

Azerbaijan: The Day Symbols Paraded on the Streets of Baku

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December 10, 2020 is probably the most important day in the political career of Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan since 2003. On that day he organized a military parade in his capital Baku to celebrate his victory in the Karabakh War. The Azerbaijani president had the attention of his people, even that of foreign political leaders, to lay out his vision, to reveal the quality of his leadership. The speeches and the symbols displayed on that day might tell us something about the future political career of the Azerbaijani president, as well as what the future might be hiding for Azerbaijan in the next years.

The parade showcased military vehicles, artillery, and Israeli and Turkish made drones, carried on the back of trucks. Then, military equipment captured from Karabakh were also paraded. Among the various military units, a contingent of Turkish Special Forces also marched in Baku parade, as if to emphasize Turkish participation in the war. Thousands of people attended the parade. In spite of a new wave of Covid-19 pandemic hitting the country no measures of social distancing was visible during the parade. Evidently, popular participation in the parade and celebrating victory was seen to be more important than public health.

The imagination of the event has close parallels to Stalin's "Victory Parade" organized on the Red Square in Moscow on June 24 1945, one month after Soviet forces captured Berlin. There is a major difference between the two events: Stalin was alone as state leader on the podium. Ilham Aliyev did not share his victory with any other Azerbaijani official, but with a leader of a foreign state: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, standing in front of Azerbaijani and Turkish flags.

Erdogan Attends the Baku Parade

The Turkish president shared this victory, as much as his Azerbaijani counterpart, if not more: the prominence of the Turkish president cast a long shadow on Ilham Aliyev. With the presence of the Turkish president, with his dominant, fatherly figure, the Azerbaijani president was relegated to a secondary role. This choice of casting is strange if one considers the communication strategy of Ilham Aliyev during the 44 days of war. He communicated through his own tweeter account war developments, and not the defense ministry of Azerbaijan. By doing so, he appropriated the outcome of the war as the sole reference of war and Azerbaijani victory. Yet, during the parade, he not only shared the victory with the Turkish leader, but also seemed to be a junior partner in the achievement. The participation of Erdogan might be explained by the important role Turkey played in enabling Azerbaijan win the war.

The speech of the Azerbaijani leader reflected Turkish importance, as he started with thanking Turkey: "I am delighted that the President of the Republic of Turkey, my dear brother Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has accepted my invitation to take part in this parade. At the same time, a large delegation from Turkey, Turkish soldiers and officers are present here. This once again demonstrates our unity, friendship and [brotherhood](#)."

The question of "genocide" was directly and indirectly present in the victory celebrations. Mr. Aliyev mentioned "the Khojali genocide" and argued that "Karabakh is our ancient historical land." He also said that he achieved what he had promised when he was elected 17 years ago. "Life has shown that we took timely steps, mobilized all our resources, created an iron fist and crushed the enemy's head. During the war, I said that our iron fist embodies both our unity and strength. That iron fist broke the enemy's spine and crushed the enemy's head."

Aliyev also raised irredentist questions when he said: "Zangazur, Goycha and Iravan districts are our historic lands. Our people lived in these lands for centuries, but the Armenian leadership expelled 100'000 Azerbaijanis from their native lands."

Ilham Aliyev continued boasted in his military successes, mixing it with further threats: "Armenia's Army is almost non-existent. It has been destroyed. After that, of Armenian fascism ever raises its head again, the result will be the same. Again, Azerbaijan's iron fist will break their back."

Mr Aliyev concluded his speech with saying: "From now on, we will only move forward." Yet, the speech did not have any "forward looking" idea, did not contain any idea that had not been on Twitter before. If anything, it was backward-looking, it lacked any vision for the future, did not draw an imaginary future, now after the glorious victory. In fact, the image of old Armenian "enemy" dominated over his speech, while mentioning Armenian territories as "our historic lands" raised the spectre of future conflict.

Enver Pasha and Aras River

The speech of President Erdogan was not only rich in historic references, but also poetry. The Turkish President also referred to "genocide" when he said: "those who brought Nagorno-Karabakh only disasters, genocide and tears should already come to their [senses](#)." He also accused the Armenian Diaspora and Western states of being responsible for the conflict: "We also hope the Armenian people get rid of the shackles of the diaspora, which doomed them to poverty with their lies about the past. They must understand that it is impossible to achieve anything at the instigation of Western imperialists." Then, the Turkish President made his historic reference:

"Today the soul of Nuri Pasha, Enver Pasha, brave soldiers of the Caucasian Islamic Army will rejoice."

Nuri Killigil and his "Islamic Army" entered Baku in September 1918, weeks before the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan also referred to the elder brother of Nuri, no other than Enver Pasha, the junior officer who had revolted against Sultan Abdul Hamid II (otherwise very appreciated by the current Turkish rulers), established Teshklat-i Mahsusa, took the Ottoman Empire into First World War while he could have chosen to stay neutral and not to choose sides between European "imperialist" forces, led the Ottoman Army to its disastrous defeat in Sarikamish, and finally organized the deportations and massacres of Ottoman Christians: Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks.

Turkish Presidents speech was not only full of symbols, but was also strategic: he made references to Islam in only general terms, but not to Ottomanism that divided Turkish speakers of Anatolia from

Turkic speakers of the Caucasus. Those two groups had been builders of rival empires, and the Safavids and the Qajars who originate in what is now termed as Azerbaijan were rivals of the Ottomans. Mostly, Erdogan's speech was full of references to Turkish nationalism and to members of the Committee of Union and Progress: in fact, modern Turkish nationalism is common denominator between Turkey and Azerbaijan, when religion divides them between Sunni and Shia Islam.

But the Turkish President had a surprise. He recited a poem by Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh quoting: "They separated the Aras River and filled it with sand. I will not be separated from you. They have separated us forcibly." If there was any doubt left, Mr Erdogan concluded by saying: "Today is a day of victory and pride for all of us, for the entire Turkic world." Is it a surprise that Iranian leaders are furious? At a moment when Iran is weak and threatened, when its scientists are assassinated and Trump and Israel might launch a last minute war, the Turkish leader questioned Iranian territorial integrity ... from Baku.

What was not said

What was absent was equally important: Aliyev did not talk "to the people of Azerbaijan", as if an Azerbaijani public opinion did not exist. He did not address to the Armenians of Karabakh - not on the future status, not even a word about their future security.

Aliyev did not say much about the Russian military now well established in the western part of his country, what seems to be annoying an important part of his public opinion, and more precisely the Turkic-nationalistic part of his population. It was exactly this group that was being addressed by the Turkish president with references to Enver and Nuri, unification of Turkish lands in the north and south of Aras river. Those Unionist references were not only a menace to the Armenians, but also were drawing a dangerous path to Azerbaijan's future.

If anything, the Victory Parade exhibited why the Karabakh conflict was not resolved peacefully for the last twenty years: Armenians faced not only constant threats of Ilham Aliyev, but they were reminded again and again by the past genocide, with threats of repetition hardly hidden. The same language was displayed both openly and symbolically in Baku on December 10.

While Azerbaijan is intoxicated by victory celebration, its leaders seem unconscious about the price they paid for it. Azerbaijan is not only hosting both Russian and Turkish troops on its land - how many other countries do you know with Russian and Turkish troops? - but also seems to have become at the centre of controversy between Sunni militant Turkey, and Shia militant Iran. As the intoxication of victory fades away, Azerbaijan might discover that it is sitting on tectonic lines of sectarian divide, tensions that devastated so many Middle Eastern countries tearing apart states and peoples.

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