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Genocide in the Lachin corridor? An investigation into the frameworks and conditions of atrocity crimes

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Abstract

The Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin corridor isolated 120,000 ethnic Armenians, including 30,000 children, living in Nagorno-Karabakh. For nine months, the region experienced shortages of water, electricity, medicine, and food. This article uses the United Nations (UN) Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention and Ervin Staub's Origins and Prevention of Genocide, Mass Killing, and Other Collective Violence to analyse Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's speeches for indication of intent to create an environment conducive to commit atrocity crimes in Nagorno-Karabakh. It argues that the international community has engaged in a war of narratives in the court of public opinion and the court of law, instead of taking concrete action to prevent genocide and other atrocity crimes. The article concludes that by instrumentalising Staub's Conditions and the UN's Framework to monitor domestic rhetoric and political actions, the international community can accurately label and intervene when atrocity crimes occur.

Keywords: atrocity crimes, genocide, Lachin corridor, rhetoric.

Introduction

A foreseeable product of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's inflammatory rhetoric was the blockade of the Lachin corridor. Had the international community been paying attention, they would have had the information to adequately prevent atrocity crimes from occurring in Nagorno-Karabakh. Psychologist Ervin Staub researched cultural-societal conditions that make genocide more likely, and growing this body of work, the United Nations (UN) created a Framework tool for the prevention of atrocity crimes – tools the international community should have used in Lachin.

This article will seek to answer the question: can we analyse how Aliyev created an environment ripe for atrocity crimes in his official speeches by applying Staub's Conditions and the UN's Framework? To answer this, I briefly outline the history of Nagorno-Karabakh, the wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory, and the 2022–23 blockade of the Lachin corridor by Azerbaijan. The article will then summarise Staub's Conditions and the UN's Frameworks as useful theoretical lenses. Using these theoretical frameworks, I analyse President Aliyev's rhetoric in official speeches to investigate whether he created an environment conducive to committing atrocity crimes. My central argument is that we should ignore the war of narratives around genocide and utilise the existing theoretical tools to prevent atrocity crimes from occurring. To answer my question, by using the Conditions and Frameworks, it is clear Aliyev created the conditions for atrocity crimes to occur in Nagorno-Karabakh with his inflammatory rhetoric.

Background: a checkered history

The history of the South Caucasus is checkered, with many different ethnic groups and states vying for the same patches of territory. Nagorno-Karabakh (or Artsakh, as it is referred to by Armenia) is one of these regions. Originally established in 1923 by the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh is a mountainous region within Azerbaijani sovereign territory with a majority ethnic Armenian community (Yemelianova, 2023). The First Nagorno-Karabakh War erupted in 1988 during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with Armenia attempting to integrate the region into its territory. In 1991, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR)/Republic of Artsakh was formed, claiming its independence following a referendum within the territory. By late 1993, Armenia had established control over the Lachin corridor (a mountainous highway connecting the Republic with Armenia) and occupied twenty per cent of Azerbaijan's territory (Yemelianova, 2023).

Following multiple violent clashes, the Second Karabakh War erupted on the 27 September 2020 and lasted 44 days (Yemelianova, 2023). During the war, Azerbaijan restored sovereignty over the territories lost 30 years prior. A trilateral ceasefire agreement was brokered with Russian mediation, under which Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed to protect movement through the Lachin corridor for a minimum of five years (Yemelianova, 2023).

On 12 December 2022, eco-activists blockaded the Lachin corridor, restricting the movement through the corridor (Der Matossian, 2021). Azerbaijani soldiers subsequently set up a military checkpoint, further restricting movement and prompting reports of the activists having government ties (Center for Truth and Justice [CFTJ], 2024). The only vehicles allowed through the blockade were the occasional Red Cross and Russian peacekeeping vehicles, and even the Red Cross vehicles were banned from entering for weeks at a time. States and international organisations condemned the blockade and urged Azerbaijan to exercise its obligation to protect populations within their sovereign territory (United Nations [UN], 2023). Ignoring calls from the UN, Azerbaijan severely restricted, and at times completely cut off, water, food, electricity, gas, and internet access for Nagorno-Karabakh (CFTJ, 2024). After nine months, the blockade was lifted with an Azerbaijani military incursion into the territory, causing a mass exodus of 120,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia through the Lachin corridor (Drion, Dolbaia, & Edwards, 2022).

A genocide "checklist"?

Conditions for Genocide

Ervin Staub has contributed to the field of social psychology by studying the roots of violence between groups. Staub's (1992) work was seminal for genocide scholars and psychologists as it outlined the origins of genocide/mass killings by identifying a set of cultural-societal characteristics and life conditions that make genocides possible/plausible. To commit genocide, a population must first experience difficult life conditions such as economic challenges that cause a deterioration of one's material well-being. Difficult life conditions cause threats to the physical and psychological self, making a person find other ways to satisfy their psychological needs. Usually, these needs are fulfilled by turning against an outgroup (Staub, 1992).

Staub (1992; 1999) suggested the following as cultural-societal characteristics that would increase the likelihood of genocide/mass killings occurring:

- The existence of an *ideology of antagonism*, where the group can unite against a scapegoat;
- The *cultural devaluation of a subgroup*, making it easier to turn the population against a historical scapegoat;
- A *history of aggression*, where the population/region tends to fight wars;
- A *strong respect for authority*, making the population more likely to follow a leader with little question and conform to an antagonistic ideology;
- The *belief in the ingroup's cultural superiority alongside an underlying vulnerability*;
- A *monolithic culture*.

The combination of these cultural-societal characteristics paired with difficult life conditions can move a population along the 'continuum of destruction' until their levels of violence equate to genocide (Staub, 1992). However, to adequately analyse the Azerbaijani case, I will interpret a *monolithic culture* as a *monolithic identity against Armenia* instead. This is because Azerbaijan has created an Islamic multicultural national identity, but still holds a monolithic view of Armenia (Sahakyan, 2024). Staub's (1992) work was seminal for genocide scholars and social psychologists, but it lacked influence in the political sphere, specifically in the prevention of atrocity crimes. However, it did provide the groundwork for the UN's Framework.

Framework for Atrocity Crimes

The United Nations built on Staub's work by creating a set of frameworks to understand when there was a risk of atrocity crimes being committed. The *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention* was originally published in 2009, with an updated version in 2014. The UN (2014) defines atrocity crimes as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, each of which is also defined under international law. This document outlines the risk factors (conditions that increase the likelihood of a dangerous outcome) that the international community should identify as warning signs for atrocity crimes. The UN (2014) identified eight risk factors that are common to all atrocity crimes, and an additional two that are specific to genocide.

Combining those that are similar, the following are the UN's (2014) Common Risk Factors:

- "Situations of armed conflict or other forms of instability", where forms of political, economic or social instability can generate an environment for atrocity crimes;
- A "record of serious violations of international human rights (IHR) and humanitarian law (IHL)", particularly in a pattern that was never prevented or punished;
- "Motives or incentives" for the use of violence paired with the "capacity to commit atrocity crimes";
- The "weakness of state structures", particularly in the "absence of mitigating factors" such as a strong civil society, efficient courts/media, and lack of non-governmental organisation (NGO)/UN presence;

- “Enabling circumstances or preparatory action” such as emergency laws to suspend state institutions/NGOs and the creation of paramilitary groups;
- The existence of “triggering factors” such as the sudden outbreak of armed conflict within/outside state borders, actions of the international community that threaten a state’s way of life, or a sudden regime change.

When these common risk factors are combined with the genocide-specific risk factors of “intergroup tensions or patterns of discrimination against protected groups” and “signs of an intent to destroy in whole or in part a protected group”, then there exists the ripe environment for genocide to occur (United Nations [UN], 2014). Within each risk factor, the UN outlines key indicators with more information that can be used for guidance.

Combination for good use?

Staub’s (1992) Conditions and the UN’s (2014) Framework have identified similar risk factors that increase the chances of genocide occurring. Staub’s research provided the groundwork upon which the UN based its Framework, but neither has been used in a meaningful way to prevent/intervene before atrocity crimes take place. The following section will investigate whether Aliyev’s rhetoric in official speeches fits the cultural-societal conditions and/or the risk factors of Staub’s and the UN’s work.

President Aliyev’s rhetoric (al conditioning)

President Aliyev uses his official speeches to rhetorically condition the Azeri population with general themes.¹ Using emotional framing and thematic analysis, we can investigate whether Aliyev’s rhetoric fits the conditions for atrocity crimes. Kösen and Erdoğan (2022) outline how Aliyev instrumentalises and manipulates emotions to control the dominant narrative around Nagorno-Karabakh and the conflict with Armenia by making certain themes salient within the population. Aliyev instrumentalises themes of injustice, pride, humiliation, and dehumanisation to poison the Azeri population against Armenians.

Before the 2020 war, Aliyev’s speeches weaponised injustice to manufacture anger towards the status quo. He rallied citizens against the international community for their role in supporting Armenia over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, painting international actors as “perpetrators of injustice” who “violated their supposed neutrality” (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023, pp. 576–577). By enraging the Azeri population over this perceived injustice, any subsequent action to regain former Azeri territory is perceived as ‘just’. During the 2020 war, Aliyev shifted his framing, turning the anger of injustice into pride for a just war. He emphasised pride by crediting the Azerbaijani people as the source of the army’s success in war (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023).

Applying Staub’s (1992; 1999) socio-cultural conditions, we can see how Aliyev weaponised injustice to evoke anger, highlighting the *underlying condition of vulnerability* within the Azerbaijani population. The President’s references to prior wars and the justification for violence highlight the *history of aggression*. Aliyev’s

¹ This article predominantly uses excerpts from speeches translated by other scholars. Most analysed translations were taken from Kösen and Erdoğan’s (2023) article.

switch from evoking anger to emphasising Azerbaijani pride meets the condition of *cultural superiority*. Using the UN Framework, one can see how Aliyev exhibits multiple risk factors. By highlighting the injustice of prior wars, Aliyev provides a ‘motive/incentive’ and a justification for future violence against Armenia. In the Framework’s wording, Aliyev’s weaponisation of prior injustices is the “politicisation of past grievances, tensions, or impunity” (UN, 2014, p.13). Furthermore, the Framework outlines that “politicisation or absence of reconciliation of transitional justice process following conflict” indicates the risk factor of a “record of serious violations of IHR/IHL” (UN, 2014, p. 11). Therefore, Aliyev politicising prior injustice following the First Karabakh War is a risk factor paving the way for atrocity crimes to occur.

In Aliyev’s pre-war speeches, he evoked shame in citizens for the loss of previous wars. Still, he transferred the blame onto Azerbaijan’s former elite/politicians, labelling them as “internal enemies” by blaming them for the loss of previous wars and territory (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023). Aliyev also emphasises the humiliation of Azerbaijanis by Armenians, complaining “How long will our cities be in captivity? How many disgusting enemies will foul our nationality?” (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023, p. 578).

Instrumentalising Staub’s (1992; 1999) works, one can attribute the simultaneous humiliation of Azerbaijanis and Armenians as evidence of *cultural superiority with an underlying vulnerability*. This narrative of blame towards the Azerbaijani elite and Armenians once again politicises prior injustices, presenting a risk under the UN’s (2014) frameworks.

Perhaps the most divisive theme Aliyev uses in his speeches is the constant dehumanisation of Armenians. The President often refers to Armenians as a “wild tribe” that was “chased from the battlefield ‘like a dog’” (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023, p. 582–583). Aliyev also dehumanises Armenians by calling them names such as “rats”, “murderers”, and “vile enemies”, which contrasts with the prideful references to Azerbaijanis as being the “teachers of virtue” (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023, p. 583).

This dehumanisation of Armenians is clear evidence of what Staub considers the most dangerous socio-cultural condition, the *cultural superiority of the dominant group* (Azerbaijan) at the expense of the *cultural devaluation of the subgroup* (Armenia). Dehumanisation also meets multiple risk factors under the UN’s Frameworks. For example, dehumanisation can be considered a ‘triggering factor’, as it is an act “of incitement or hate propaganda targeting particular groups” (UN, 2014, p. 17). This rhetoric of dehumanisation of Armenians fits the risk factor of “enabling circumstances or preparatory action”, as it is an example of “increased inflammatory rhetoric ... or hate speech targeting protected groups” (UN, 2014, p. 17). In this example, Armenians are the ‘protected group’, as they are the ones being targeted by Aliyev’s rhetoric.

Azerbaijani President Aliyev uses explicitly inflammatory rhetoric to condition the Azeri population into believing they are the dominant group that should control the Armenian sub-group by weaponising injustice, pride, anger, blame, and dehumanising Armenians (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023). Analysing the combination of Aliyev’s rhetorical themes, one can apply aspects of Staub’s Conditions and the UN’s Framework more generally. Aliyev meets the genocide-specific risk factor of inflaming intergroup tensions with rhetoric that involves themes of “past or present serious tensions or conflicts between protected groups involving other types of groups ... with regards to

access to rights and resources” (UN, 2014, p. 18). The President’s rhetoric has acted to evoke past tensions and worsen present ones, generating an environment conducive to atrocity crimes. Concerning the second genocide-specific risk, the signs of an intent to destroy the Armenian nation, in part or in whole, can be seen through Aliyev’s “methods of practices of violence that are particularly harmful against or that demonise a protected group”, through his methodical use of divisive themes in his rhetoric (UN, 2014, p. 19). Indicators within the genocide-specific risk factors being exhibited through Aliyev’s rhetoric suggest there is an environment conducive to atrocity crimes.

The beginning of this section demonstrated how Aliyev constructed a narrative of hatred towards Armenians through specific themes and emotional framing. Aliyev also uses his position as an autocratic leader to engage in another risk factor – “enabling circumstances/preparatory action”. It was previously outlined how Aliyev has caused an environment conducive to the commission of atrocity crimes by politicising the past and using inflammatory rhetoric, both of which are indicators under the risk factor of “preparatory action”. Aliyev’s speeches/actions met another indicator – strengthening the security apparatus – which he proudly takes in stride, referring to himself as an “army builder” (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023, p. 579). Feeling pride in a strengthened army alongside Aliyev’s inflammatory rhetoric towards Armenians creates an environment conducive to the commission of atrocity crimes.

Another risk factor that is exacerbated by Aliyev’s role as an authoritarian leader is the ‘absence of mitigating factors’ which could lessen serious acts of violence against protected groups. The lack of free media, an organised civil society, the presence of international NGOs, and the lack of willingness to engage in dialogue with conflict partners are just some of the indicators of this risk factor. As an authoritarian state, Azerbaijan lacks mitigating factors as there is no free media and organised civil society because of Aliyev’s control over the state (Sultana, 2014). Furthermore, Azerbaijan lacks the mitigating factors of international NGOs and an open dialogue with Armenia, in large part due to Aliyev’s belief that the international community has abandoned Azerbaijan in their struggle to regain previously lost territory (Kösen & Erdoğan, 2023). Therefore, Aliyev’s role as an authoritarian leader decreases the likelihood of efficient mitigating factors, increasing the chance of serious acts of violence against protected groups. Overall, as an autocratic leader, Aliyev controls the narrative, the preparatory action, and the absence of mitigating factors, creating an environment conducive to atrocity crimes.

Given the turbulent history of the South Caucasus and Nagorno-Karabakh, one can see how triggering factors quickly create a security crisis. The UN’s (2014) Framework outlines triggering factors as acts by the international community that threaten a state’s sovereignty, spillover of armed conflicts in neighbouring territories, and the sudden deployment of security forces. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has been an ongoing crisis over the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh which at times has turned into a conflict due to “defection from peace agreements” and “armed conflict in neighbouring countries” (UN, 2014, p. 10). The continued security crisis/conflict over the unknown fate of Nagorno-Karabakh creates an environment conducive to atrocity crimes, with no government or international organisation wanting to hold anyone accountable. The ongoing conflict could threaten a population’s psychological well-being, having them search for ways to fulfil their basic psychological needs (Staub, 1999). Amongst a plethora of triggering factors and cultural-societal conditions, it is possible to see how a population would turn to violent means of resolving their difficult

life conditions. Therefore, using the UN's Framework and Staub's Conditions, this analysis has shown how Aliyev's inflammatory rhetoric in speeches and his position as an autocratic leader has created an environment conducive to atrocity crimes.

The appropriate classification of atrocity crimes

Most conflicts are accompanied by the debate as to whether or not atrocity crimes are taking/took place. Little is done by way of prevention or intervention when they do occur, despite extensive and strict international and humanitarian laws about atrocity crimes. Instead, there is an endless war of narratives between those calling 'genocide' and those denying it is taking place.

The blockade of the Lachin corridor was no different. Following the initial blockade by 'eco-activists', Azerbaijan set up a military checkpoint and blocked the movement of any vehicle thought to be carrying contraband (Sewell, 2023). This led to immediate calls for Azerbaijan to lift the blockade and ensure the safe passage of citizens through the corridor, as well as accusations of genocide. Amidst the numerous accusations and denials of genocide, the President of Nagorno-Karabakh requested former International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor Luis Ocampo investigate the blockade (Ocampo, 2023; Sewell, 2023).

Ocampo's report concluded that there was a genocide occurring in the Lachin corridor, as "starvation is the invisible genocide weapon" (Ocampo, 2023, p. 1). The former ICC prosecutor pointed to Article II of the Genocide Convention, which outlines that deliberately imposing conditions on a group that could bring about its physical destruction, is legal evidence for genocide (UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948; Ocampo, 2023). Thus, Ocampo's (2023) expert opinion explicitly labels the closure of the Lachin corridor a genocide and urges the ICC to investigate to bring Azerbaijan (and Aliyev) to justice.

In contrast to Ocampo, Yavuz, a professor of political science at the University of Utah argued that the genocide debate has become politicised and that no genocide has taken place in Nagorno-Karabakh (Yavuz, 2023). Instead, he points out that Aliyev invited the citizens of Karabakh to become fully integrated citizens of Azerbaijan and offered to open the Aghdam Road as an exit from the Republic into Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Yavuz (2023) argues genocide was never the intention, as Azerbaijan offered to deliver aid from the Aghdam Road, but it was the citizens of Karabakh who refused this aid. Thus, Yavuz's central argument on the opposing side of the narrative war is that the intent was not genocide, but instead was the integration of the Republic with Azerbaijan, as exemplified by the offering of the Aghdam Road for aid and safe passage.

Technically, Yavuz is correct in pointing out that the Aghdam Road offer 'proved' the Lachin blockade was not a genocide, as citizens had a 'choice'. Following the rejection of Azerbaijan's aid, Nagorno-Karabakh citizens accepted humanitarian aid from Russia to be sent through the Aghdam road (Yavuz, 2023). However, before pointing to the Aghdam Road as evidence against genocide, one must consider the implications of rejecting aid amidst mass shortages, in fear that the aid would be tampered with. Rejection of Azerbaijani aid and acceptance of Russian aid suggests Karabakh's citizens truly feared for their lives under Azerbaijani control. Reasons for this fear can be traced to Aliyev's extensive inflammatory rhetoric outlined above, and numerous official

statements threatening the fate of ethnic Armenians in Karabakh. In a televised statement, Aliyev threatened Armenians; “If you do not want to die, then get out of Azerbaijani lands” (Aliyev, 2015). Aliyev reiterated this sentiment in a 2023 televised speech, stating ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh should “either accept Azerbaijani citizenship or find another place to live” (Der Matossian, 2021, p. 17). Regardless of the outcome of the war of narratives, there is real fear amidst the ethnic Armenian population of Karabakh when it comes to Azerbaijan.

Yavuz (2023) is also correct in arguing that the “language of genocide has been weaponised”. When labelling something as genocide, there is a discontinuity between the court of public opinion and the court of (international) law. In the court of public opinion, academics engage through articles and the media. In the court of law, countries and their lawyers engage in ‘lawfare’ by lobbing accusations at one another (Scheffer, 2023). In court, prosecutors must prove the “*intent* to destroy, in whole or in part”, which is difficult to achieve in time for action (UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948). Regardless, the narrow legal definition of genocide and the war of narratives does nothing for the people on the ground who may be experiencing trauma from conflict and/or atrocity crimes.

The lack of action in the 76 years since the Genocide Convention was signed, and the endless promises of ‘never again’, is proof that the international community is not preventing genocide through appropriate means. I propose that Staub’s Conditions and the UN’s Framework are useful tools to qualify an event as genocide *before* it is too late to act. If used appropriately, they could act as a theoretical framework to navigate and categorise the precursors of genocide, and hopefully, prevent the actual crime.

In the Lachin case, it is too late to act, as there has already been a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia due to fears of persecution under Azerbaijani rule. To label the Lachin blockade as genocide would simultaneously be vindicating and heartbreaking for the victims, especially since there were so many clear-cut signs of a crisis. I argue that the international community would have noticed the warning signs if the UN’s Framework and Staub’s Conditions had been put to good use. As proven above, Aliyev’s threatening, dehumanising, and anger/pride-provoking rhetoric met so many conditions and risk factors for atrocity crimes. Had the international community instrumentalised the Conditions and Framework, the warning signs of genocide would have been staring them in the face. With these warning signs, concrete action could have been taken to facilitate action or a diplomatic solution when the blockade started.

The Lachin Blockade: 1001 Warning signs

In conclusion, the analysis above is an example of how the international community could instrumentalise the UN’s Framework and Staub’s Conditions to prevent genocide. This article has demonstrated how Aliyev’s inflammatory rhetoric and position as an autocratic leader stoked the fear of genocide in citizens of Karabakh, exemplified by the rejection of Azerbaijani aid through the Aghdam Road during the Lachin corridor blockade.

Staub’s seminal work acted as a precursor to the UN’s Framework, but both can be instrumentalised to classify an environment as conducive to atrocity crimes. By classifying environments as such, the international community has the opportunity to

monitor and intervene at appropriate times without entering a war of narratives in the court of public opinion and law. Both works should be used in conjunction for appropriate use, as Staub emphasises the psychological precursors whilst the UN emphasises environmental precursors to atrocity crimes.

The Framework was “designed to facilitate early action” with the aim of prevention (Dieng & Welsh, 2016, p.11). It has an extensive list of risk factors and their indicators so that they can be applied with flexibility to ensure action above all else. Despite this, political barriers and institutional constraints continue to maintain the status quo of slow action and no prevention (Welsch, 2015). A full investigation of these barriers was not possible in the current article but could be a crucial avenue for further research to ensure action is always taken.

Clearly, by analysing Aliyev’s rhetoric through the lens of the UN Framework and Staub’s Conditions, we can see 1001 warning signs of the intent to commit atrocity crimes in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, because the international community failed to use these tools appropriately, they allowed the blockade of the Lachin corridor to occur alongside a war of narratives and atrocity crimes. These tools are already at our disposal – we just need to use them appropriately.

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