

# Azerbaijan's 2023 counterterrorism operation in Karabakh region: causes and consequences

## Антитерористична операція Азербайджану в Карабахському регіоні 2023 року: причини та наслідки

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**Purpose:** is to discuss the possible causes and consequences of Azerbaijan's 2023 counterterrorism operation in Karabakh region.

**Method:** comparative analysis, and synthesis.

**Findings:** Azerbaijan is one of few countries which successfully waged a full-scale war against Armenia in order to restore its territorial integrity and conducted impeccable counterterrorism operation of the local nature against illegal armed groups in Karabakh region in order to eliminate separatism and ensure its sovereignty over liberated territories. A set of principles is usually followed to conduct counterterrorism operations, which are intricate and multidimensional, with the goal of efficiently fighting terrorist threats while minimizing collateral harm and safeguarding human rights. All principles of counterterrorism operation were met and Azerbaijan eliminated separatism once and for all and ensured its sovereignty over the liberated territories. What makes this operation different from many operations of the same nature, is that a long-term approach – one of the most important principles of the counterterrorism operations has been applied, where the immediate security concerns were eradicated, the source of separatism was isolated, the ideological extremism was dispelled, the promotion of stability was ensured, left no reason for foreign troops (so-called Russian peacekeepers) to stay in its territory.

**Theoretical implications:** The paper enhances our understanding of key concepts of counterterrorism operations in general and provides new insights for understanding the possible causes and consequences of Azerbaijan's 2023 counterterrorism operation. The results obtained in the study have broader implications for national security strategies in pursuit of eradicating the similar problems in different contexts.

**Practical implications:** Azerbaijan's 2023 counterterrorism operation is a typical example for the nations suffering from the same problem. Applying different aspects of this operation as depicted in the paper would definitely contribute to the adjustment of tactics and techniques, reallocation of resources, effective application of new technologies by the nations to eliminate the separatism within their internationally recognized territories.

**Value:** The study presents Azerbaijan's 2023 counterterrorism operation as a model for eradicating the problems of the same nature in pursuit of peace and stability in different regions,

**Мета роботи:** обговорити можливі причини та наслідки антитерористичної операції Азербайджану в Карабахському регіоні 2023 року.

**Метод:** порівняльний аналіз і синтез.

**Результати дослідження:** Азербайджан є однією з небагатьох країн, які успішно провели повномасштабну війну проти Вірменії з метою відновлення своєї територіальної цілісності. Також Азербайджан провів бездоганну антитерористичну операцію локального характеру проти незаконних збройних формувань у Карабахському регіоні з метою ліквідації сепаратизму та забезпечення свого суверенітету над звільненою територією. Для проведення антитерористичних операцій, які є складними та багатовимірними, зазвичай дотримуються ряду принципів, спрямованих на ефективну боротьбу з терористичними загрозами, мінімізуючи супутню шкоду та захищаючи права людини. Були дотримані всі принципи антитерористичної операції, Азербайджан остаточно ліквідував сепаратизм і забезпечив свій суверенітет над звільненими територіями. Що відрізняє цю операцію від багатьох операцій такого ж характеру, так це те, що було застосовано довгостроковий підхід – один із найважливіших принципів антитерористичної операції, де безпосередні проблеми безпеки були викорінені, джерело сепаратизму ізольовано, було розвіяно ідеологічний екстремізм, забезпечено сприяння стабільності, не залишилось жодних підстав для перебування іноземних військ (так званих російських миротворців) на її території.

**Теоретична цінність дослідження:** Результат статті покращує розуміння ключових концепцій антитерористичних операцій загалом і надає нові ідеї для розуміння можливих причин і наслідків антитерористичної операції Азербайджану 2023 року. Результати, отримані в дослідженні, отримують більні можливості для стратегій національної безпеки в пошуках викорінення подібних проблем у різних контекстах.

**Практична цінність дослідження:** Антитерористична операція Азербайджану в 2023 році є типовим прикладом для країн, які страждають від такої ж проблеми. Застосування різних аспектів цієї операції, як це зображено в документі, безумовно, сприятиме коригуванню тактики та техніки, перерозподілу ресурсів, ефективному застосуванню державами нових технологій для ліквідації сепаратизму на їхніх міжнародно визнаних територіях.

delineates the principles of the counterterrorism operations and explains them in the example of the operation conducted by Azerbaijan Armed Forces.

**Paper type:** theoretical.

**Цінність дослідження:** У дослідженні представлено антитерористичну операцію Азербайджану 2023 року як модель подолання проблем однакового характеру в пошуках миру та стабільності в різних регіонах, окреслено принципи антитерористичної операції та пояснено їх на прикладі операції, проведеної Збройними силами Азербайджану.

**Тип статті:** теоретичний.

**Key words:** counterterrorism operation, Karabakh, Second Karabakh War, Tripartite Statement, illegal armed group.

**Ключові слова:** антитерористична операція, Карабах, Друга Карабаська війна, Тристороння заява, НЗФ.

## Introduction

Practice makes perfect. The armies with battle experience are always stronger than the ones without any experience, irrespective of the level and intensity of training. Learning from the experiences of these armies contributes to global security in terms of any operations to be conducted in future based on the international law. Even though the hope is dim, when the war is over in Ukraine, Kyiv will be boasting one of the most experienced armies in the world. What makes the US Army formidable is the experience it gained in different operations, not its size and budget. Türkiye remains stable in the midst of unstable neighboring countries due to the experience Turkish Army gained in counterterrorism operations. Russian Army applied lessons learned from their experience in Syria in order to advance its interests in Ukraine, otherwise, it is the reality that Russia would not be able to maintain momentum against the backdrop of staunch Ukrainian resistance.

The world has witnessed a number of counterterrorism operations throughout history ranging from neutralizing small terror groups like hijackers of Sabena Flight 571 (1972) to NATO's invocation of its collective defense clause (Article 5) in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 on the United States. Having studied all possible sources, we have not been able to find even a single substantive scientific-academic research depicting the real causes and consequences of the operation. Since the operation was conducted in accordance with the international law, some researchers try to simply focus more on the humanitarian issues to attract more attention from the international community rather than highlighting Azerbaijan's underlying causes for initiating that operation. For instance, PhD Walter Landgraf and Nareg Seferian (2024) deems Azerbaijan opportunistic, against the backdrop of Russia-Ukraine war, where the latter fights for the same reason (restore its territorial integrity and ensure its sovereignty) with an unequivocal and unwavering support from the West, which in turn undermines their reason as a scientific argument. Because the same researchers state that the operation was conducted within the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan. The same authors exaggerate the exodus of Armenians from Karabakh to Armenia, however do not mention even a single sentence about the destiny of one million Azerbaijanis who were forced to flee from their home towns during the first Karabakh war and spent approximately three decades as IDPs. The main difference between these two issues will be delineated in the paper. However, Dr. Saeed Bagheri (2023), assistant professor in international law states that, the operation eliminated the claims and allegations of forced movement of thousands of ethnic Armenians from the region, since local armed groups in Karabakh had to be disarmed after the Second Karabakh War was over. Stefan Wolff (2023), professor of International Security, University of Birmingham states that the success of Azerbaijan signals more broadly shift in the geopolitical power balance in the South Caucasus.

Although such established theoretical lenses as realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, feminism and others exist, neoclassical realism has been chosen as the means to make sense of this case study. Qualitative research methods such as comparative analysis, and synthesis have been used in the preparation of the article.

## Results

### From the Second Karabakh war to counterterrorism operation. Retrospective analysis

Increased interference by external actors, seeking to exploit the conflicts for their own interests, has always complicated the situation in the South Caucasus region and posed a threat to national security of particular countries, including Azerbaijan (Iskandarov et al., 2024). The paths of the three South Caucasus republics have been different since the end of the Cold War in terms of their geopolitical ambitions, with Armenia being a CSTO member, Azerbaijan pursuing an independent policy regarding global powers, and Georgia, apparently, demonstrating a pro-NATO position. The geopolitical aspirations of the three South Caucasus republics have diverged since the end of the Cold War: Georgia appears to be displaying a pro-NATO stance, Azerbaijan is pursuing an independent policy toward world powers, and Armenia is a member of the CSTO. Their destinies are, nevertheless, inextricably linked, making it challenging to discuss the security risks in the region without taking into consideration their shared geopolitical context and dynamics (Sadiyev & Iskandarov, 2018). Some non-regional countries exploit tensions between the nations, especially between Armenia and Azerbaijan to advance their own agendas. The historical analysis of the processes after the demise of the USSR proves that "New Great Game" has already started in the South Caucasus with different actors, however, with the same purpose (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020; Iskandarov, 2019). Regional and global actors like Russia, Türkiye, Iran, China and the US, leading organizations like EU, NATO, EEU and CSTO are the actors involved in this struggle. The US/EU approach of trying to change the values and norms of the region is perceived as provocative by Moscow (Iskandarov et al., 2019; Nasirov et al., 2017). China has economically engaged, refraining itself from associating with political issues. Nonetheless, its potential for future processes cannot be ignored. Iran is enthusiastic to be represented in regional processes and tries to exclude other external actors, highlighting 3+3 model. Türkiye does not have as strong clouts as Russia has, however, its presence offsets Iran's dominance (Sadiyev et al., 2021).

The so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" between Armenia and Azerbaijan might be considered as one of the most tragic conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with far-reaching consequences that have significantly impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Prior to the November 10, 2020 Tripartite Statement, the conflict had been characterized as one of the longest-lasting conflicts. The international world paid no heed as Yerevan had refused to engage in negotiations for 27 years while the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group issued only formal statements. Only couple years before the full-scale Second Karabakh war broke out, the "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" came to the spotlight due to periodic confrontations (Piriyev et al., 2023). August 2014, April 2016, July 2020 were more conspicuous months with regard to the confrontation between the parties. Azerbaijan had consistently stated that it preferred the problem to be resolved peacefully. In order to expand its so-called "security belt", Armenia had additional territorial claims in Azerbaijan, which should be specifically mentioned. According to intelligence reports, in 2020 Armenia was preparing an offensive operation against Azerbaijan with the intention of extending the so-called "security-belt". Our claim is supported by the Armenian policy of sending members of YPG/PKK who were trained in Iraq and Syria to the Karabakh region. The international community had anticipated the new government to be preparing the country for peace, but instead they had been preparing for war (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021b).

Finally, on September 27, Armenian Armed Forces initiated offensive operations along the entire so-called "frontline". But the counteroffensive operations launched by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces ushered in a new security environment in the region. As a result, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces destroyed the Armenian Army's first echelon and the so-called "impregnable defense line". The Azerbaijani Armed Forces liberated 286 villages, 4 settlements, and 5 cities in 44 days. The

distance from the point of counterattack to its farthest western reach was about 100 km and that distance was covered in four weeks. The distance from the point of attack in the south to its most northern point was about 80 km and it took six weeks for the Azerbaijani Army to maneuver to Shusha (Guner et al., 2022). With its distinct characteristics, the 44-day Second Karabakh War is cited as an example of modern warfare. Several papers have been dedicated to the Second Karabakh war which might be found in open sources (Guner et al., 2022; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021a, 2021b; Iskandarov et al., 2022). The Second Karabakh war ended on November 10, 2020 with the signing of a tripartite statement on ceasefire (Figure 1). The statement was signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021a).



Figure 1. Situation on November 10

The statement facilitated the stationing of Russian peacekeeping contingent consisting of 1,960 personnel, 90 armored vehicles, 380 vehicles and special equipment along the contact line and the Lachin corridor in Karabakh. Emphasizing the geostrategic importance of the statement, Matthew Bryza, the former ambassador of the United States of America to the Republic of Azerbaijan, noted: *“The statement can contribute to the restoration of peace, prosperity and stability in the entire region by ending one of the world’s longest conflicts and creating incentives for a number of other diplomatic and economic agreements”* (Bryza, 2020). Unfortunately, an ironclad peace treaty has not yet been signed ever since, which in turn has been undermining the long-lasting peace and prosperity in the region.

The control of Lachin corridor was delegated to Russian peacekeeping contingent based on Azerbaijan’s good will, however it was misused by both Armenia and its supporters, since Russian soldiers turned blind eye to the transport of military personnel and equipment. Reneging on its obligations, Armenia did not completely withdraw its armed forces from Karabakh region, on the contrary, it rotated them through the Lachin corridor, supplied them with weapons and ammunition, continued to finance them from the state budget of Armenia and engaged in the plundering of Azerbaijan’s natural resources.

#### **The outbreak of the operation: From causes to consequences**

Before reflecting on the characteristic features of the counterterrorism operation conducted by Azerbaijan Armed Forces, it is important to understand how counterterrorism operation is

defined in order to eliminate any clash of interests, since the opponents of the operation and Armenia itself try to exclude the term "counterterrorism". According to the Council of Europe, *"Terrorism constitutes a real threat to democracy, the rule of law and the enjoyment of human rights. As such it must be countered through prevention and suppression by the member States of the Council of Europe"* (coe.int, 2024). The existence of Armenians in Azerbaijan should never be considered a problem, because Armenians are not only in Karabakh, but also in some other region, such as Baku (more than 30,000). They are the citizens of Azerbaijan and may enjoy the same rights together with other minorities. One of the biggest Armenian minorities in the world are in the US, France and Russia. There are 2 million Armenians in the US and 2.5 million in Russia. More than 750.000 Armenians live in France (Tahirov et al., 2020). It is beyond the imagination that some 10 or 20 thousand of these minorities have been armed with light and heavy weapons and claim "independence" in the internationally recognized territories of these countries where they reside. No nation in the world would tolerate it. The existence of illegal armed groups in the Karabakh region posed a serious threat to the national security and democracy of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The IDPs from Karabakh region living in different regions of Azerbaijan were not confident to go back to their homes due to this threat, which had been violating their inalienable rights. Thus, that wish was remaining a distant hope for hundreds of thousands of displaced Azerbaijanis. Since both Armenia and Azerbaijan are members of the Council of Europe, Yerevan should have considered the reasonable concerns of Baku after the end of the Second Karabakh war. The second part of the statement by the Council of Europe further highlights: *"Poorly implemented or overly Draconian counter-terrorism measures can be counterproductive. While law enforcement operations aimed at terrorists are necessary and justified, counter-terrorism measures should not go beyond what is necessary to maintain peace and security, nor should they subvert the rule of law and democracy in the cause of trying to save it"* (coe.int, 2024). The analysis of the operation proves that Azerbaijan abode by every single principle set by the Council of Europe. Azerbaijan could have decimated all members of illegal armed groups. Vice versa it gave them a chance to surrender and leave its internationally recognized territory. Thus, Azerbaijan did *"not go beyond what was necessary to maintain peace and security"* in Karabakh region. There is not even a single proof that Azerbaijan subverts the rule of law and democracy to the chagrin of the opponents of the operation. We will try to prove our arguments in this paragraph with conclusive facts.

Even though the vast majority of the provisions (6 out of 9) of the tripartite statement had been implemented, Armenia was reluctant to implement two provisions: 4 and 9. Provision number 9 states: *"All economic and transport links in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the safety of transport communication between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic with a view to organize the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo in both directions. Control over transport communication shall be exercised by the Border Guard Service bodies of the FSS of Russia"*. The paper developed by K.Iskandarov and P.Gawliczek (2023) discusses the plausibility of realizing the Zangezur Corridor and highlights its importance as an integral element of global transit route. In this article we will not focus on this issue, which is of course a potential reason of another confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan expressed his good will in this regard by stating *"We will return to Zangezur but not with tanks, with cars"*, even though some actors try to sabotage this process (Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023).

In this paper we will rather substantiate the provision number 4 as a conclusive cause of the 24 hours counterterrorism operation which was conducted on September 19-20. The provision states: *"The peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation is deployed in parallel with the withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces. The term of stay of the peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation is 5 years, and if any of the Parties does not withdraw its intention to terminate the implementation of this provision 6 months before the end of the term, the term is automatically*

extended for the next 5 years" (Piriyev et al., 2023). The peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation was immediately deployed after the agreement was signed (Figure 2), however withdrawal of the Armenian Armed Forces had been somehow delayed for 3 years until Azerbaijan Armed Forces launched a counterterrorism operation. The counterterrorism operation carried out by the Azerbaijan Armed Forces is unique in nature and can be analyzed from a number of aspects.



Figure 2. Situation after the Second Karabakh war and before the counterterrorism operation broke out

There is a very important fact here that, why this operation was called counterterrorism operation. Because Armenia had consistently denied that it did not have any troops deployed in Karabakh, then that was an inalienable right of Azerbaijan to neutralize the illegal armed groups of more than 10,000 in its internationally recognized territory as it was mentioned in the first paragraph of the paper. It proves that they were non-state actors, with significant influence over the local population. It does not necessarily mean that Azerbaijani Army did not have a connection with local community, which is a critical principle for successful counterterrorism operation. In a nutshell, non-state actors used to frequently control or heavily influence over the Karabakh region where the Azerbaijani citizens of Armenian descent were living. Then how this group of illegal armed personnel had gained such amount of military equipment, if Armenia denied its connection with them. Of course, it was either Armenia or its supporters who provided them with military equipment via Armenia. Conventional paradigms of international relations that are predicated on a state-centric perspective do not fit into the study of non-state actors. In terms of armed groups, non-state actors have historically been seen as competitors with no official accountability; nonetheless, it is becoming more widely acknowledged that non-state actors play important roles in modern armed

conflicts (Dcaf Horizon, 2015). The operation launched by Azerbaijan was in accordance with rule of law, legal norms, domestic legislation and human rights standards, which ensures the primary principle of the counterterrorism operations. The analysis of the processes shows that Armenia is not interested in discussing the activities of illegal armed groups, it rather tries to highlight the so-called rights of local Armenians in Karabakh region. Azerbaijan definitely complied with Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which offers an international minimum protection to persons taking no active part in hostilities, including members of armed forces in certain situations (ISIL Year Book, 2001).

Even though Azerbaijan attempted to initiate the reintegration process of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijani society, the Armenian community in Karabakh region obviously swayed by foreign actors rejected all invitations of the government to meet the officials in Baku to discuss the implementation of reintegration and infrastructure projects in Karabakh. Thus, against the backdrop of the new realities that had arisen in the region after the Second Karabakh War, Armenia's neglect of the requirements of the Tripartite Statement dated November 10, 2020 had undermined all the efforts made in the direction of ensuring long-lasting and sustainable peace, since it did not admit its involvement in the affairs of illegal armed groups operating in the Karabakh region.

There are pretty enough facts with video recordings that after the Tripartite Statement was signed, the transportation of manpower, ammunition, mines, as well as other military equipment from Armenia to the illegal armed groups in the territory of Azerbaijan had been intensified. Apart from it, the visit of foreigners to Karabakh without Azerbaijan's permission had been aggravating the situation. The decision of a Russian billionaire of Armenian descent Ruben Vardanyan to renounce his Russian citizenship and move to Karabakh with a pretext of launching his business there was the last straw that stroke the camel's back. It is not secret that foreign actors have at various times in history, used minorities and key figures to promote their interests in particular countries. The existence of Armenians in Karabakh region in fact creates favorable conditions for external actor to advance their vested interests. Even though Russia has been presented or perceived the primary actor to benefit from the situation, the deep analysis of the cases proves that, the involvement of external actors in the process goes far beyond Russia, including other influential players, such as China, France, Iran, Türkiye and the US, with different ambitions. One might claim, Azerbaijan's retaliation and restoration of its territorial integrity has paid dividends to Türkiye. It did, however Türkiye's efforts serve the unity of the region and long-lasting peace (Iskandarov et al., 2024). Türkiye would benefit more from the unity of the region rather than the confrontation between the countries in the region. There are two plausible reasons why Ruben Vardanyan decided to appear in Karabakh: 1. He wanted to eschew the sanctions imposed against Russia. 2. He was chosen as a new figure of Moscow after Kocharyan-Sarkisyan duos to be used against incumbent Prime Minister of Armenia. His appointment as a so-called "prime-minister of Karabakh" made the second variant more plausible. In both cases his appearance in Karabakh was against Azerbaijan's national interests. Vardanyan's "patriotism" in fact became ineffective and produced deleterious side effects. As Denison (2020) stated foreign regime-change initiatives frequently have negative side effects and are futile, whether trying to achieve political, security, economic, or humanitarian goals, rather, they are more likely to start civil wars, diminish democracy, intensify repression and ultimately involve the nations in protracted conflicts. These facts prove that the initiation of the operation was intelligence-driven relying on accurate and timely information to identify, track and disrupt terrorist activities in Karabakh region.

It would be naïve to claim that Russian peacekeepers were unaware of it, it is crystal clear that they turned a blind eye to the transportation of military equipment, as well as entrance of key figures, such as Ruben Vardanyan to Karabakh, to the detriment of their reputation as peacemakers in Azerbaijani society. Armenia defied repeated warnings of Azerbaijan. Therefore, in order to

control and prevent the illegal activities of Armenia, on April 23, 2023, the border control point of Lachin was established by Azerbaijan in its sovereign territory. This attempt was something in fact Armenia did not expect. It definitely inflicted Armenia's efforts to support the remnants of its armed forces in the Karabakh region. In order to disguise its real reasons Armenia began to spread false claims about a "tense humanitarian situation" in the region. Emboldened by its foreign supporters, Armenian Armed Forces began to commit provocations such as shooting at Azerbaijani border guards in the directions of Lachin, Kalbajar and Gadabey regions (Figure 2). The purpose was to attempt to smuggle weapons and send trucks to the territories of Azerbaijan without permission. Apart from it, the illegal armed groups in Karabakh region under the temporary control of Russian peacekeepers began to fire at the positions of the Azerbaijani Army and carry out sabotage activities. The situation was aggravated by the death of six police officers on duty and civilians working on the reconstruction of infrastructure in the liberated territories as a result of the explosion of mines planted on the road in the Khojavend district of the Karabakh economic region by the Armenian subversive group in the morning of September 19, 2023 (Figure 2). At this juncture it should be mentioned that only since the end of the Second Karabakh war until that date when six policemen died, 336 people (65 died, 271 injured of different severity) had already been become victims of explosives (trend.az, 2023).

Complying with the principles of accountability and transparency, Azerbaijan informed the UN and international organizations about the situation in the region through diplomatic channels, declared that local counterterrorism operation was launched against illegal armed groups in the area where Russian peacekeepers were temporarily stationed and called on Azerbaijani citizens of Armenian descent located there to stay away from military facilities and terrorists and not to support them. Counterterrorism operation of a local nature began on September 19, 2023 at 13:00 and ended on September 20 with the disarmament of illegal armed groups after only 23 hours and 43 minutes. Thus, the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan was completely ensured. There are several examples from the history, where separatism has been eliminated once and for all. "Operation Storm" is one of the typical cases in this regard. In "Operation Storm", the Croatian Army overthrew the separatist regime in Serbian Krajina – a so-called Serb state (18.4% of Croatia) formed within Croatia's international borders and restored the country's territorial integrity. One of the most striking similarities between these two operations is the movement of the local people, where some 200,000 Serbs living in Serbian Krajina fled during the operation (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021a). However, there is a slight difference between these two cases, because local Armenians living in Karabakh decided to leave the region after the operation was over. The number of Armenians leaving Karabakh has certainly been exaggerated by Armenia by multiple times. It is crystal-clear that the number of people leaving Karabakh presented by Armenia could not be realized within a couple of days. Of course, there is a list of Armenians who lived in Karabakh until its occupation. This list can certainly be presented by the Azerbaijani authorities. The interview of people at Lachin border checkpoint prove that the number of Armenians immigrated to Karabakh region from across the world was relatively high. It means that previous Armenian governments were interested in artificially increasing the number of populations in Karabakh. The question might be asked, why the incumbent government also exaggerated the number of people leaving Karabakh region. First it was a golden opportunity for Armenian government to get grants from the West, second, it was a tool to demonize Azerbaijan in international community. Regarding the movement of Serbs, Croatian historian Ivo Goldstein writes: *"The reasons for the migration of Serbs are different. Some were obliged to flee because the Serbian Army forced them to do so, while others fled in fear of retaliation by the Croatian Army or their Croatian neighbors, who had once been driven out and looted. However, later it became clear that this fear was unfounded"*. It is possible that, the local Armenians in Karabakh could have had such a fear, however it does not necessarily mean that Azerbaijan would not guarantee their security as Armenia claims now (Iskandarov & Gawliczek,

2021a). They would have a reason to say so, if there was even a single incident against civilians, which in fact proves the nonsense of this claim.

Azerbaijan prioritized the protection of civilians in Karabakh region and minimized any harm to non-combatants. During the operation, the Azerbaijani Army used only high-precision weapons and struck legitimate military targets. In order to protect the civilian population, militarily strategic high grounds surrounding the residential areas were captured, roads were taken under control and residential areas were blocked. The movement of illegal armed groups was restricted, primarily to their Air Defense and EW vehicles, command posts, tanks and armored fighting vehicles, MLRS, artillery and mortar batteries, combat and observation posts, ammunition depots, transmission stations were hit with high-precision weapons. As a result of this, almost 90 combat posts were captured with a single attempt of early operation and strategically important high grounds and road junctions were taken under control by moving much deeper (azertag, 2023). Abiding by the requirements of international conventions the Azerbaijani Army did not aim at any target with suspected civilians. In respect of the principal of proportionality Azerbaijan gave a chance to armed personnel to surrender and leave the region. In fact, as it was already mentioned, Azerbaijani Army would have eliminated each and every single member of armed groups within a couple of hours, however it did not, because the purpose was to eliminate the separatism and it achieved that goal. Azerbaijan refrained from excessive use of force in order to avoid unintended repercussions.

## **Conclusion**

Having considered the abovementioned facts, we can definitely state that, the post Second Karabakh War security architecture provided Azerbaijan with a conclusive ground for launching counterterrorism operation within its internationally recognized territory. A set of principles is usually followed to conduct counterterrorism operations, which are intricate and multidimensional, with the goal of efficiently fighting terrorist threats while minimizing collateral harm and safeguarding human rights. All principles of counterterrorism operation were met and Azerbaijan eliminated separatism once and for all and ensured its sovereignty over the liberated territories. What makes this operation different from many operations of the same nature, is that a long-term approach – one of the most important principles of the counterterrorism operations has been applied, where the immediate security concerns were eradicated, the source of separatism was isolated, the ideological extremism was dispelled, the promotion of stability was ensured, left no reason for foreign troops (so-called Russian peacekeepers) to stay in its territory. This operation is a typical example for the nations suffering from the same problem and different aspects of it needs to be studied meticulously against the backdrop of evolving threats and changing circumstances. It would definitely contribute to the adjustment of tactics and techniques, reallocation of resources, effective application of new technologies by the nations to eliminate the separatism within their internationally recognized territories.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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