



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

THE "FOUR-DAY WAR" BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN: WINNERS AND LOSERS

MAMUKA KOMAKHIA

73

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

MAMUKA KOMAKHIA

**THE “FOUR-DAY WAR” BETWEEN ARMENIA AND
AZERBAIJAN: WINNERS AND LOSERS**

73

2016



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2016 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-9566-5

Introduction

The unexpected military confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan triggered on April 2, 2016 has gone down in history as the “Four-Day War” which ended on April 5 while on April 6, in Moscow, the Armenian and Azerbaijani Chiefs-of-Staff agreed on a ceasefire. As a result of the “Four-Day War,” Azerbaijan managed to restore a small section of Armenian-occupied lands,¹ subsequently assessed by Armenia as a strategically insignificant loss.

From Ceasefire to the “Four-Day War”

The conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh which has its roots in the Soviet era developed into a full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1991 before ending on May 12, 1994 with a ceasefire agreement. Despite ongoing negotiations since the ceasefire, confrontation along the ceasefire line never ceased. In this regard, the “Four-Day War” was the bloodiest of the clashes since 1994. A small-scale border conflict also took place in August 2014 which was settled due to Russia’s early intervention.

Chronology of the “Four-Day War”

The “Four-Day War” began at dawn on April 2, 2016 when Azerbaijani forces launched an attack on the Armenian-occupied territories from the north-east and south-east. Interestingly, the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents were both attending a nuclear security summit in the United States at the time.

On April 3, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev openly declared that due to the lack of progress in OSCE Minsk Group-mediated peace talks, Azerbaijan was forced to take retaliatory steps. Azerbaijan’s official representative also announced that the resumption of hostilities was triggered by Armenian military provocations throughout the year due to which Azerbaijan had developed a retaliatory strategy for Nagorno-Karabakh which entailed a small-scale military operation. Following the occupation of certain sections of territory, Aliyev declared a unilateral ceasefire.²

According to a statement issued by the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry, on the night of April 1 Azerbaijani military positions and residential settlements came under intense fire from enemy lines. In order to avoid a provocation and ensure the safety of civilians, the leadership of the Azerbaijani armed forces took the decision to launch a retaliatory attack toward Agdere-Terter-Agdam (north-east) and Khojavand-Fizuli (south-east). According to Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry, several strategic heights and settlements were entirely cleared of enemy forces, including heights in the vicinity of the Talish village in the north-east which exposed the Goranboy rayon (district) and the city of Naftalan within it to risk. In the south-east, in order to defend the city of Horadiz, Azerbaijani forces occupied the strategic heights of Lele Tepe, located in the direction of the Fizuli rayon, which allowed them to exert control over a vast territory.³

The military confrontation came to an abrupt end on April 5 when the conflicting sides declared a ceasefire and, on April 6, in Moscow, the Armenian and Azerbaijani Chiefs-of-Staff signed a ceasefire agreement following which Russian President, Vladimir Putin, held telephone conversations with the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents.⁴

On May 5, in response to the Azerbaijani military operation, the Armenian government passed a resolution recognizing the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵ However, this decision did not have a legal follow-up. On May 16, talks were held in Vienna between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents with the participation of conflict mediators (Russia, France and the United States). Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, and US Secretary of State, John Kerry, also took part in the meeting.⁶ In a statement issued by the mediators, it was put forward that the Armenian side appealed to enhance the investigation mechanism for violations of the ceasefire regime and the ceasefire agreement while the Azerbaijani side called for new peace talks. The basis for the talks should have been Lavrov's proposal made in 2015 which constituted a modernized version of a document submitted to Aliyev and Sargsyan in 2011. According to the document, transport communications were to be gradually restored and the Armenian side was to relinquish part of the occupied territory in return for security guarantees for Karabakh Armenians.⁷ Despite talks held after the end of the "Four-Day War," the sides continue to accuse each other of periodic breaches of the ceasefire agreement.

Human Casualties of the Conflicting Sides

It is difficult to precisely identify the number of military personnel and civilians who lost their lives in the “Four-Day War” due to the fact that both sides of the conflict make divergent assessments of the opposing side’s losses due to propaganda purposes. Both sides claim to have lost 60 troops and several civilians.⁸ According to a briefing issued by the US Department of State, both sides suffered an estimated 350 military and civilian casualties.⁹ As per other relatively neutral sources, up to 200 persons lost their lives. The Armenian side confirms 88 losses while Azerbaijani non-governmental media outlets report over 100 Azerbaijani casualties.¹⁰

Territories Recovered by Azerbaijan

As a result of the “Four-Day War,” Azerbaijan restored certain territories in the north and south of the conflict zone which have been under Armenian control since 1994.

As of April 2, the territory reclaimed by Azerbaijan in the north measured 4 km in length and 1-1.5 km in depth. In this case, the Azerbaijani side had acquired a positional advantage since the Talish village became its direct target. The village, located in the province of Mardakert which is under Nagorno-Karabakh control, has been vacated by Armenian civilian population and is now fully occupied by troops.¹¹

On the same day, to the south, Azerbaijan reinstated control over the Lele Tepe heights in the vicinity of the town of Horadiz which have been afforded strategic significance. According to Azerbaijani assertions, the Lele Tepe heights enabled the Armenian side to conduct surveillance of all of the settlements in the Fizuli rayon, especially the city of Horadiz. Through the occupation of these heights, the Azerbaijani armed forces will be able to observe Armenian positions.¹²

According to a statement issued by the *de facto* Ministry of Defense of Nagorno-Karabakh, Lele Tepe cannot be considered a strategically significant location since the upper part of the hill measures 5 meters while its height amounts to 20 meters. In terms of positioning, the hill does not possess any tactical significance while its immateriality in terms of strategic importance goes without mention. According to assessments

from the Armenian side, in the vicinity of the Lele Tepe heights, the Nagorno-Karabakh army surrendered territory with total measurements of 1.5 to 2 km in length and 500 m to 1 km in depth.¹³

On May 17, Serzh Sargsyan conceded that during the confrontation with Azerbaijan in the «Four-Day War,» 800 of the 800,000 hectares of the «security zone»¹⁴ were lost. According to Sargsyan, the relinquished territories bore no tactical or strategic significance for the Armenian armed forces. “From a psychological standpoint, Azerbaijanis can convince their people that they have achieved something but at least one soldier was killed and two more wounded for gaining control over just one hectare of land. The Armenian forces were capable of restoring the *status quo*, but the question is whether it is worth such major losses. I am concerned about the fate of every one of our soldiers and officers,”¹⁵ Sargsyan is quoted as saying.

In their assessments, Armenian officials emphasized that their territorial losses were not of strategic significance which Armenian society saw as an attempt to justify military defeat. In order to neutralize this position, the Armenian Defense Minister, Seyran Ohanyan, stated that “these territories cannot be forgotten just as we do not forget all our historical lands,” effectively avoiding labeling the lost territory as “strategically insignificant.”¹⁶

New Methods of Warfare

For the first time, during the “Four-Day War” the parties to the conflict openly employed new methods of combat including cyber attacks and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) or drones. Azerbaijani hackers carried out attacks on news sites and social media in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia which was reciprocated in attacks on Azerbaijani government websites by Armenian hackers. The fact that a bus carrying Armenian volunteer fighters was hit with a strike by a “kamikaze drone,” leaving seven dead, was used as evidence to support the cyber attack proposition. According to the Armenian side, the location of the bus was likely pinpointed as a result of an Azerbaijani cyber attack on Karabakh’s communication lines.¹⁷ According to several sources, Azerbaijanis deployed an Israeli-made “IAI Harop” drone which, besides Israel, is used only by India and Azerbaijan.¹⁸

A New Combat Strategy

Unlike earlier small-scale clashes, the April 2016 military confrontation was dubbed a “war” owing to its large scale. Despite the fact that the conflict lasted only four days, during the hostilities the sides resorted to a variety of combat methods and weaponry including tanks, armored vehicles, heavy artillery, rocket launchers and aircraft as well asUCAVs.

Armenian researcher, Richard Giragosyan, estimates that unlike the earlier escalations, Azerbaijan’s offensive campaign was based on a new strategy to seize territory, provide a secure environment and sustain long-term control. Giragosyan believes that the new strategy constitutes a significant deviation from Azerbaijan’s previous strategies which simply focused on attacking for the sake of pressure.¹⁹

International Response

Western countries and organizations issued a timely response which was generally circumscribed by calls for an immediate ceasefire and the initiation of talks. The EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, and US Secretary General, John Kerry, called on the parties to respect the 1994 ceasefire agreement. They urged Armenia and Azerbaijan to show faith in the so-called Minsk process overseen by the OSCE.²⁰

In his assessment of the military confrontation, the Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Nikolay Bordyuzha, emphasized Azerbaijan’s culpability. He asserted that Azerbaijan’s actions in this case triggered an escalation of the situation and the conflict and that “everything must be decided through negotiations.”²¹ Unlike the CSTO Secretary General, other influential members of the organization assumed a more pro-Azerbaijan position, causing discontent in Armenia. Kazakhstan’s pro-Azerbaijan position even led to the cancellation of a summit of the European Economic Union planned in Yerevan inasmuch as the country refused to attend.²² Belarus’ position also led to serious discontent as Minsk supported the peaceful resolution of the conflict keeping in mind the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders. Due to this position, the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Belarus ambassador in Armenia for

clarifications. As per Yerevan's assessment, such a position held by Minsk is not consistent with the spirit of Armenian-Belarus relations.²³

Ukraine also declared support for Azerbaijan. In a conversation with Ilham Aliyev, Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, reiterated support for Azerbaijani territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders.²⁴ Turkey also openly expressed its support for Azerbaijan. Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, declared that they prayed that their Azerbaijani brothers would prevail in the confrontation. Erdoğan also criticized the Minsk Group due to its weaknesses which, he said, led the situation to the circumstances at hand.²⁵ Russia, in turn, called Turkey's statement expressing support for Azerbaijan "one-sided."²⁶

Georgia maintained a neutral position with regard to the confrontation between its neighboring countries and called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In their respective statements, the Georgian President and Prime Minister expressed hope for the de-escalation of the situation through the efforts of the international community.²⁷

Impact of the "Four-Day War" on Domestic and Foreign Policies in Armenia and Azerbaijan

Armenia

In terms of foreign policy, the military confrontation with Azerbaijan triggered a degree of mistrust in Armenia towards its partners and allies. In recent years, Russia has enhanced its supply of advanced weaponry to Azerbaijan which, as seen by Yerevan, contradicts the spirit of strategic partnership between Armenia and Russia. With their positions towards the "Four-Day War," members of the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO - Belarus and Kazakhstan - demonstrated that Azerbaijan is a more valued partner than Armenia.²⁸

In terms of domestic policy, the retreat of Armenian military units was reason for serious concern within the Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian governments. Moreover, such a failure could undermine the authority of the Armenian president. While the resumption of the conflict contributed to the revival of patriotic sentiment manifested in the mobilization of thousands of volunteers, the myth of the undefeated Armenian army, capable of occupying even more vast Azerbaijani territories, came under suspicion for the first time.²⁹

Azerbaijan

For Azerbaijan, the “Four-Day War” assumed a special symbolic significance after the defeat in the Karabakh conflict. The loss of territory in the Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities had inflicted an unhealed trauma upon the Azerbaijanis while the victory in the “Four-Day War” became cause for all-out celebration. In Azerbaijan’s view, the “Four-Day War” concluded with the recovery of a small but strategically significant territory. The successful military offensive led to public support and increased the popularity of the government, especially the Ministry of Defense.³⁰

In the Azerbaijani case, the “Four-Day War” had particular significance on the domestic policy arena. According to existing opinions, the victory in the “Four-Day War” will allow Azerbaijan to temporarily settle/postpone domestic political issues, some of which are instigated by current social and economic factors in Azerbaijan, fueled by the reduced oil prices. Oil and gas accounted for 94% of the country’s total exports in 2013. Beginning in 2014, due to the falling prices, the Azerbaijani Central Bank was obliged to expend two-thirds of its currency reserves before allowing the national currency to devalue sharply. Rising prices and unemployment led to protest rallies in several small towns in early 2016 which has been a rarity under Ilham Aliyev’s tenure.³¹

Impact of the “Four-Day War” on Russia’s Role

Russia received the most political dividends as a result of the “Four-Day War,” solidifying its position as the principal guarantor of peace in the conflict zone and the key mediator between the parties. According to one notion, the conflict was part of Russia’s grand plan which implies the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the region under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the CSTO. Such an objective can be attained via altering the *status quo* and discrediting the OSCE Minsk Group efforts. Thus, Russia will enhance its military presence in the region and gain an additional tool to influence Armenian and Azerbaijani domestic policy which, in turn, will further weaken the West’s role in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace processes.³²

Key Conclusions

- Failure in the “Four-Day War” has urged Armenia to seek even closer ties with Russia in the area of security. While Armenia has voiced discontent in terms of increasing military cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan, given the geopolitical circumstances in the region, Armenia enjoys only limited resources for foreign policy maneuvers. Therefore, it is unlikely that Armenia will turn down a strategic alliance with Russia, especially against the background of Russian military bases deployed in the country and, as Armenians believe, the likelihood of a similar confrontation with Azerbaijan in the future.
- Azerbaijan’s success in the “Four-Day War,” assessed as a victory within the country, will allow the Azerbaijani political elite to temporarily relieve itself from domestic pressures. In light of the failed peace talks and the unwavering growth of Azerbaijan’s defense budget, the Azerbaijani authorities experienced internal pressure, manifested in the public demand to reclaim the Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani districts by force. The territories recovered as a result of the “Four-Day War” are relatively small, however, they possess a symbolic significance which will weaken the internal pressure on the government and, ultimately, albeit in the short term, will reduce the risk of renewed conflict.
- The risk of the resumption, in the nearest future, of large-scale hostilities in the likes of the “Four-Day War” will be significantly reduced by ongoing regional energy projects, engaging Azerbaijan and Georgia. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that during the “Four-Day War,” the *de facto* Defense Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh announced that an attack would be launched against Azerbaijani energy infrastructure. The development of the confrontation along the same scenario will not only pose a threat to the operation of existing oil and gas pipelines but will also cast doubt over the future of the gas corridor which is set to provide a direct supply line for Azerbaijani gas to Europe via Georgia.
- The “Four-Day War” has confirmed that the principal role in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict belongs to Russia while the OSCE Minsk Group and the West have symbolic positions. It is noteworthy that while Russia remains Armenia’s strategic ally and the main guarantor of the latter’s security, in recent years the Russian Federation has also

developed into a crucial military partner for Azerbaijan. In bolstering ties with both sides of the conflict in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, Moscow will secure a relatively indisputable advantage over the West, which will increase the former's influence on regional processes.

References

1. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in addition to the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh itself, the Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh armed forces occupied seven additional Azerbaijani rayons/districts: Kalbajar, Lachin, Qubadli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, Agdam and Fizuli.
2. Orhan Gafarli, «Secrets of the Four-Day Karabakh War,» *The National Interest*, April 13, 2016, www.bit.ly/2f0JYl3 (Accessed on October 31, 2016).
3. «Azerbaijani Defense Ministry: Heights surrounding Talish village fully cleared of enemy forces,» *Apa*, April 2, 2016, www.bit.ly/2gi74t8 (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
4. Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Maciej Falkowski, “The Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Centre for Eastern Studies*, June 4, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fxElhW (Accessed on October 31, 2016).
5. «Armenia government approves bill on recognition of Karabakh independence,» *News.am*, May 5, 2016, www.bit.ly/2f5cyFb (Accessed on November 16, 2016).
6. “Armenia, Azerbaijan Presidents Meet in Vienna over Nagorno-Karabakh,” *RFE/RL*, May 16, 2016, www.bit.ly/2gHmSGh (Accessed on November 22, 2016).
7. Thomas De Waal, «Prisoners of the Caucasus: Resolving the Karabakh Security Dilemma,» *Carnegie Europe*, 16 June 2016, www.carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/16/prisoners-of-caucasus-resolving-karabakh-security-dilemma/j1yq (Accessed on November 16, 2016).
8. Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Maciej Falkowski, «The Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh»...
9. «Background Briefing on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,» *U.S. State Department*, May 16, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fhi7hn (Accessed on November 9, 2016).
10. Thomas De Waal, “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Resolving the Karabakh Security Dilemma”...
11. Tatul Akopyan, “The Four-Day April War: Results, Lessons, Legends – Analyticon,” [Татул Акопян, «4-дневная Апрельская война: итоги, уроки, легенды – Аналитикон»], ANI Armenian Research Center, June 2, 2016, www.bit.ly/2f592dH (Accessed on November 12, 2016).

12. «Liberated 'Lele Tepe' height,» *Report.Az*, April 7, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fY1UBp (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
13. Tatul Akopyan, «The Four-Day April War: Results, Lessons, Legends – Analyticon,» [Татул Акопян, «4-дневная Апрельская война: итоги, уроки, легенды – Аналитикон»]...
14. This term is used by the Armenian side to refer to the Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani rayons/districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh.
15. «Karabakh lost 800 ha that played no strategic role: Armenia,» *PanARMENIAN.Net*, May 17, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fGfSot (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
16. Sara Khojoyan, «Land Debate: Loss of “unimportant” territory makes life in Karabakh village unsafe,» *ArmeniaNow*, May 24, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fZu9xD (As of June 2016, the online journal *ArmeniaNow* is no longer published).
17. Masis Ingilizian, «Azerbaijan’s Incremental Increase on the Nagorno Karabagh Frontline,» *Bellingcat*, April 12, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fXYUor (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
18. Raf Sanchze, «‘Suicide drone’ used for first time in fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia,» *The Telegraph*, April 8, 2016, www.bit.ly/1Xl7rOu (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
19. Richard Giragosian, «Nagorno-Karabakh Situational Assessment,» *Regional Studies Center*, April 4, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fWbOB7 (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
20. Simon Tisdall, «Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict is a reminder of Europe’s instability,» *The Guardian*, April 3, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fG91ey (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
21. «CSTO Chief Blames Baku for Escalation in Karabakh,» *Azattyun*, April 2, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fY50FB (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
22. Aza Babayan, “Eurasian Union Meeting in Yerevan Cancelled,” *Azattyun*, April 7, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fZwUyS (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
23. «Yerevan bewildered over Belarus position on Karabakh conflict,» *ARKA News Agency*, April 3, 2016, www.bit.ly/2eGIVLA (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
24. “Ukraine supports Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity within intl recognized borders – Poroshenko tells Aliyev,” *Kyiv Post*, April 5, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fY4JlH (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
25. “Nagorno-Karabakh clash: Turkey backs Azeris ‘to the end’ against Armenia,” *BBC*, April 3, 2016, www.bbc.in/1RUTgkQ (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
26. “Turkey must stop meddling in other states’ affairs, end support of terrorism, Russia says,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2016, www.reut.rs/1Xbnuhl (Accessed on November 13, 2016).
27. «Tbilisi Concerned over Heavy Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh,» *Civil Georgia*, April 3, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fG8adV (Accessed on November 13, 2016).

28. Anahit Shirinyan, "Four-Day Battle over Nagorny Karabakh May Be a Prelude to a New War," *Chatham House*, April 22, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fWKMBa (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
29. Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Maciej Falkowski, "The Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh" ...
30. Zaur Shiryev, «The 'Four-Day War:' new momentum for Nagorno-Karabakh resolution?,» *CACI Analyst*, May 2, 2016, www.bit.ly/2fhidWa (Accessed on November 1, 2016).
31. "Nagorno-Karabakh's war: A frozen conflict explodes," *The Economist*, April 9, 2016, www.econ.st/1qxE80P (Accessed on November 12, 2016).
32. Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Maciej Falkowski, "The Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh" ...