan has control over these sites and is demonstrating their strength over the territory. As caretaker, they have a responsibility to protect what is vulnerable. But rather than demonstrating this responsibility by showing an example of protecting religious diversity, Azerbaijan is holding it hostage to force a community who is now vulnerable to their power to first say that the vulnerable community itself does not protect religious diversity.

Demands of reciprocity open the door to tactics of rationalization (*example: they did it first*) and justification (*example: we believe we are being reasonable*). One of the more pressing humanitarian issues to have immediately emerged as a consequence of the war is Azerbaijan's treatment of Armenian Christian POWs, both military and civilian. Rationalization and justification tactics have been displayed throughout this entire process concerning the POWs.

On the one side, videos of POW mistreatment show their captors dismantling their sense of identity and choice. They are not simply taunted or beaten. Their captors use their power for control and coercion in a manner which reinforces the narrative used to justify the war. For example, in one video viewed by ICC, Azerbaijani military personnel have captured three Armenian men dressed as civilians. One lies on the ground, presumably deceased. While the other looks on, the captors beat one demanding that he affirms their belief that Karabakh is Azerbaijani. He eventually does for the camera. Given the nature of Pan-Turkism, what he is being asked is more than a question of nationality. He is being asked to ignore every aspect of his identity, including his faith.

Azerbaijan rationalizes similar and worse POW treatments on the basis that Armenians treat Azeri POWs poorly. Although Azerbaijan committed itself to repatriate all Armenian prisoners of war in an all-for-all swap, Azerbaijan justifies this treatment and their continued captivity on the basis that the Azerbaijanis are liberators, and the Armenian POWs belong to a class who are guerillas or terrorists. Again, however, the power dynamics are important. As the “conqueror” of Karabakh, Azerbaijan holds more POWs than Armenia and is in the position of strength. They have chosen a caretaker role; therefore, they must set an example for the standard of humane treatment. They have a responsibility to protect human rights because it is the right choice, not because it can be politically advantageous. Instead, the example which is being set is one of rationalization, justification, and reciprocity towards human rights. It is an example which does not bode well for the protection of freedom of conscience in Karabakh’s future.

## IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

As part of their invasion into Nagorno-Karabakh, both Turkey and Azerbaijan used a number of impression management tools intended to rename and reframe the war, thereby protecting their interests. This meant building and controlling a narrative which speaks to the heart of Pan-Turkism. Since the goal of Pan-Turkism is the liberation of the Turkic people and restoration of Turkic culture, it was important to build this narrative in the days leading up to the invasion.

The July 2020 conversion of Turkey’s Hagia Sophia Cathedral from museum into mosque was the first public step in this process. The imagery surrounding the first Friday prayers at Hagia Sophia brought Turkey’s Ottoman past back into focus. Themes of Islamic conquest, seen for example in the sword wielded during the opening sermon, were profoundly apparent.

Exactly one month later, Turkey’s Directorate of Communications released a video entitled the [Red Apple](#) (Turkish: *Kızıl Elma*). The Head of Communications said that, “*For us, the Red Apple of Turkey is big and powerful. It is the happy march of our nation.*” The video was laced with imagery alternating between Ottoman Era conquests and Turkey’s modern military. Islamic themes were strongly present, and several frames were dedicated to the conversion of Hagia Sophia. References to Fatih, the Ottoman Sultan who replaced Christianity with Islam through his conquest, are spread throughout the video. The symbolic phrase of the Red Apple is cloaked language historically used to show that Turks are preparing for new military conquests in the name of Islam, just as Fatih did when he [seized](#) the literal Red Apple from a statue at Hagia Sophia.

Between the conversion of Hagia Sophia and the release of the Red Apple video, Turkey was already laying plans for the invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh. Beginning on 29 July 2020, Turkey and Azerbaijan began



holding large-scale joint military exercises which lasted until 10 August. A written statement from the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry [said](#) on 27 July, just three days after the Hagia Sophia conversion, that “*Azerbaijani-Turkish Live Fire Joint Large-Scale Tactical and Flight-Tactical Exercises will be held in our country with the participation of the Land Forces and the Air Force of both countries.*”



Two clips from Turkey’s Directorate of Communications a video entitled the [Red Apple](#). They show the conquest of Hagia Sophia as a continuum between the Ottoman and modern eras

State media justified these activities saying that Karabakh was held by Armenian separatists who seized the territory in the 1990s, and by citing recent military tension and clashes along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Such comments were unnecessary given that the alleged military aggression from Yerevan that Azerbaijan and Turkey cited as justification had occurred far from Karabakh. The Red Apple and conversion of Hagia Sophia were all tools used to begin managing the impression such a conflict might have on the broader population.

Libyan mercenaries, but quickly were overwhelmed by rumors of Syrian mercenaries. By the time the war started in September, Turkey had hired at least 4,000 Syrian mercenaries at \$1,800 for a period of three months. These mercenaries were drawn from the ranks of known terrorist groups, including ISIS. Chatter on the Syrian side showed that they were being recruited using jihad terminology against Christians. For example, *AsiaNews* [quoted](#) a source from Syria who explained that they were going to fight alongside Azerbaijan “*because it is part of the Jihad; it is a holy war of Muslims against Christians.*” Syrian mercenaries reported that they were offered monetary bonuses based on different actions, such as beheading Christians.

Turkey’s recruitment of mercenaries began shortly before Baku and Istanbul’s joint military exercises, but increased in speed as the date of the invasion approached on the 27 September. [Rumors](#) at first pointed towards

Following the truce, Turkey and Azerbaijan continued reframing the narrative about why the invasion took place. For Western audiences, an English-language video was released entitled [Two States, One Army](#). This phrase is Pan-Turkic in origin but leaves no doubt that whatever happened in Karabakh, it happened because of Turkey and Azerbaijan together. The video explains that every member of Azerbaijan’s Armed Forces gained their skills through Turkey. Indeed, many of the footage of war crimes committed during the conflict show troops wearing the dual patches of Azerbaijan and Turkey, making it hard to distinguish the actual nationality of the perpetrator. As an impression management tactic, this makes accountability challenging by redefining the concept of state while also making clear that whatever this redefined concept of state means, that is who is responsible for initiating the war. Blurring the definition so profoundly reduces the ability for accountability.

It is not enough, however, to build the narrative. Controlling the narrative is also important, and a task nat-

urally suited to the media of both Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, there are two audiences which must be presented with a narrative of the war: the international community, and Turks.

The [press freedom index](#) rates both countries poorly: Turkey stands at 154 and Azerbaijan at 168. For comparison, the lowest ranking possible is 180. Alternatively, Armenia stands at 61 on the list. There are currently two opposing narratives circulating throughout Turkey and Azerbaijan's English-language media, but both narratives serve the goal of reframing and renaming the war for foreigners.



A clip from Turkey's Directorate of Communications in a video entitled [Two States, One Army](#)

The first narrative denies the historic presence of Christianity in Karabakh. The second narrative redefines it, not as Armenian, but as originally belonging to either the ethnic Udi or Albanian communities. In regards to the second, it is noteworthy that at these Christian sites, it is the Armenian language which is written and often engraved onto the stone. Both narratives share in common that they are meant to dismantle and discredit attempts at framing this war within religious freedom terminology. It also sends the subtler message that they will tolerate Christianity only on very specific terms.



[Tweet](#) from President Erdogan on December 10 with short video clip of his involvement during Baku's victory parade. The tweet highlights the religious elements of the conflict

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan delivered a speech at the military parade in Baku, highlighting the narrative which is being pursued domestically by both countries. The language was purposefully cloaked in that foreigners would have difficulty understanding the symbolism, but locals would grasp the full meaning. For example, Erdogan referenced the names of leaders who were involved in the 1915 genocide against ethnic Christians. "Today, may the souls of Nuri Pasha, Enver Pasha, and the brave soldiers of the Caucasus Islam Army be happy," he stated.

Azerbaijan's President Aliyev [responded](#) in a more direct manner, saying "My brother said that Azerbaijan was right in this war! Turkey's political and moral support for Azerbaijan makes every Azerbaijani citizen proud and happy."

He further made provocative claims about territories internationally recognized as belonging to the Republic of Armenia, and used language which confirms an intent to crush rather than integrate Karabakh's residents into Azerbaijan. "Our iron fist embodies both our unity and strength. That iron fist broke the enemy's spine and crushed the enemy's head. If Armenian fascism ever raises its head again, the result will be the same. Again, Azerbaijan's iron fist will break their back."

## THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Azerbaijan has made it clear that though they want territorial ownership over Artsakh, they do not want a caretaker role over the residents who live there unless those people validate a particular identity. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey have made it clear these actions are taken because of a Pan-Turkic ideology that prefers conformity to Islam, with some exception for very specific versions of Christianity. These two countries have pursued their actions in a way which elevates and echoes the 1915 genocide of ethnic Christians. This kind of language and behavior shows an intention of eliminating a community from their homes simply because of an identity they were born into. It has caused serious bodily harm, mental harm, and even death to those residents. As such, it should trigger international concern that a genocide has and is taking place within Karabakh toward ethnic Christians. Given Turkey's role as a conflict instigator and now as a peacekeeper following the truce agreement, there is also concern about the current system monitoring Karabakh and whether it will truly encourage diversity.

It is also worth noting that the external religious freedom violations found during the Karabakh war is the fruit of internal religious freedom problems within Turkey and Azerbaijan. The low press freedom scores in both countries hide just how seriously religious freedom is violated in both countries. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan once had a vibrant, diverse society. Today, freedom of conscience and identity does not exist there. This is what is at stake in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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