TURKIC POLICY IN POST-WAR ARTSAKH

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Last month, the International* Christian *Concern published a report ("The Anatomy of Genocide: Karabakh's Forty-Four Day War") on the Second Artsakh War and the persecution of Armenians by Azeri forces and their allies during and after their invasion. Below are extracts from report—Editor. For the complete report, click on [The Anatomy of Genocide](#).

Following the truce at the end of the Second Artsakh War, Turkey entered a peacekeeping role alongside Russia. Nevertheless, Turkey demonstrated biased support to Azerbaijan, which persisted 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 Armenian population. The strategic planning by Turkey and Azerbaijan show an intent of mass extermination, thereby genocide, of Karabakh's Armenians 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. to travel into the main territory of Azerbaijan. Karabakhi Armenians were thus essentially rendered stateless.

Shunning the Role of Caretaker

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. Azerbaijan claims that it has a caregiver role over the territory of Karabakh, but in the years leading to the 44-day war, Azerbaijan had shunned



An Azerbaijani general was spotted during the Dec 10 Baku Victory Parade flashing the Grey Wolves sign

this position. 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 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 in the report Turkey: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020.

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 import-ant 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.

As caretaker, Azerbaijanis 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 which is 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 PanTurkism, 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.

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. Beginning on July 29, 2020, Turkey and Azerbaijan began holding large-scale joint military exercises which lasted until 10 August. 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 Sept. 27. 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.

Following the truce, Turkey and Azerbaijan continued reframing the narrative about why the invasion took place. 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 naturally suited to the media of both Turkey and Azerbaijan. 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.

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.

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 first 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 first 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. Turkey and Azerbaijan 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 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. Today, freedom of conscience and identity does not exist there. This is what is at stake in Nagorno-Karabakh.

There are no comments yet.