

Tovuz Clashes: A Message from Russia to Azerbaijan

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Abstract – The Armenian-Turkish conflicts, which have a much older history, resurfaced in the South Caucasus from the late 1980s with the weakening of the Soviet Central authority. As the conflicts turned into a hot war, including Nagorno-Karabakh, 20% of Azerbaijani territories were occupied by Armenia. Although the war seems to have ended with the 1994 Bishkek Protocol, no final agreement was reached and relative peace was violated by frequent conflicts. The most recent July clashes between the Armenia and Azerbaijan, unlike previous ones, took place not around Nagorno-Karabakh, but on the international border of the two countries. The emergence of the conflicts in Tovuz, where the land and railways which connect Azerbaijan to the West and the important oil and natural gas pipelines carrying the Caspian Basin natural resources to the West, has brought many question marks with it. The risk of paralyzing the Azerbaijani economy and having great consequences shows that the Tovuz conflicts are not just an action taken on the initiative of Armenia. In this context, Russia, which tries to keep its 'circle of influence' under control with the instabilities it created in the Post-Soviet geography, comes to the fore. In the recent times, the increasing importance of Azerbaijan in the energy security of the West, the dismissal of Russian-backed politicians in the Azerbaijani administration and the deactivation of the Russian pipelines while bringing its own energy resources to the world market increase the possibility of the Russian hand behind these events. In addition, alternative scenarios such as regional competition of Russia and Turkey related to the background of the conflicts, economic and health problems caused by the pandemic process. However, the attitude of Russia during and after the conflict reinforces the possibility that the Tovuz incidents were a message by the Russians. This paper will shed light on the possible causes of the conflict and will further elucidate how this conflict was actually a message by Russia towards Azerbaijan.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh Problem, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia.

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INTRODUCTION

The recent Tovuz clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which broke out internationally in the two countries, have again revealed that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which is a 'frozen conflict', is a bomb ready to explode at any time. The Turkish-Armenian question, whose history dates back to earlier years, emerged again as a new conflict in the South Caucasus, with the weakening of the central authority of the Soviet Union during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since the late 1980s, the illegal military activities that started with the uprising of Armenian separatists in the autonomous province of Nagorno-Karabakh and the involvement of the Armenian Armed Forces in the operations resulted in the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan, and the other 7 provinces around it. In this context, Tovuz border conflicts have the nature of the large scale conflict after the four day war between Armenia

and Azerbaijan that took place in April 2016. The conflict started with the Armenian attacks on the positions in Tovuz province of Azerbaijan and turned into large-scale conflicts in which both sides suffered losses. Both countries made statements blaming the opposing party for starting the clashes. With the loss of senior military personnel and increasing tensions, as the conflict escalated into a risk of total war, calls were made for the parties to lower the tension and return to the ceasefire. The clashes reinforced nationalist sentiment in both communities, calls for war began to be heard, and demonstrations were organized by the two communities in the country and abroad protesting the opposite side. Different views have been expressed about different scenarios and the background of events regarding the emergence of conflicts. In this context, the fact that the Tovuz region is the corridor region established by the vital logistics and energy routes question the idea of Azerbaijan being the party that initiated the conflicts. As a matter of fact, the energy pipelines

of Azerbaijan, whose economy is largely based on the need for natural wealth, and the main land and railways connecting the country to the west pass through this region, which is a narrow corridor carries a risk that will paralyze the economy of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the fact that the attack on the international border of the two countries would make Azerbaijan, which does not claim territory to Armenia and which is already occupying 20% of the territory, an occupying position indicates that the attacks would have been carried out by Armenians. It is also claimed that the two countries' governments benefit from the conflict because the pandemic process is not well managed and the country's economies are increasingly in a bottleneck. On the other hand, Russia is behind the Armenian attacks against Tovuz and those who want to strengthen the integration with the west of the aforementioned attacks and the pro-Russian political forces that have been in the country for a long time. It can be thought that it is a message to Azerbaijan that deactivates the pipelines passing through Russia while bringing its natural resources to the world market. There are also those who think that the Tovuz attacks are a move towards Turkey, which at every turn has been on the side of the country and has recently strengthened its political-military position in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and North Africa. In this context, it is claimed that Russia aims to distract and weaken Turkey by forcing it to open a new front in the region.

TOVUZ CONFLICTS

On July 12, 2020, there were violent clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia over strategic positions in Azerbaijan, located at the international border line. Unlike the military conflicts between the two countries that started in the late 1980s and continued for more than 30 years, the most striking feature of the Tovuz conflicts, this time, is not around the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and the 7 Azerbaijani provinces around it, but it was that the two countries were involved internationally. The first statement about the conflict came from Azerbaijan. On July 12, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan announced that an attempt was made by the Armenian Armed Forces in order to seize Azerbaijani positions in Tovuz province, which is on the border with Azerbaijan Armenia. The ministry official said that enemy attacks were repulsed, while 2 soldiers were killed at the scene and one more soldier was killed despite medical intervention.[1]

Similarly, at around 12:30, the Armenian Ministry of Defense announced that the soldiers of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces tried to violate the state border of Armenia in the direction of the Tavush region with military vehicle, and after being warned by the Armenian forces, they abandoned the vehicle and retreated to their positions and did not suffer any casualties. It was also stated that the Azerbaijani army had fired the Armenian positions using mortar and tanks, but the situation was under control.[2] Thus, while the two sides accused each other of

starting the conflict, the clashes escalated in intensity, with the two sides accusing the other side of using heavy weapons to fire on civilian settlements and provocation.[3] At the same time, the two countries' defense ministries announced that the opposing side had shot down drones, mortars, tanks and other military vehicles, military positions and battalions, and shared images of military operations several times.[4] As the clashes escalated, casualties from both sides increased, and the sides accused each other of concealing the actual figures for the casualties.[5] According to official figures, the Azerbaijani side announced that 11 soldiers, including a Brigadier General, were killed, 4 soldiers and a civilian citizen were also injured.[6] On the other hand, the Armenian side announced that 2 police officers were injured first, then 4 soldiers were killed, and 36 people were injured in total.[7] The Tovuz clashes caused serious concerns in the Azerbaijani and Armenian public opinion, and while the sense of nationalism and patriotism rose in both communities, support rallies were held for the army. While people gathered in city centers in different provinces of Azerbaijan, especially since the day of the conflict, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in the capital Baku demanding support and mobilization. In addition, the number of volunteers enrolled in the army exceeded 55 thousand in a short time. Similarly, citizens who took to the streets in Armenia expressed their support for the army and expressed their desire to enlist in the army.[8] On the other hand, while Azerbaijanis and Armenians living abroad held rallies in order to support their state or protest the opposing side, there were also conflicts between the two sides in cities such as Los Angeles and London.[9] In addition, the lynching of the Azerbaijani youth by Armenians in Belgium fueled the hatred between the two communities and similar incidents took place in several countries.[10]

Who initiated the Conflict?

The Tovuz conflicts, which started on July 12, revealed the risk of a new war that would emerge in the region with the increasing tension between the two countries. Thus, after the 4-day war in the occupied territories in April 2016, the most violent clashes between the two countries emerged at the international border of the two countries, this time between the village of Aghdam in Tovuz province of Azerbaijan and Movses and Chinari villages in Tavush province of Armenia. (Map. 1) The clashes started especially around the Garagaya position, which was located at the strategic point and where villages were clearly visible from both sides. (Map. 2)



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Map 2 - Location of Azerbaijan and Armenian Post

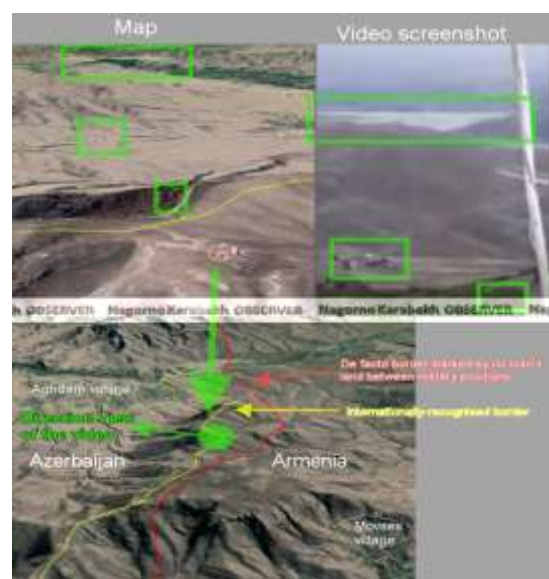


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So who really started the conflicts? First of all, if we consider the region where the clashes took place, we see that the Tovuz region is completely outside the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas (Map.3). What we understand here is that if the Azerbaijani side had started the conflicts, the most suitable geography to attack would be Nagorno-Karabakh and its surroundings. This region is officially the territory of Azerbaijan at the international level. In addition, there are resolutions 822, 853, 874, 884 of the UN Security Council regarding the unconditional evacuation of the Armenian forces from the region occupied by the Armenians and Azerbaijan, which was subjected to an armed attack as a violation of Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Treaty. It has the right to Legitimate Defense in accordance with the Article.[11] In this context, if Azerbaijan was the party that initiated the attack, it would not have gained any land by attacking the Tovuz region, and it would not have claimed territory. Instead of making itself an invader by attacking the internationally renowned Armenian territories, it would have carried out from the occupied region and would have saved part of its territory from occupation if it carried out successful operations by using the right to Legitimate Defense granted to it by international law. On the other hand, while Nagorno-Karabakh is already under occupation, the opening of a second front by Azerbaijan means weakening its own power. In addition, the Government of Azerbaijan had given the defense of this region, which had no connection with the occupied

territories, to the State Border Service months earlier, by taking it from the Ministry of Defense.[12] In this context, as President Ilham Aliyev said, the Azerbaijani side gave this region to State Border Service months ago and stated that they did not have any military operation objectives here. In addition, if Azerbaijan had carried out an attack, as the Armenian side claimed, it would not have done this with an unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) branded military transport vehicle with two soldiers inside it. On the other hand, Azerbaijan's attack on the international borders of Armenia, which is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, means opposing all members of the organization. That is, if there is an attack on any of the members under the laws of the organization, the other members join the war on the side of the attacked country.[13] This means that Azerbaijan goes to war with Russia and other member states. Considering the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, it is obvious that Russia will act immediately in such a situation. Therefore, it does not make any sense for Azerbaijan to carry out an attack on Armenia's international border with any purpose. On the other hand, after the Armenian side announced the statement about the conflict, videos and photos of the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) branded military vehicle for Azerbaijan were shared with the Armenian public. However, afterwards, it was seen that the military vehicle was actually moving within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan and that there was no attempt to attack the Armenian side with the satellite images shared with the public by the Nagorno-Karabakh Observatory (Image, 1). Anyway, the geographical location of the region shows that it is not possible to cross the border with an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) branded military vehicle.[14]

Figure 1 - Area where conflicts occur



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On the other hand, Azerbaijan, whose economy is largely based on oil and natural gas imports, realizes the natural resources it exports, which is of great importance for the energy security of the West to the world market through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline. All these projects pass through Tovuz province. In addition, within the scope of the Great Silk Road project, the most important highways and railways (Baku-Tiflid-Kars Railway) connecting Azerbaijan with the West pass through Tovuz province. Tovuz province has a narrow strait between Armenia and Georgia[15] (Map.3). Considering all these, the Azerbaijani side does not bother itself by carrying out military operations in this geography, which risks collapse its national security and the entire economic system of the country.

Map 3 - Location of Tovuz province, through which pipelines, railways and highways pass



<http://www.justice.gov.az/categories/22>

On the other hand, the agreement agreed in January 2019 by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Paris on preparing the two countries' communities for peace is one of the issues to be addressed.[16] In this context, the Azerbaijani side has adopted a people-based approach to the problem in the last two years in order to adopt a more constructive attitude in the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As a matter of fact, the Azerbaijani Union of Nagorno-Karabakh made constructive statements for the establishment of peace among the peoples. Tural Genceliyev, Member of the National Assembly of Azerbaijan, stated that they were citizens of Azerbaijan and that they were assured that all their rights would be protected and called for peace to be lived together by eliminating the separatist regime.

Thus, the points we have mentioned reveal that the Tovuz conflicts pose a great risk for Azerbaijan, that the Azerbaijani side is not keen on such a conflict and that military operations in a region where the country's jugular vein passes are in no way desired by Azerbaijan. In this context, it is concluded that the clashes were started not by Azerbaijan but by Armenia.

INTERNATIONAL REACTION

Since the first day of the conflict, reactions in the international arena have been generally neutral, with most of the countries calling for an immediate halt to the conflict and a ceasefire. International organizations and states have called for the reduction of tensions, avoidance of provocation and resolution of problems only through peace negotiations. In this context, while many states remained neutral and called on both countries to peace and to stop the conflicts immediately, some countries expressed their open support to the parties. Turkey, Ukraine, Pakistan, and Moldova, as well as GUAM, have all sided with Azerbaijan in the conflict, while Cyprus has made statements supporting Armenia. Republic of Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, clearly stated that they are ready to make any kind of assistance needed and they are next of Azerbaijan because of Armenia's occupational attitude and they also harshly condemned the Armenian attacks.[17] Similarly, in a statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, it condemned the attacks made by the Armenian side to the province of Tovuz in Azerbaijan, expressed condolences to the families of the soldiers who lost their lives, and stated that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved within the framework of Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. GUAM (Organization for Democracy and Economic Development) issued a condolence message for Azerbaijani martyrs and made statements supporting Azerbaijan. Moldova and Ukraine also supported Azerbaijan in their statements and expressed that the problem should be solved within the framework of internationally recognized territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.[18]

Cyprus, on the other hand, has expressed support for Armenia, while criticizing Azerbaijan for its aggressive stance. On the other hand, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Iran, Georgia, and Japan expressed their concerns about the military conflicts in the region, and emphasized that the conflicts should be stopped immediately and the problems of the parties were to be resolved peacefully. Russia has made similar statements and further stated that they can take on the role of mediator if necessary.

RUSSIA AND THE BACKGROUND

So why did Armenians, who had problems with Azerbaijan for more than 30 years by occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and 7 Azerbaijani provinces and who had great economic difficulties under the embargo, attacked Azerbaijan? There are considerable arguments that Russia was behind the Armenian attacks on Tovuz. In this context, let's first take a look at the current socio-economic

situation of Armenia. Since the period when Armenia declared its independence, the large amount of support of Russia caused the country to become dependent on the Russians in the economic, social and military fields. That is to say, Russia, which has a military base in Armenia even now, controls the energy sector and economy of Armenia, especially natural gas and oil.[19] Dependence from Russia is clearly manifested in the foreign policy of the country, and Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization formed under the leadership of Russia. In this context, even though the powers change in Armenia, dependence on Russia continues and the foreign policy almost 'drawn' by Russia is followed in the country. Russia, which created conflict zones in the Post-Soviet geography with its policy of controlled instability, thus used separatist forces as a means of pressure on the countries of the region, aimed to control the post-Soviet geography. In this way, the conflict areas between Azerbaijan and Armenia such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, Donbas region in Ukraine and Crimea issues, and Russia controls the countries of the region and exports a large amount of weapons to the parties to the conflict.

But why would Russia, which has great influence over Armenia, have ordered an attack on Azerbaijan?

In general, the anti-Russia and Iran attitude of the Elchibey administration during the first periods of independence, Turkey and the west-oriented foreign policy after the arrival of Heydar Aliyev to power in 1993 has chosen a balanced foreign policy path[20] In fact, when we say a balanced foreign policy, it is aimed to develop relations with the West by getting along with Russia and to bring the oil and natural gas of the country to the world market with the agreements made with the West and to ensure the economic development of the country. Ilham Aliyev, who came to power in 2003 and is ruling until today, has also continued his father's foreign policy understanding. This policy has kept the integration of the country to the west at a high level, but has also slowed the pace of democratic development of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the balanced policy has reduced the pressure of Russia on the country and made Russia appear 'neutral' in the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Thus, with the 'frozen conflict' in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia continued to maintain its influence in the region by keeping Azerbaijan and Armenia under control. In this context, pro-Russian politicians in Azerbaijan under Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev managed to rule until today. However, in recent times, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has started to remove some of the people who have been in the administration for a long time. , In October 2019, one of the most important persons to have been removed from the post was the removal of Ramiz Mehdiyev, the head of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and

the Chief Secretary, who has been in the administration for 24 years. R. Ilham Aliyev, who awarded Mehdiyev with the Heydar Aliyev medal and appointed him president of the National Academy of Sciences, also called on the officers who are past 70 to leave their posts and announced that young cadres should be placed in office.[21] He had also appointed Aliyev Mahdiyev as a member of the National Security Committee. Ramiz Mehdiyev, nicknamed the "grey cardinal", was known as the most important figure standing behind Russia-bound political power during his long tenure. It was also stated that Mahdiyev, who was claimed to have received significant support from Russia, was against the reform in the country.[22] In this context, it is not surprising that Russia considers the liquidation of the pro-Russian forces in Azerbaijan as an anti-Russian policy and therefore Russia is behind the Armenian attack, which is actually a message to Azerbaijan.

The fact that the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zaharova, answered the question about the conflict in the first days of the Tovuz clashes on her facebook account saying that 'Petersburg form and Zhara Festival' was missing in Baku, which raised doubts about the involvement of Russia behind the events. In this context, the pro-Russian Azerbaijani billionaire businessman Ferhad Ahmedov, who lives in Russia, shared his photo with the former Foreign Minister and the Minister of Civilization on social media and expressed his support for them.[23] On the other hand, since the first years of its independence, Azerbaijan has carried out very important projects with Western companies such as Baku - Tbilisi - Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku - Tbilisi - Erzurum natural gas pipeline in order to carry its natural resources to the world market. Thus, Baku's oil, which was of great importance for the old union economy, has now begun to be used for the development of Azerbaijan's own independent economy. On the other hand, the Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline, which runs through Russia since 1997, has been an alternative project to bring Azerbaijan's natural resources to the world market. In fact, while the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline existed, exporting through the Baku Novorossiysk project seemed unnecessary, with the pressure of Russia, the oil continued to be exported. Because Russia has pressured for the transportation of natural resources specific to Azerbaijan over its own lands or the realization of projects in which the Russians will also get a share. However, Azerbaijan is reducing its exports with the Baku – Novorossiysk line every year. In 2019, oil exported by the Novorossiysk pipeline decreased by 36.5% compared to 2018, while exports were halted completely as of January 2020. Thus, exports with the BTC pipeline increased by 8.1% between January-July 2020. In this context, it was unacceptable for the Russians to disable the pipelines passing through Russia by Azerbaijan.

This reinforces the suspicion that Russia is behind Armenia's provocative attacks on the Tovuz region. As a matter of fact, shortly after the conflicts, Azerbaijan State Oil Company SOCAR made a statement about the resumption of exports with the Baku-Novorossiysk Pipeline as of 17 July.[24] This decision can be read as a result of Russia's message through Armenia.

Moreover, the sharp increase in imports in favor of Azerbaijan in Turkey, which has one of the largest shares among Russia's natural gas exporting countries in recent years, may be another issue that bothers Russia. According to the official figures of the Energy Market Regulatory Board of the Republic of Turkey, according to 2012 statistics, Russia was the leader in Turkey's natural gas imports with a share of 58%, Azerbaijan had a share of 7%.[25] According to 2018 statistics, Russia's share decreased to 46.95%, while Azerbaijan's share increased to 14.95%, while Russia's share fell to 33.6% according to 2019 data, while Azerbaijan's share was 21.2%. In the last four months of 2020, Russia's share decreased to 23.56%, while Azerbaijan's share increased to 33.16 and finally became the leader. In this context, while Russia's share of Turkey's natural gas imports has gradually declined in the last 10 years, Azerbaijan has become the leader. Thus, Russia's decline in the Turkish market may have caused it to pursue aggressive policies. The presence of oil and gas pipelines extending to Turkey in the Tovuz region where the Armenians attacked shows that this attack was carried out with the provocation of the Russians, that the geography of the attack was not chosen in vain, and that this step is a message to Azerbaijan and Turkey. In this context, the Trans-Adriatic pipelines that bring the Caspian Basin natural resources to the world market, which is of great importance in the energy security of the West, and the Southern Natural Gas Corridor, which reduces the energy dependence of the West on Russia, have been endangered. As a matter of fact, Azerbaijan has stated that the Armenian attacks put energy transportation and security in great danger.[26]

In addition, Russia's presence of a military base in Gyumri city of Armenia, which is vital for the control of the region, and Armenia's membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization means that Russia will be involved in the war in case of any attack on Armenia. In this context, Tovuz attacks by the Armenians eliminate the possibility of realization without Russian approval. Shortly after the Tovuz attacks, Russia launched a major military exercise in the southern and Caucasus region on the border with Azerbaijan with the participation of 400 military aircraft and 150,000 soldiers. Although the Russian Defense Ministry has stated that the exercise is not related to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict but is a routine exercise, it was obvious that it was a threat. In addition, on July 23, the Armenian Ministry of Defense announced that they would begin air defense exercises against the armed drones that

Azerbaijan has used effectively in the Tovuz conflict with Russia, reinforcing Russia's claim that it is sending a message to Azerbaijan. After the Russian and Armenian military exercises began, Azerbaijan and Turkey announced that they would begin joint military exercises with the participation of air and ground forces. The exercise called 'Turaz Eagle' has a special importance in Baku, Nakhchivan, Ganja, Kurdemir and Yevlah regions of Azerbaijan.[27]

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

There are also sections in the Tovuz region of Armenia that interpret the provocative attacks against Azerbaijan in a different way. In this context, some commentators who emphasize that Russia was behind the Armenian attacks say that this provocation is a message to Turkey. In this context, the thinkers who emphasize that Turkey and Russia are in recent proxy wars draw attention to the fact that this provocation attempt, which Russia is behind, is a move to stop the successes that Turkey has achieved in areas where it has logistical advantages. As such, Turkey has strengthened its position in the Middle East through its successful military operations in Syria and Iraq, and expanded its continental shelf by strengthening in the Mediterranean under the agreement it has made with the Libyan national government. Moreover, the military success of the national government and the progress of the national government in Libya, which carries out drilling activities in the Mediterranean, bother Russia, which supports Haftar. In this context, some thinkers point out that Russia's attempt to force Turkey, which has always expressed its support for Azerbaijan, to open a new front in the Caucasus. Thus, the recent progress in the Mediterranean and in Libya, Turkey is thought to be the center of attention aimed to disperse the concentration pulling to other points. In addition, the opening of Hagia Sophia to worship by removing its museum status may be effective in this process. That is, the transformation of Hagia Sophia, which is of great importance for the Russian Orthodox Church, into a mosque was unacceptable for Russia. However, after the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that this was Turkey's internal affairs, but before the museum status was removed, the Russian Orthodox Church made a statement and stated that Hagia Sophia should remain a museum and expressed its discomfort with the process. According to some scholars, religion might be also the reason behind these clashes. As stated by Sheikh and Yusofi, "While the international relations system has an anti-religious and secular nature, religion has influenced inter-human relations, societies and inter-state relations throughout history." In this context, there are also those who claim that the Armenian attacks are a message to Turkey, which acts jointly with Azerbaijan.[28]

Another scenario related to the emergence of Tovuz conflicts was related to the deteriorating economic situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to those who underlined this issue, due to the pandemic process that started with the emergence of a new Corona Virus named Covid -19, the bad course of the economy of both countries caused increasing discomfort in the society. There is also a general perception in both countries that the pandemic process is not well managed. As a matter of fact, issues such as the pandemic policy of the governments, the insufficient effectiveness of the measures taken, the increase in cases and deaths, and the extension of the quarantine process have been one of the focal points of criticism in both societies. Thus, with the emergence of conflicts, it may have been aimed by the administrations of both countries to divert attention from the socio-economic situation. Moreover, according to another claim, Pashinyan's opponents, who are in power in Armenia, may be involved in such an attempt to undermine its power. That is to say, after Pashinyan came to power, it started to liquidate the cadres called the 'Karabakh clan' that had been ruling for a long time. Based on this, the old administration supported the idea of attacking Azerbaijan over the international border in order to eliminate the problems in the country and to highlight the need for the old staff in the current situation. A conflict was decided at the international border of the two states, as an attack from the Nagorno-Karabakh geography could result in loss of land if it fails.

On the other hand, Mathew Bryza, who was the American Ambassador to Azerbaijan and served in the OSCE Minsk group, made a statement to a television program and drew attention to the fact that Tovuz conflicts were the biggest conflict after the Armenia-Azerbaijan war in the early 1990s and the April 2016 war. . Bryza stated that the conflicts between the two countries will not reach the level of war and that such a decision carries great risk for both countries. Saying that Russia has a large military base in Gyumri, the former ambassador underlined that Russia, which has been acting as a mediator between the two countries, has defended Armenia for years. Bryza said that Azerbaijan is a political front between Turkey and Russia and warned that Pashinyan cannot take any action without Moscow's permission and that Russia does not want major military conflicts to occur. Bryza also stated that Russia is keen to maintain the current status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh and does not want to sign the final peace agreement. Bryza pointed out the statements of Konstantin Zatulin, the first chairman of the committee on relations with Russians abroad and the CIS in Parliament, that Armenia was a military partner with Russia and that Russia should be involved in the war on the part of Armenia if there was an attack on Armenia.[29]

According to the Armenian-based point of view, the Azerbaijani administration has been keen on this

conflict in order to draw the attention of the world public opinion to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. The Azerbaijani side has been troubled by the lack of any results from the protracted talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group. Due to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, which has been the biggest obstacle to the region's destabilization for more than 30 years, Azerbaijan has not been able to maintain its territorial integrity and its economic development has slowed down. In this context, it is stated that the Azerbaijani side may be interested in such a conflict in order to intensify the frozen problem, which still carries a great risk of war.[30]

Furthermore, the martyrdom of senior officers, including a Brigadier General, during the Tovuz clashes fueled a different debate in the Azerbaijani public. The fact that the attack was carried out by a high-level technology product not in the hands of Armenians, reinforces the suspicions that Russia was behind this attack. In addition, the fact that the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense did not make a full explanation about the details of the attack remains a subject that is heavily debated in the public.[31]

CONCLUSION

The Tovuz attacks were a message of Russia's intimidation to Azerbaijan. The Armenian attacks, with Russia behind them, were planned to take over strategic positions specific to Azerbaijan and threaten the logistics centers, land and railways, including the Georgian border crossing, connecting Azerbaijan to the west and Turkey. Thus, the oil and natural gas pipelines carrying the energy resources of Azerbaijan and the Caspian Basin to the west, which significantly reduce the energy dependence of the West and Turkey on Russia, are threatened and are intended to be built in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's integration into the West, its desire to strengthen relations with Western countries and institutions, Azerbaijan's ability to transfer its natural wealth to the West through alternative means by disabling the pipelines passing through Russia and its rise to a leading position in the natural gas sector in Turkey have been among the factors that have been instrumental in provoking the Armenians and the Russians.

On the other hand, as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the aim of the Tovuz attacks was to bring Russia and the organization into the conflict on the side of Armenia. As a matter of fact, the Armenian side called on the Security experts to do what was necessary immediately after the clashes occurred, but the organization was neutral and called on both countries to reduce tensions. After the Tovuz attacks, 150 thousand Russian drills in the Caucasus region on the border with Azerbaijan and then the Russian-Armenian joint military drills clearly show that Russia was

behind the attacks. The decision of Azerbaijan and Turkey to conduct large-scale military drills in the region exposes Russian-Armenian, Turkish-Azerbaijani unity and regional conflict of interest around the issue. Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan's stated that Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Armenia, the so-called 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' presidential elections, and the oath-taking ceremony was held in Shusha, where the population of Nagorno-Karabakh consists of Azerbaijanis and has great moral value for Azerbaijan. The Tovuz attacks, which are seen as a continuation of provocative steps such as the announcement that they will start the construction of a new highway that will unite Armenia, was described by the official in Baku as one of the provocations by the Armenians. It is also worth underlining that such an aggressive policy offers Nikol Pashinyan a great opportunity to eliminate his own enemies and strengthen his position in domestic politics. On the other hand, although the Tovuz conflicts took place outside of the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region, high tensions between the two countries once again revealed the urgent need to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, one of the conflicts that have been established in the post-Soviet geography, always poses the risk of a war. Although international law has officially recognized the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenians at the UN level, the lack of sufficient pressure by the international community on Armenia leads to the continuation of the occupation, which is the biggest obstacle to the region's stability and development, and to the formation of conflicts such as the April War, the Tovuz Conflicts.

NOTES

1. <https://apa.az/az/azerbaycan-ordusu/Dusmn-hucumunun-qarsisini-alarkn-3-hrbcimiz-shid-olub-MN-shidlrin-adini-aciqlayib-coloredFOTOcolor-596193>
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