

Siege of Karabakh and Two Visions of Azerbaijan

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The siege of Karabakh imposed by the authorities of Azerbaijan is nearing its ninth month. Cases of death from lack of food, fuel and medication has been recorded. As winter approaches the entire population of Nagorno Karabakh - or the Armenian Artsakh - is threatened by the policies of Azeri authorities. This siege is the outcome of a specific ideological vision dominant within Azerbaijani ruling circles. In the meanwhile, alternative voices are taking shape, while in minority yet powerful.

The siege imposed on Nagorno-Karabakh since December 12, 2022, is having devastating impact: the region's 120'000 population are on the verge of famine. The siege started by Azerbaijani authorities sending "echo-activists" who blocked the only road from Karabakh to Armenia. As this initial step was not met with any effective opposition, not from Armenia, not from Russian peacekeepers whose mandate was to keep the road open, nor from the US and European self-declared "international community" the guardians of global legality, the so-called "environmentalists" were swiftly replaced by Azeri uniformed military on March 25, 2023. A month later, on April 23, Azeri military took control of the bridge on the Lachin Corridor that links Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, until then under the control of the Russian "peacekeepers". The final step of this blockade came on June 15, when even the ICRC cars transporting medicaments and patients were forbidden to continue their humanitarian mission.

Now, after Azerbaijani authorities imposed a total blockade from land and from air on Karabakh, they are pressing to send "humanitarian aid" of their own state controlled Azerbaijani Red Crescent.

Ilham Aliyev is not giving a choice to Karabakh Armenians: either to submit to his domination or death. Even after submission what is waiting for Karabakhtsis is arrest, show trials, and risk of death: in the last few months Azerbaijani soldiers arrested elderly Armenians, including the 68-year-old patient Vagif Khachatryan, travelling via an ICRC vehicle through Lachin Corridor, and accused them of committing "crimes" in the past and arrested them. On August 28, [three students](#) travelling from Karabakh to Armenia by Russian peacekeepers vehicles were also arrested. Any Armenian that ends up in Azerbaijani hands risks a similar fate of kidnapping, as there is no functional judiciary system in Azerbaijan.

Using the alibi of ecology by a regime which depends by 94% of its income on oil and gas exports is not only cynical, but also a deliberate destruction of meaning. Concepts such as "ecology" or "activism" "save the planet" are transformed by the authoritarianism of Aliyev dynasty into an Orwellian nightmare of ethnic hatred, siege wars, and threat of genocide.

Repression Intensifies Since the 2020 War

This destruction of meaning does not concern only Armenians; it is a total system engineered by Ilham Aliyev since he inherited power from his father two decades back. When genuine

environmental protests erupted in Azerbaijani [village of Soyudlu](#) in July, villagers protesting against mining resulting in toxic pollution, Azerbaijani police violently attacked the elderly demonstrators, brought the village under blockade, and threw activists into prison.

In fact, the Azerbaijan is under strict control since the Covid-19 pandemic. Land-borders with neighbouring countries, Georgia, Russia, and Iran, remain closed ever since. The official justification is the pandemic, although unofficially Aliyev thinks he is more secure if Azerbaijani borders with Russia and Iran remain closed. The ethnic Azeri minority of south-eastern Georgia have protested this blockade, [petitioning Baku](#) to re-open the border.

Why is Ilham Aliyev continuing aggressive policies, and pushing for ethnic cleansing of Karabakh-Armenians even after the 2020 war?

One interpretation is that he needs such extremist policies to gain popularity. While most Azerbaijanis agree to aggressive policies against Armenians, Ilham Aliyev does not need public consent for his policies. The military victory gave Aliyev the necessary legitimacy, like no other Azeri ruler enjoyed since independence. The policies implicated since by Ilham Aliyev reflects his own visions, are translations of his own völkish ideology - those extreme nationalist and racist views like those dominant in Europe in the 1930's.

For Ilham Aliyev Armenians simply do not have the right to exist. They were "brought" from somewhere by "Russian colonialism" and have no right to have political views. Not only Aliyev is sincere about his plans of ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians, but his regime openly challenges the legitimacy of Armenian statehood itself; in Azerbaijani official media Armenia within its exact current borders is labelled "["western Azerbaijan"](#)". Such an ideology is the source of perpetual ethnic wars.

Aliyev also looks down at the people of Azerbaijan through similar lenses. His conviction that there are individuals - like himself - who has the hereditary legitimacy to rule, and the inferior masses who are fated to be ruled, was only strengthened by his 2020 military victory. Rule of law, human rights, multilateralism, democracy, and such things are for the weak, in his conviction. That is why Nagorno-Karabakh is under siege for nine months, that is why repression against Azeri dissidents has been intensified, and not relaxed, since the war: the number of Azeri political prisoners has increased since 2020. Only in the last few months two political prisoners Şaiq Kazımov and [Sabuhi Salimov](#) died after long hunger strikes, protesting against the appalling prison conditions.

In the state of Ilham Aliyev there is either personal submission to the ruler and his whims, or opposition and repression. Autocratic regimes need external enemies to justify internal discipline and repression. The works of economist Gubad Ibadoglu who in a recent paper, had concluded that "[oil hinders democracy](#)" are simply not tolerated; he was arrested in Baku on July 23 on unbelievable charges of "counterfeiting" and tortured in prison.

The harshest repression befell on religious, [Shia believers](#). Hundreds of them have been arrested in the last months. While Shia Islam is the state religion, Aliyev regime wants to control any autonomous organization, and suspects that Shia believers might have connections with Iran.

The decades long repression is dismantling any remaining self-organization of Azerbaijani civil society, a policy which will have catastrophic consequences once the autocratic regime of Aliyev's enters its crisis period.

Alternative Azerbaijan

The völkish ideology of Ilham Aliyev is unable to convince educated circles of Azerbaijan, especially

after the 2020 war. The war took away a major justification of anti-Armenian hatred; Azerbaijani policies since, continuous military attacks and especially the 9-month long blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh has clarified the sources of perpetual violence in this conflict. Moreover, many in Azerbaijan were hoping that after war and victory will ease internal repression. Now they link the continuous internal repression against dissident Azeris and external violence against Karabakh Armenians as a continuum.

It is this exact link - between the ethnic enemy and war and internal repression" is the originality of the August 10, statement of the Azerbaijani Feminist Peace Collective. The title of which is enough to surprise the observer of Caucasus politics: "[In solidarity with Karabakh/Artsakh against total war, blockade and hegemony](#)". The statement rejects the violence exercised against the Armenian population of Artsakh, in the name of the Azerbaijani nation-state:

"Be it the blockade of Karabakh/Artsakh, the violence against the people of Soyudlu village, or the organized state terror against the politically active population, it is important to understand that all of these are interconnected and that the real enemy is not the powerless Armenian community, but the dominant and hegemonic state of Azerbaijan."

Ilham Aliyev's continuous repression has destroyed the political centre, and polarized Azeris between those who surrender to the rulers in personal loyalty, and those who are pushed away to be radicalized.

Such radical views are in minority today as most of the Azerbaijani population follow Aliyev. Yet, one should not under-estimate the importance of the new ideas taking shape. It is the first time in a conflict of thirty years that such a radical critique against dominant ideology is raised, creating possibilities of surpassing the causes of conflict itself: aggressive nationalism. Nor should we under-estimate the importance of critical ideas raised against Aliyev ideology which has no content, an ideology that destroys meaning, and is founded not on persuasion but on brutal power. Only an inclusive anti-nationalist vision of the future can end the endless wars in the Caucasus, wars against the "other" as well as against oneself.

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