

Destruction of Islamic cultural and religious sites in Azerbaijan's occupied territories and related anti-Muslim narratives

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I. Introduction

Muslims the world over – including the Rohingya in Myanmar, Muslims in Assam and Kashmir, and Uighurs in China – are under existential threat. In addition to genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass internment, and countless other human rights violations, however, Muslims face the additional struggle of an international community that is, at best, silent on their plight, and, at worst, wilfully misrepresents it.

While some of these issues are now receiving wider coverage, the atrocities have been able to progress as a result of the prolonged passive stance of the international community. Many of those targeted are still fighting to be recognised as victims of human rights violations, rather than the role of Muslim aggressors they are usually assigned.

This report draws attention to the reasons underlying this approach, through the lens of the recently ended [Nagorno-Karabakh conflict](#) in Azerbaijan, discussions of which are permeated with Islamophobic narratives. Tensions leading to the 1991-94 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan [began](#) in 1987 with the violent expulsion of 200,000 Azerbaijanis from the Armenian region of Kafan, resulting in dozens of deaths. The war led to a plethora of violations, some ongoing, that attract little international attention: the 1992 [Khojaly massacre](#) (including [mass mutilation](#)) of Azerbaijani civilians, recognised by several states as a genocide; the mass [ethnic cleansing](#) of 800,000 Azerbaijanis from the Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions; and the [intentional razing, burning and mining](#) of Azerbaijani cities, diverse [cultural and religious heritage sites](#), and [civilian property](#). Despite these mass atrocities, the international community continues to cast Azerbaijan within the stereotyped role of Muslim aggressor.

¹ This submission is written in the author's capacity as an independent researcher. All views are the author's own.

II. Anti-Muslim hate speech

A. Online and offline hate speech and violence

A [concerning tendency](#) of [Armenian social media users](#) is to [refer to Azerbaijanis](#) as [cockroaches](#), while [describing](#) Armenians as a “[superior race](#)”. This must be considered within the context of Armenia’s [reverence](#) of [Garegin Nzhdeh](#), whose “racialist Tseghakron philosophy is thought to be inspired by Nazi ideology”. Indeed, in [collaborating with Hitler](#), Nzhdeh presented evidence “that the Armenians were an Aryan people”.

The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) has previously denounced the use of the term “cockroaches”, noting that such language was used by both Nazis and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. Members of Rwandan media organisations that had used this language were later convicted of public incitement to commit genocide by an international tribunal. The Nazi media “described people their masters wanted to eliminate as rats and cockroaches”.

The use of such language against Azerbaijanis is especially concerning considering the 1992 massacre of Azerbaijani civilians perpetrated by Armenian forces, and recognised as a genocide by several states. The massacre continues to be [staunchly denied](#) by the [Armenian government](#) and [diaspora groups](#) alike. As chronicled in a [Human Rights Watch/Helsinki report](#), before the attack, Khojaly had been home to some 6,000 people. On the night of 25-26 February 1992, as Armenian forces seized Khojaly and residents fled, Armenian forces fired on them. After the massacre, more than 300 bodies showing evidence of a violent death were submitted for forensic examination, of which many had been scalped, had body parts removed, or been otherwise mutilated.

Armenian social media users commonly post anti-Muslim hate speech. Azerbaijanis are referred to as [terrorists](#), both by Armenian social media users as well as the [Armenian government](#), echoing common Islamophobic stereotyping. Anyone who [reports on](#) or [mentions](#) war crimes committed by Armenia is similarly denounced as a terrorist. After Liseron Boudoul, a TF1 (France) journalist, and other staff received mass death threats, including threats of beheading, from the Armenian community in France for showing Armenian shelling of Azerbaijani cities, TF1 [removed the report](#) altogether in order to “defuse tension”, thus casting further doubts on France’s [alleged](#) respect for free speech.

Azerbaijanis are also referred to by Armenian social media users as “[Mongol leftovers](#)”, echoing Islamophobic language used in other parts of the world, such as in [India](#) in reference to Muslims in Kashmir.

The online anti-Muslim hate speech has spilled over into violent hate crimes – in November 2020, [ethnic Armenian suspects](#) attacked employees inside the Café Istanbul restaurant in Los Angeles, and later in an outside alleyway,

“while chanting that they wanted Turks to die, that they were here to kill Turks”. In the months before the attack, callers to the restaurant had made [death threats](#) against the owners and vowed to “burn down your restaurant while you’re eating breakfast with your family”.

In response to the repeated shelling of [Ganja](#), Azerbaijan, which caused the deaths of 26 people, including a [10-month old baby](#), while they slept, an Armenian “Support Artsakh” website began sales of a T-shirt with the slogan “[I smoked Ganja](#)”.

B. Governmental attempts to stoke inter-religious hatred

Despite the war originating in Armenian [territorial claims](#) on Azerbaijan, the Armenian government has [sought](#) to paint the conflict as a religious war between Muslims and Christians. However, as noted in a [European Parliament report](#), there are more than fifteen different ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, with “Muslims [coexisting] peacefully with other traditional religious groups in the country”.

Armenia, by contrast, “is the most ethnically homogeneous of the three South Caucasus republics” and, as a result, has few adherents outside of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the “exclusive historical mission” of which is recognised in the Constitution and is [central](#) to domestic discourse on the war. The Apostolic Church [controls the syllabus](#) on religious education in schools, and selects the teachers. The classes are “used to promote that faith and denigrate others”, thus “[\[propagating\] intolerance](#) against other religions”.

Political allegiances in the region are not formed along religious lines – Muslim Iran is more [closely aligned](#) to Armenia within the conflict, while Christian Georgia has a tense relationship with Armenia on account of the latter’s [territorial claims](#) on Georgia. Armenia’s destruction of other, non-Islamic religious heritage sites, such as the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) in the Khojavend district of Nagorno-Karabakh, also casts doubt on the Christians versus Muslims rhetoric.

Yet [unsurprisingly](#), the [false narrative](#) of religious discord and a [Christian battle](#) against a Muslim ([though secular](#)) enemy has been enthusiastically adopted by right-wing groups in France. Republican senators have [justified](#) their proposal urging recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh on the basis that “[t]o oppose the advance of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh is also to oppose the expansion of Turkish Islam across Europe” with [others](#) similarly referring to “Turkish Islamist expansionism”.

This exercise in crude Islamophobia however unsurprisingly succeeded with the passing by the French Senate of the resolution (echoing the [Islamophobic comments](#) made prior to France’s passing of the burqa ban). In the continued spirit of Islamophobia, the Senate resolution also refers to “jihadist mercenaries” aiding the Azerbaijani army, despite these claims having been proven to be [false](#), and in spite of consensus amongst [military experts](#) that

Azerbaijan's military successes resulted from its use of advanced drones that were able to target Armenian military objects with precision. Incidentally, Armenia's [admitted use of foreign fighters](#) from Lebanon, the United States and Argentina, and deployment of mercenaries from [Syria and France](#), has drawn [little censure](#).

For right-wing commentators in France, the conflict has presented a further opportunity to engage in open Islamophobia. Alongside a video of the Islamic call to prayer in a mosque in Shusha, a city that Azerbaijan has regained control of, a journalist from Le Figaro declared that these were Azerbaijan's "true motivations" all along, thereby presenting the [Islamic call to prayer](#) and the very presence of Muslims on their own territories as something macabre. [Open letters](#) in [right-wing French newspapers](#) conveniently fail to mention the [well-established](#) legal and historical background to the conflict, again reverting to the concoction of inter-religious tensions. Ironically, France's [deals with Armenian terrorist groups](#) are not mentioned.

Armenian lobbyists have [commented](#) that "[m]ost American congressmen are generally aware of the Turkish genocide ... so that was a good way to present the issue". The continued grouping of different groups of Muslims into an overall, barbaric "other" is thus essential to the promotion of Islamophobic narratives that manage to [supplant](#) even the well-established facts of the conflict.

Azerbaijan's [diverse religious leaders](#) have ultimately taken matters into their own hands to dismiss attempts at obfuscating the causes of the conflict:

The escalating conflict ... is not religious in nature, no matter how much others wish it to be, nor is Azerbaijan playing the "Muslim invader" part in international fantasy. Ours is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation with a flourishing Ashkenazi Jewish community, our own unique Mountain Jewish community and Christians of the Catholic, Orthodox and Armenian traditions.

...

Armenia certainly is a Christian nation. It is even more so today than it was 30 years ago when—during the 1988-94 conflict that led to the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan's territory—more than 300,000 Azerbaijanis, mostly Muslims, were forced from Armenia as refugees.

That war also saw 700,000 Azerbaijanis evicted from Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, which are still occupied by our neighbor though internationally recognized as within our nation's borders.

Azerbaijan does not play the role of invader—Muslim or otherwise—that has been chosen for us.

...

We have hope that the world will see past this narrative. It is dangerous to play politics with religion—and equally so to attempt to pit religions against each other.

III. Destruction of cultural and religious sites and desecration of cemeteries in Azerbaijan's occupied territories

The heads of some of the diverse religious groups in Azerbaijan – including the Albanian-Udis, Ashkenazi Jews, Mountain Jews, and Catholics – have issued a [joint statement](#) on the destruction of religious monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh:

Mosques, temples and cemeteries, historical monuments, museums, libraries in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan have been destroyed and looted; Caucasian Albanian Christian temples and Russian Orthodox churches have been Gregorianized ... Out of 67 mosques in Karabakh 63 have been razed to ground and the remaining three have been severely damaged. Armenia has completely demolished the historical Azerbaijani religious sites in its territory – Yerevan's "Shah Abbas", "Sardar", "Haji Novruz Ali" and other mosques, and changed the architectural style of the Blue Mosque. Not content with destroying only Muslim mosques, Armenia has usurped the Gregorian Orthodox Church in Shusha, the Albanian-Udi temples in other districts, and completely destroyed the Khojavand Orthodox Church.

Azerbaijani [cemeteries](#) in Fuzuli have been desecrated. In Ashagi Abdurahmanli, bullets were [intentionally fired](#) into the depicted faces of deceased Azerbaijanis shown on gravestones.

In Agdam, often referred to as the "[Hiroshima of the Caucasus](#)", the [only building](#) that remains standing is the [now decrepit](#) and graffiti-scarred mosque, which, in a deep religious defilement for Muslims, was used as a pigsty under Armenian control. A sign outside of the mosque describes it as a "Persian" mosque, thereby erasing its cultural [Azerbaijani heritage](#). Similarly, the Mamayi Mosque in Shusha was [changed into an Armenian church](#); its commemorative Islamic plaque was erased and replaced with an Armenian cross. The [Khudavend Monastery](#), which, outside of the [27 years](#) of Armenian occupation, has always stood peacefully on Azerbaijani territory, is now being [burned](#) and [dismantled](#) by [armed Armenian clergy](#).

Occupied cities were [intentionally razed to the ground](#), burned and mined to prevent Azerbaijani civilians from returning. Armenia [later](#) engaged in a state policy of illegal settlement on the occupied territories, with ethnic Armenians

[arguing](#) that it was their “moral right” to settle land that “centuries ago was part of the Kingdom of Greater Armenia”. This worryingly echoed Armenian PM Pashinyan’s [2020](#) reference to territorial boundaries drawn in the first-century B.C. era of King Tigran the Great.

In a final act of destruction, [Armenian settlers](#) have been [burning](#) the homes of Azerbaijanis [expelled](#) during the 1991-94 war. In doing so, they have again expressed commonly held Islamophobic beliefs:

“In the end, we will blow it up or set it on fire, in order not to leave anything to [Muslims](#)”

“I don’t want to leave something for [terrorists](#)”

“This is my house, I can’t leave it to the [Turks](#)”

“How can I leave it here for a [Muslim](#) to live there?”

In an alarming invocation of colonisation strategies, Armenia also systematically renamed Azerbaijani place names upon invasion, seeking to erase the region’s historic Azerbaijani heritage. Thus, in 2010, “Aghdam” was changed to “[Akna](#)”; in 2017, “Nagorno-Karabakh” began to be called “Artsakh”. Even the non-occupied Azerbaijani city of [Ganja](#) is referred to by Armenians as “Gandzak”. Armenians similarly call the Georgian territory of Javakheti “[Javakhk](#)” because they likewise make territorial claims on the region. However, Javakheti continues to be referred to by its real, Georgian name, while media outlets often adopt Armenian place names designated after invasion. Since Georgia is a Christian country, it is again difficult to draw any conclusions for this disparity other than anti-Muslim bias.

It is worth, finally, pointing out recent calls to violence against Azerbaijanis issued in [Asbarez](#), an Armenian-American newspaper published by the [Armenian Revolutionary Federation](#) – once identified by the CIA as the world’s [most savage terrorists](#) on account of their global and systematic terror attacks against Turkish and other civilians since 1896:

Why not ... manufacture dirty bombs? ... It will definitely make them think twice if we could turn Baku into a radioactive wasteland for the next 5,000 years.

The world would do well to be alert to such threats, regardless of the religious affiliation of those issuing them, and to finally reflect on these and other atrocities that it has turned a blind eye to for the past 33 years.

IV. Recommendations

- Social media companies should take active steps to remove Islamophobic and derogatory racist language that has been previously employed as incitement to genocide from their platforms.

- Media outlets should refrain from blindly adopting false governmental narratives that seek to stoke inter-religious hatred for political aims.
- All media sector professionals and employees of social media companies should undergo obligatory implicit bias training.
- Rather than responding by effacing Muslim stories, media outlets should condemn attacks on journalists and freedom of speech in the strongest possible terms. The absence of reporting from the occupied state in an armed conflict, with complete impunity for the harassing group, sets a dangerous precedent for freedom of speech and protection of journalists.
- Media outlets should report on the destruction of Islamic religious and cultural heritage sites and desecration of cemeteries in the same way as when such destruction affects other religious or ethnic groups.
- School teaching on religious education should not promote hatred of any religious groups. Religious leaders should not be involved in the training or appointment of religious education teachers.