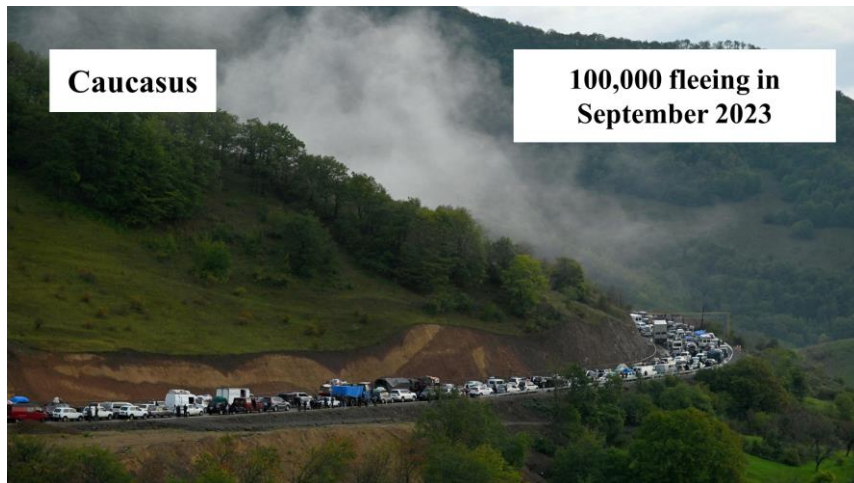


# The next war in the Caucasus

## Taking Ilham Aliyev seriously

28 March 2024  
*ESI background paper*



## **NAGORNO-KARABAKH AFTER 1988...**

In 1988, when tensions rose between the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and the rulers in Baku, Nagorno-Karabakh was an autonomous region within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, covering an area of 4,400 km<sup>2</sup>, with no land border with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

According to the 1989 census, Nagorno-Karabakh's population of 188,000 included 145,000 Armenians (77 percent), 40,000 Azerbaijanis (21 percent) and 3,000 Russians.

On 20 February 1988, members of the Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region appealed to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to transfer the region from Azerbaijan to Armenia. A month later, on 23 March, this request was rejected.

On 12 July 1988, the Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region voted for secession from Azerbaijan and incorporation into Armenia under the name of Artsakh.

On 1 December 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia and the Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region both voted in favour of reunification.

On 20 May 1990, the inhabitants of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region participated in the elections to the Supreme Soviet of Armenia.

On 23 September 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan declared sovereignty.

On 23 August 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia declared sovereignty.

On 30 August 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan declared independence.

On 2 September 1991, the Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region declared independence.

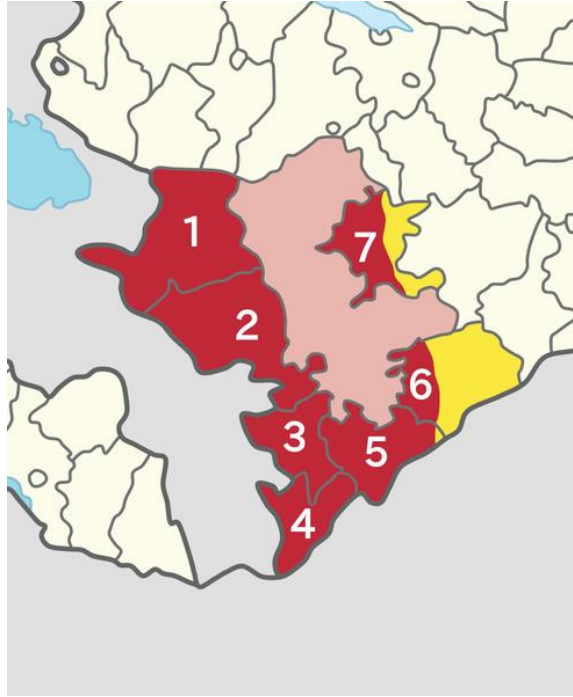
On 23 September 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia declared independence.

On 26 November 1991, the Azerbaijani parliament abolished the autonomous status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. On 10 December 1991, 99 percent of those of its inhabitants who took part in a referendum voted in favour of independence. However, Azeris of the region boycotted it. Two weeks later, on 28 December 1991, a first round of elections to the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh took place, followed by a second round on 4 January 1992.

Low intensity violence erupted into full-scale fighting in early 1992. In the following year and a half, some 30,000 people were killed. Armenians took control of Nagorno-Karabakh and of seven regions of Azerbaijan surrounding it, five fully (Lacin, Kelbecer, Cebrayil, Zengilan, Gubadli), and two partially (Agdam, Fuzuli). One million Azeris left their homes behind and became internally displaced persons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, "[Explainer: What is happening between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh?](#)", 20 September 2023.



1. Kelbecer, 2. Lacin, 3. Gubadli, 4. Zengilan, 5. Cebrayil, 6. Fuzuli, 7. Agdam

On 5 May 1994, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a protocol in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, calling for a ceasefire.<sup>2</sup> Six days later, on 11 May, all parties signed an agreement and the ceasefire entered into force on 12 May. Representatives of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh agreed in Moscow on ceasefire lines and the deployment of international observers.<sup>3</sup>

Over the next three decades, international attempts led by the OSCE to broker a peace agreement repeatedly failed. The ceasefire was largely observed until 2008, when serious clashes took place along the line of contact. During the following eight years, sporadic clashes grew in intensity, culminating in four days of heavy fighting in April 2016. On 5 April 2016, parties agreed on a new ceasefire.

On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan launched a full-scale military offensive and took back all of the seven occupied regions, and some areas within Nagorno-Karabakh, including the town of Susa. On 9 November 2020, parties agreed on another ceasefire.

On 12 May 2021, Azerbaijan launched its first incursion into Armenia itself, occupying a few kilometers of Armenian territory.

On 12 September 2022, Azerbaijan launched another incursion into Armenia itself, occupying additional strategic outposts.

On 12 December 2022, Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor – the only land route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia.

On 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan took back all of Nagorno-Karabakh in a single day of fighting. On 20 September, parties agreed to a ceasefire, ceding control of the region to Azerbaijan. An estimated 100,000 people – almost the entire remaining Armenian population

<sup>2</sup> UN Peacemaker, [The Bishkek Protocol](#), 5 May 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Peace agreements data base of the University of Edinburgh, [Ceasefire agreement](#), 11 May 1994.

– fled over the next few days.

In the wake of Azerbaijan’s military victory in September 2023, a question inevitably arises: is this the end of the fighting?

Some may refer to remarks made by Ilham Aliyev at a military parade in Nagorno-Karabakh on 8 November 2023, just weeks after Azerbaijan’s victory:

“We do not need a new war. We have achieved what we wanted, restored international law, restored historical justice, restored our national dignity and showed the enemy his place. The enemy kneeled before us, and today I am speaking here before the victorious Armed Forces of Azerbaijan. That is, we have fulfilled all our tasks.”<sup>4</sup>

However, those with a longer memory and an acquaintance with Aliev’s long-standing habit of clearly telegraphing his intentions will look back on a decade of repeated irredentist claims.



*Ilham Aliyev attending a military parade in Hankendi/Stepanakert in Nagorno-Karabakh on 8 November 2023. Turan News Agency, [“‘Azerbaijan does not need a new war’, Ilham Aliyev – Updated”](#), 8 November 2023.*

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<sup>4</sup> Turan News Agency, [“‘Azerbaijan does not need a new war’, Ilham Aliyev – Updated”](#), 8 November 2023.

## “HISTORIC LANDS” IN ARMENIA



*Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan*

### Aliyev in September 2013

On 18 September 2013, Ilham Aliyev gave a speech at the opening of the “Guba genocide memorial”, marking the discovery, in 2007, of a mass grave in the town of Guba, alleged by the Baku authorities to contain the bodies of Azerbaijanis massacred by Armenians in 1918:

“The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan must be restored in full, the national flag of Azerbaijan must be raised in Susa and Hankendi, and the Azerbaijanis should live on all of their historical lands in the future. **Our historical lands are the Khanate of Revan [today’s Yerevan], Goyce [the region around Lake Sevan] and Zangezur.** The time will come when we live there. I believe in and am sure of that. To achieve this, each of us has to make an effort. Each of us must do his bit to approach this sacred day.”<sup>5</sup>

### Aliyev in January 2014

On 21 January 2014, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev addressed IDPs during a visit to Azerbaijan’s second largest city of Gence:

“I want to once again state that Azerbaijanis must return to all of their historic lands, and, **our historic lands are not confined to Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent districts.** If we look at the non-so-distant past, 19<sup>th</sup> century statistics, we will see that the territory where Azerbaijanis resided was very vast. **Modern-day Armenia is a historic Azerbaijani land.** Therefore we will return one day to all of our historic land... This is our goal and this will always be our goal.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Guba Soygiri Memerial Kompleksinin acilisinda Ilham Aliyevin nitgi](#), 18 September 2013.

<sup>6</sup> President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Ilham Aliyev Gencede 1,500 mecburi kockun ailesi ucun tikilmis yeni yasayis mahallesi ile tanis olmusdur](#)”, 21 January 2014.

### Aliyev in March 2015

On 19 March 2015, in a speech on the occasion of the Novruz holiday, Ilham Aliyev stated:

“Today our army is in full control of the situation on the line of contact. Our soldiers adequately protect the homeland. We have full advantage. I am absolutely confident that we will achieve what we want and restore historical justice and our territorial integrity. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh must be resolved only within the framework of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognised territorial integrity. **After that, we Azerbaijanis will, of course, go back to our ancient lands – to Revan [today’s Yerevan], Goyce and Zangezur. All these are our ancient lands.** The younger generation should also know that our lands are not only the territory of the present-day independent Azerbaijan. We must and we will go back to these lands. We have to work hard every day to bring that day closer.”<sup>7</sup>

### Aliyev in February 2018

On 9 February 2018, Ilham Aliyev addressed the congress of his New Azerbaijan Party (*Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası*):

“I would like to emphasise that **we should not forget our historic lands** and we will not forget them. This is the focus of our actions today, and this must be the focus of our actions in the future. **Our historical lands are the Khanate of Revan [today’s Yerevan], Zangezur, Goyce [the region around Lake Sevan].** This should be known to the youth and to the world ... **Yerevan is our historic land, and we, Azerbaijanis, should return to this historic land.** This is our political and strategic goal and we need to get step-by-step closer to it.”<sup>8</sup>

### Aliyev in March 2021

On 31 March 2021, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev gave a speech at the extraordinary online summit of the Organisation of Turkic States:

“Today we are working on the Zangezur corridor issue very hard. At the summit in Nakhcivan [*in 2009*], I had said that, with the handing over of Zangezur from Azerbaijan to Armenia, unity of the Turkic world was disputed, resulting in our geographical fragmentation. **When you look at the map, Zangezur looks like a dagger stabbed in our body, dividing the Turkic world.** Historic Azerbaijani land, Zangezur, will soon play the role of connector for the Turkic world.”<sup>9</sup>

### Aliyev in July 2021

On 14 July 2021, Ilham Aliyev, gave a speech at a ceremony to give out apartments and cars to disabled veterans:

<sup>7</sup> President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Novruz bayramı umumhəlg senliyində İlham Aliyevin nitqi](#), 19 March 2015.

<sup>8</sup> President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyasının VI. qurultayında İlham Aliyevin nitqi](#), 8 February 2018.

<sup>9</sup> *Həlg Gazeti*, [“Zangezur dehlizi bütün türk dünyasını birləşdirəcək”](#), 2 April 2021.

**“East Zangezur is our historical land. West Zangezur is our historical land. We cannot forget history.** We cannot become hostages of anyone’s political interests. Let them look up historical documents and maps and see when the Soviet government tore Zangezur apart from Azerbaijan and handed it over to Armenia. It is relatively recent history – 101 years ago. So, why should we say that this didn’t happen? Why? We are telling the truth.

**The whole of Zangezur – East and West – is our ancestral land. In Armenia they now say that Ilham Aliyev is making territorial claims. If there is East Zangezur, then there is also West Zangezur. Yes, West Zangezur is our ancestral land. I said that we have to return there. I said it ten years ago.** All my speeches are available in the media. I said that it is the land of our ancestors, and we must return there. We will, and, we are already returning there. No one can stop us. We will definitely return because there is no other way.”<sup>10</sup>

### Aliyev in January 2024

On 10 January 2024, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev gave an interview which was broadcasted on all TV channels in Azerbaijan:

“For me the issue of recovering our territorial integrity has always been a historical and national issue...**This issue needed to be resolved once for good, and we needed to fully recover our territorial integrity and sovereignty,** destroying each and every separatist nest in our country. I have always thought that if my generation would fail to accomplish this task, future generations should take it over and accomplish it in the 20,30 or 50 years to come.”<sup>11</sup>

“In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, **Azerbaijani lands were given plot by plot to Armenia.** In 1918, one day after the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, **Unfortunately, Yerevan was given to Armenia. The transfer of Yerevan to Armenia had no basis. Yerevan is an old Azerbaijani city.** Azerbaijanis lived there for centuries. Monumental Azerbaijani architecture of Yerevan was the reason behind the city’s historical splendour. In Yerevan, there was no ancient settlement but only an Azerbaijani city which is today destroyed and erased...**This was a historical murder! And this was just a beginning!**

In November 1920, after the establishment of the Soviets, a large segment of the western Zangezur [*Syunik region of Armenia*] was given to Armenia. This is also a historical fact, There are maps ... which show that all of Zangezur was Azerbaijani land... Such territorial gifts went on afterwards and the last one dated back to March 1969... The area of Azerbaijan Socialist Republic was originally 100,000 km<sup>2</sup>, but we ended up with 86,600 km<sup>2</sup>. They [*the Armenians*] want to use the maps of 1970s, but by then our historic lands were already given to Armenia. We will never accept the use of the 1970s’ maps.”<sup>12</sup>

**“In May 2021, several leaders asked me to withdraw our forces from the Armenian border. They told me to retreat. I asked them “Retreat where?”** They said: “Just get back to where you came from.” I told them: “We came from Baku!” (*Aliyev laughs*) Now, let me tell you something: We had been far from that “border” for 30 years! [*The Azerbaijani regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh were not under Azerbaijan’s control for 30 years*] If that “border” was a proper border, Armenia should have treat it as a proper

<sup>10</sup> President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Ilham Aliyev Hocasan gasebesinde sehid aileleri ve muharibe elillerine menzillerin və avtomobillerin təgdim olunması mərasimində iştirak edib](#), 14 July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> *Youtube*, [“Prezident İlham Aliyevin yerli televiziya kanallarına müsahibəsi”](#), 10 January 2024.

<sup>12</sup> *Youtube*, [“Prezident İlham Aliyevin yerli televiziya kanallarına müsahibəsi”](#), 10 January 2024.

border, with border posts, signs etc...But nothing such was there, because the Armenians thought that their border was at Agdam [*an Azerbaijani region occupied by Armenia for 30 years*]. We will not leave the spots we have taken under our control since May 2021 and September 2022.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Youtube, [“Prezident İlham Aliyevin yerli televiziya kanallarına musahibəsi”](#), 10 January 2024.