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Azerbaijan: The burden of history – waiting for change

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Young recruit guarding
parliament in Baku
PHOTO: ANNA MATVEEVA

Summary

Azerbaijan was not traditionally a nation with a strong 'gun culture.' When conflict flared up in 1988 over Nagorno Karabakh, a largely Armenian-populated autonomous region which was demanding freedom from Azerbaijan, most people were unarmed. This paper traces the methods by which Azeris went about acquiring arms. This began on a small scale, as local paramilitary groups obtained weapons from wherever they could, in particular from Soviet military stores. As the conflict grew, however, both sides started to acquire larger quantities of SALW and heavy weaponry. When Azerbaijan became an independent state in October 1991, arms acquisition became a matter for the newly-founded armed forces. The country obtained a large quantity of arms through the division of Soviet military property in the South Caucasus, and further weapons were obtained through illicit purchases and seizures of Soviet weapons. Yet because of internal political disputes, Azerbaijan remained military weak, crime in the republic rose, and the country remained deeply unstable until Heydar Aliiev came to power in 1993. Since a ceasefire was agreed in Nagorno Karabakh in 1994, the situation has stabilised and the state has largely succeeded in stemming SALW proliferation. The paper finishes by considering the current condition of the military and security sectors and recent political developments.

Small Arms and Light Weapons in Soviet Azerbaijan

Until the start of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in 1988 and the fall of the USSR in 1991 Azerbaijani attitudes towards the use of small arms and light weapons (SALW) were closely linked to its people's history and mentality. Regardless of who was in power, historically most of the population – which was largely peasant-based – did not have the right to bear arms according to the prevailing traditions. The exceptions were nomads, the aristocracy, and representatives of the ruling classes, as well as those who needed weapons for work (shepherds and inhabitants of mountain regions). Any social or other problems that arose were settled by community elders in country regions, and by the district authorities in cities. Thus Azerbaijanis were a law-abiding people and developed a respect for authority. It did not matter who ruled over them, as long as that rule was powerful and took responsibility for security in the country. This Azeri characteristic was frequently remarked upon in many studies written in the Russian Empire. Therefore in Azerbaijan in the 19th century, most of the population had no need to carry firearms.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, for a short time (1918–1920) there was chaos in the region, with armed clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. After 23 months, however, the Communists came to power in the country, and restored the law and order that Azerbaijanis understood. Even the village communities were retained, simply being renamed *kolkhozy* (collective farms) and *sovkhozy* (state farms). Since the Communists almost totally destroyed the groups that had previously carried any form of arms (the aristocracy and the ruling circles), and the nomadic peoples adopted a sedentary life, the level of criminality in Azerbaijan in Soviet times, particularly in rural areas, was extremely low. This was not just according to the official statistics, it was genuinely so. Virtually all crime in the republic was focused in three cities – the capital, Baku; Ganja (in Soviet times, Kirovabad); and Ağdam. In these particular areas it was possible to procure SALW at unofficial 'arms fairs'. The trade even developed its own specific words: a 'chicken' was a pistol, and bullets were 'chicks'.¹

To a large extent this was explained by the fact that these towns housed the main arms depots in Soviet Azerbaijan. In Baku the gigantic Salyan barracks housed units of the Soviet Army. There were also several other military stores and objects around the capital (in Gilazi and Güzdek). Other large military stores and Soviet Army units were located in Ganja and Ağdam. Weapons could also be found in Soviet times in other towns in the republic that had military units (Nakhichevan, Lenkoran and Sumqayıt), but these places served as sources of weapons only at a local or regional level. Of course, all these weapons were kept under strict control, but at the beginning of the Karabakh conflict there were cases in which SALW went missing, in particular *Makarov* and *Stechkin* pistols.

There was another channel for weapons procurement – security guards at factories and enterprises had stolen weapons at their disposal, mostly obsolete rifles. It should also be noted that members of the Union of Hunters possessed hunting weapons. However all of this was under the control of law-enforcement agencies, and on the whole only a very small quantity of SALW fell into the hands of the general population in Soviet times.

There were other ways to get weapons. The population kept a very small amount of weapons as trophies from the first and second world wars, principally pistols and revolvers. These were also available at the unofficial 'arms fairs' in Ganja and Ağdam.

¹ From an interview with a former police officer in the Füzuli region, Hafiz Safikhonov, 3 March 2002.

The procurement of SALW by the population and the outbreak of the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh

The first clashes

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that began in February 1988 over the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Azerbaijan was the starting-point for SALW proliferation. The first clashes happened on 22–23 February near the small Karabakhi village of Askeran, where for the first time in the Karabakh conflict firearms were used. According to the recollections of both sides, they were armed principally with sticks and stones, though some people had pistols as well. Two Azerbaijani residents of Ağdam were killed by Armenian pistols, opening the sorry count of fatalities in the Karabakh conflict. This was followed by pogroms against Armenians in Sumqayit and Azerbaijanis in Armenia. As a result, a stream of refugees began to flow from one republic to the other.

Throughout 1988 there were reports that during the almost constant clashes in Nagorno Karabakh both sides used hunting rifles and other *ad hoc* weapons (axes, knives, pitchforks).² In reality, the use of such weapons on the Azerbaijani side was not at first widespread. Government officials – both in the republic and from the central authorities in Moscow – tried in every way possible to assure the Azerbaijanis that the problem could and would be solved. And since Azerbaijanis were law-abiding and were used to believing the authorities, the decision to confiscate various types of firearms, taken after the famous session of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 18 June 1988 concerning the clashes in Nagorno Karabakh, did not cause any great displeasure. The great majority of Azerbaijanis started to hand in all kinds of registered weapons, principally hunting weapons. By 26 September 1988, according to official statistics, 855 firearms had been confiscated from the general population of Nagorno Karabakh and of the Ağdam region (the overwhelming majority of which were from Azerbaijanis), principally hunting weapons.³ In order to prevent weapons proliferation, then blocked the enrolment of new members into the Union of Hunters.

In 1989 the clashes became almost regular. Azerbaijanis' trust in the authorities began to fall, for several reasons. On the one hand, the Azerbaijani population in Nagorno Karabakh and the surrounding areas observed that by autumn 1988 the Armenians had already started to create paramilitary 'self-defence groups', organised under centralised control from their regional headquarters in Stepanakert.⁴ At the same time, the authorities did not allow the Azerbaijanis to create similar structures. But these Armenian armed groups were taking an increasing part in the clashes and this could not but worry the Azerbaijanis. On the other hand, the opposition organisations that had emerged in Azerbaijan immediately after the start of the Karabakh conflict were growing in strength and within a year they had gained significant influence in society. Unlike the authorities, the opposition started to insist on the need for the general arming of the population with SALW in order to resist the Armenian military groups.

Again the authorities in the republic attempted to convince the population that the problem would be solved with the help of units of the Soviet defence and security forces. To back this argument up, it was announced that sub-units of the internal forces were being transferred to the region with the task of stabilising the situation. It has since become known that in autumn 1989 there were up to 15,000 internal troops concentrated in Nagorno Karabakh – *spetsnaz* (special force) units, independent operational regiments, motorised police battalions, and students from the training schools of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI).⁵

A shortage of weapons

In summer 1989, however, Armenian groups began an operation to force the Azerbaijani population out of Nagorno Karabakh, beginning with attacks on towns

² See for example *Express-Khronika* (Moscow), No. 49, 4 December 1988.

³ *Kommunist* (Yerevan), 27 September 1988.

⁴ Asratian S, *Goyamart (Kratkii ocherk o boevom puti armii oborony NKR)*, (Stepanakert, 1998), p 6; Also his *Karabakhskaya voina*, (2001), p 187.

⁵ Arasly J, *Armyano-Azerbajjanskii konflikt*, (Baku, 1995), p 6.

and regions which had a concentrated population of Azerbaijanis. This exposed the complete powerlessness of the sub-units of the Soviet internal forces, which were clearly unable to counter the attacks of the Armenian military groups. It was this that led the main force in the Azerbaijani opposition – the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF) – to form the first volunteer brigades in August 1989 and sending them to the conflict zone. Priority was given to reserve servicemen who had served in Afghanistan. At the same time, self-defence groups were organised in rural areas of Karabakh and in regions bordering Armenia.⁶

Already it was clear that there was an acute shortage of weapons and ammunition on the Azerbaijani side. This problem was solved in different ways. Several people sold their cattle to buy arms, but this time talk was no longer merely of hunting weapons. During one armed clash in mid-October 1989 in the settlement of Karkijahan in the suburbs of Stepanakert, both sides used not only hunting weapons, but pistols, sub-machine-guns and machine-guns. Homemade firearms were also used.⁷

A month later, on 26 November 1989, at a closed meeting of the USSR Supreme Soviet, the Chairman of the Special Administration Committee of the NKAO that had been set up, Arkadii Volskii, stated that over the previous few months, 18 Armenians and Azerbaijanis had died in Nagorno Karabakh, and 62 had been wounded. In addition, 39 servicemen had been wounded. In the period from September to November 1989 there had been ‘82 attacks on military units, 47 cases involving weapons. More than 3,500 units of firearms had been confiscated from the general population, including 850 rifled weapons, hundreds of homemade explosive and incendiary devices. Grenades, explosives, and detonators were being confiscated with increasingly regularity. In brief, both sides were actively preparing for military actions’.⁸

Nonetheless, the Azerbaijani side suffered from a catastrophic shortage of weapons. The Azerbaijani authorities continued to call on the population to rely on the organs of law and order. This only increased the influence of the informal organisations in the country. By the end of 1989 the Communist Party of Azerbaijan was losing real power in the country, which was increasingly in the hands of the Popular Front. APF leaders began in turn to look for additional sources of firearms. Under APF pressure, local government bodies in many regions returned some of the previously confiscated hunting rifles to the general population.⁹

Meanwhile, they also began to confiscate various types of SALW from DOSAAF (Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Air Force and Navy). Weapons (small calibre rifles and *Nagan* pistols) were also stolen from other state services, such as fire brigades.¹⁰

Escalation of the conflict

At the start of January 1990, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict escalated into open military operations. On 9 January 1990 the Armenians used converted civilian Mi-8 helicopters for the first time in the conflict to shell the Azerbaijani population of the Geranboi region of Azerbaijan, lying to the north of the NKAO. On 11 January the first armed clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian armed groups took place in the Khanlar and Geranboi regions. Initially about 100 people participated in the fighting on the Azerbaijani side; a week later this figure had risen to 300. They were armed with various forms of SALW, from hunting weaponry and *Nagan* pistols to sub-machine-guns.

On 13 January 1990, the APF announced the creation of a National Defence

⁶ Ibid p 7.

⁷ Tairzadeh A, *Plushchad': 4 goda i 4 mesyatsa. Tom 1*, (Baku, 1997), p 395 (in Azeri).

⁸ *Express-Khronika*, No. 52, 24 December 1989.

⁹ *Izvestiya (Moscow)*, 24 February 1990.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Committee; businesses and factories began making lists of all men capable of bearing arms and wishing to volunteer to fight in Nagorno Karabakh. At the same time the APF leaders succeeded in partially converting the Lieutenant Schmidt factory, which built machinery for the oil industry, to produce certain types of firearms.¹¹ But the quality was so low that this idea was soon abandoned.

The fighting in Nagorno Karabakh and in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Oblast was taking place against a backdrop of a rapidly deepening political crisis in Azerbaijan. The republican authorities were completely paralysed, and by the start of January actual power in Azerbaijan was in the hands of the APF. In several southern regions of the country (the towns of Lenkoran and Jalilabad) the APF's military groups took power into their own hands, disarming the local police. The formation of voluntary units for transfer to Nagorno Karabakh was accelerated. Since there was still a great shortage of weapons, in January 1990 attacks were launched on Soviet Army locations, capturing several hundred sub-machine-guns, pistols, ammunition and even four T-72 tanks.¹² Although the tanks were later returned to the units, almost all the SALW obtained were sent to the front line in Nagorno Karabakh. Around the same time, some of the ethnic Azerbaijani soldiers and officers in the Soviet Army went over to the APF.

The reassertion of Moscow rule

It was in these circumstances that the leadership of the USSR sent a 50,000-strong force into Baku on the night of 19–20 January in order to assert its rule. In the course of the operation, troops repeatedly opened fire on civilians. According to official data from the Azerbaijani parliament, 132 Baku residents were killed and 744 were wounded. APF fighters at times returned fire using the various weapons they had previously captured (mostly pistols). The Soviet Army suffered 29 fatalities and 98 wounded.

At the same time, Soviet troops occupied towns and potentially explosive regions across Azerbaijan – Nagorno Karabakh, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Oblast, and the border with Iran and Turkey – declaring a state of emergency everywhere. These forces also began the process of disarming the population. As a result, some APF paramilitary groups disbanded themselves, while others carried on illegally. Not trusting the local population, the Soviet Army regiments even disarmed the local branches of the Interior Ministry.

Soviet troops reported at the end of January 1990 that they had already seized 81 guns, many of them homemade. In mid-February the Soviet military claimed that between 20 January, when troops entered Baku, and 16 February, they had seized six rifles and 133 hunting weapons. Another Soviet army report declared that in the same period 19 units of SALW were seized from civilians in Baku, including two AKM sub-machine-guns.¹³ The insignificant quantity of SALW seized shows that the APF leaders had indeed sent a significant proportion of the arms they had captured to the fronts in Nagorno Karabakh and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Oblast, which was to some extent confirmed by the Soviet military themselves.¹⁴ The military was also able to seize arms in areas where the local authorities were completely in the hands of the APF. In one case in particular, in Lenkoran at the end of January 1990, soldiers seized more than 350 units of SALW, almost 180,000 bullets and even three mortars from APF fighters.¹⁵

Overall, in January–February 1990 about 6,000 weapons seizures were carried out in Azerbaijan (mostly in and around Nagorno Karabakh) and parts of Armenia,

¹¹ Yunusova L, 'Mera otvetstvennosti politika' in *Istiqlal (Nezavizimost)*, Baku, No. 4, 1990, pp 18–19; *Konflikty v SSSR: chernyi yanvar' v Azerbajjane. Otchet amerikanskoi Khelsinskoi grupy*, May 1991, pp 10–11.

¹² Op cit Arasly p 8.

¹³ *Konflikty v SSSR*, pp 15–16.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p 10.

¹⁵ *Pravda (Moscow)*, 28 January 1990.

according to official Soviet reports. In the same period about 4,000 units of SALW and 600 kg of explosives were confiscated from the general population.¹⁶

1990– early 1992: Arming the nation

The restoration of Soviet power in Baku and across the whole of Azerbaijan in January 1990 partially stabilised the situation, at least for a while. There were no more attempts to steal or capture weapons, and the criminal situation improved. But this was merely a temporary phenomenon, as in Azerbaijani eyes the government had lost its authority after the January massacre in Baku. Throughout 1990, as Communist support plunged, the popularity of the APF grew. In Nagorno Karabakh, Armenians were still carrying out attacks on Azerbaijani settlements, and the Soviet government agencies and security structures either could not or did not want to do anything to prevent them. The Azerbaijani leadership continued to place all its hope for an improvement in the situation in Nagorno Karabakh on Moscow.

Meanwhile in May 1990 the Armenian Communists ceded power to local nationalists, ie the Armenian National Movement. This was a serious signal to the Azerbaijani Communists. It was clear that without some signs of success in Nagorno Karabakh the same fate awaited them. This was understood in Moscow as well, and from the second half of 1990 the Azerbaijani authorities were granted a certain degree of independence in their attempts to stabilise the situation in Nagorno Karabakh and provide security to the region's Azerbaijani population. In autumn 1990 the Azerbaijani MOI began to form OMON (Special Police Detachment) sub-units specially to fight against armed Armenian groups. For this purpose, they were given a limited quantity of obsolete and written-off armour, as well as SALW from the Soviet Army. The number of Azerbaijan OMON troops at this time reached 3,000.¹⁷

However the OMON forces were unable to fundamentally alter the situation. Then in spring 1991 the leadership of the Ministries of Defence and Internal Affairs took the decision to destroy the bases of the Armenian armed groups in Nagorno Karabakh. Many Soviet Army sub-units centred in Azerbaijan were recruited for this operation, which was codenamed 'Operation Ring', as was the Azerbaijani OMON. The total number of forces reached 6,000 men.¹⁸

The operation began on 30 April, and by the middle of May Armenian units had been expelled from the positions they had been occupying in mountainous regions. The Armenian populations of 24 villages in Nagorno Karabakh were deported.

However, the coup in Moscow in August 1991 and the subsequent disintegration of the USSR at the end of the year sharply altered the situation in the region. In place of Mikhail Gorbachev, power in Moscow was seized by Boris Yeltsin, who did not conceal his pro-Armenian sympathies. Ayaz Mutalibov, the Azerbaijani Communist leader, found himself without Moscow's support, and the consequences became clear immediately: the formerly Soviet, now Russian units increasingly fought on the Armenian side. The APF-led opposition mobilised strongly and demanded urgent changes to Nagorno Karabakh policy and, most importantly, the formation of their own armed forces, since the existing interior and KGB forces were small and badly prepared for military action in the mountainous regions of Nagorno Karabakh.

Creating armed forces: government inaction

Under pressure from the opposition and from public opinion, the Azerbaijani leadership signed a decree on 5 September 1991 to create a Ministry of Defence for the republic. A new decree followed on 29 September 1991, when President Mutalibov set

¹⁶ *Izvestiya*, 24 February 1990.

¹⁷ *Op cit* Arasly p 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid* p 13.

up a National Defence Council with eight members (three of whom were representatives of the opposition), headed by the president himself. On 9 October 1991 parliament decided to create the National Army of Azerbaijan (NAA) within a timescale of three months.

At the time many people both inside and outside Azerbaijan seriously believed that within that short space of time well-armed national armed forces would emerge. The Soviet and Western press constantly cited 'reliable facts', from which it appeared that as early as October NAA units were already being formed near Ganja.¹⁹ The NAA was understood not to have a problem finding weapons – the Soviet Army had allegedly already given part of its weaponry to Azerbaijan that summer, and in October 1991, with the connivance of the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs, Viktor Barannikov, '20,000 units of automatic weaponry were transferred through intermediaries to Azerbaijan'.²⁰ Nor, apparently, did Muslim countries stand aloof: around 200,000 automatic weapons and a large quantity of missiles were said to have entered Azerbaijan from Turkey.²¹ There were even reports of 'Islamic Revolutionary Guards' arriving from Iran with large quantities of weapons, while the Central Asian republics took it upon themselves to train officers for the NAA in their own military schools.²²

But in reality, things were very different. The Azerbaijani Communists, despite the changed state of affairs in the USSR, continued to look to Moscow, and still hoped to win Yeltsin's support in a 'renovated CIS'. Therefore the Azerbaijani leadership opposed the creation of genuine armed forces, fearing that they might later turn their weapons against the Communist authorities. For similar reasons everything possible was done to prevent weapons falling into the hands of the population. Following secret orders from the republican leadership, officials in the MOD openly sabotaged the decision to create the NAA. The Minister of Defence, 64-year-old Valeh Barshadly, stated openly in an interview that he favoured the creation of 'a small self-defence force', but not a regular army, for the latter would be an 'expensive luxury'.²³ Hence officers and soldiers arriving at recruitment stations were dissuaded in every possible way from enrolling in NAA ranks.²⁴ As a result, between December 1991 and February 1992, while 21,640 people were called up to the NAA, there were only 5,425 men in the army.²⁵ Indeed, there were many fewer men in the ranks: on 18 February 1992 the acting Minister of Defence, Shahin Musayev, stated that five months after the parliament's decision to set up the armed forces, there were in fact only 150 servicemen in the NAA.²⁶

Creating armed forces: opposition action

The opposition forces did everything possible to set up armed forces. Taking their opportunity, two members of the National Defence Council, Rahim Gaziev and Etibar Mamedov, began forming the first volunteer sub-units. On 9 November 1991 the first self-defence battalion was formed in Shusha region. On 19 November a similar battalion was formed to defend Lachin region.

Azerbaijan's leadership was apprehensive of such activism and the National Defence Council was disbanded. At the same time an order was given to send dummy sub-machine-guns and grenade launchers with blank cartridges to the Shusha and Terter regions in the combat zone. Incensed by this, on 5 January 1992, 95 NAA fighters even left their fighting positions and came to Baku to sort things out with the MOD leadership.²⁷ But the arms supply problem still remained very severe. Even in MOI summaries from the period, which are now openly available, it is clear that the military

¹⁹ *Express-Khronika*, No. 45, 1991.

²⁰ *Express-Khronika*, No. 46, 1991.

²¹ *Megapolis-Express* (Moscow), 24 October 1992.

²² *Moskovskie Novosti* (Moscow), 16 February 1992.

²³ *Svoboda* (Baku), 12 September 1991.

²⁴ For details see Yunusov A, 'Natsionalnaya armiya: vchera i segodnya' in *Azadlyq* (Baku), 18, February 1992 (in Azeri).

²⁵ *Azerbaijan* (Baku), 3 December 1993 (in Azeri).

²⁶ Yunusov A, 'Azerbaidzhan segodnya' in *Express-Khronika*, No. 10, 1992, p 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

leadership in the combat zone frequently requested that weapons be sent. On 28 December 1991 Armenians used flame-throwers for the first time in the Karabakh conflict, burning down more than 50 Azerbaijani homes in Karkijahan in the suburbs of Stepanakert. The situation was so dangerous that residents of Shusha region threatened to overthrow the local authorities and capture the local police station in the town of Shusha. A military résumé and a concurrent inquiry both indicated that there was an 'urgent need for grenade-launchers, normal, hollow-charge and fragmentation grenades, underbarrel attachments and, if possible, heavy machine-guns'.²⁸

The opposition forces solved the problem of weapons procurement in various ways. They used weapons that had been obtained earlier and temporarily hidden – hunting rifles, *Nagan* pistols, sub-machine-guns and pistols. They also bought SALW from police officers²⁹ or seized them in battle. Since the military leadership of the (formerly Soviet) Russian Army still had its units satisfactorily under control, there were only isolated cases of weapons being bought in 1991 and the start of 1992. Attacks on the army were much more frequent. One such incident was reported in the MOI summaries: on 18 December 1991, 'unknown persons stole 66 units of AK-74s, 3,960 bullets for them, and 2 *Makarov* pistols from an engineering battalion stationed in Ağdam'.³⁰ According to some figures, until the NAA genuinely began to be established in mid-1992, volunteer units from the APF and other political organisations played the major part in fighting in Nagorno Karabakh. At that time they had about 4,000 units of SALW at their disposal (captured from Soviet Army forces).³¹

But this did not stop the leaders of the opposition, particularly Rahim Gaziev. At his insistence, the first two battalions of self-defence forces that had been created were reformed on 22 January 1992 into regular NAA battalions for the defence of Shusha and Lachin. Their equipment was noticeably inferior to that of certain other military formations (OMON, MOI and KGB units), but the fighters clearly exceeded them in morale and were the most combat ready. Yet the Azerbaijani authorities dealt with these forces in a very peculiar way. On 8 January 1992 the second battalion was disbanded by the MOD leadership on a far-fetched pretext. On 26 January 1992 the new Minister of Defence Tajaddin Mekhtiyev sent the first battalion out without any preparation to storm Armenian positions in the village of Dashalty. Moreover, the Armenians, who had been warned, set up an ambush, leaving 123 fighters dead. With that, the first battalion ceased to exist.³² These and other similar moves by the Azerbaijani leadership led to the loss of 57 Azerbaijani-populated areas in Nagorno Karabakh and brought the country to the brink of disaster. The final straw was the Armenian capture on 26 February 1992 of the Karabakh village of Khojaly, and the killing of about 1,000 civilians. Public anger at the inaction of the Azerbaijani leadership and at the horrific nature of the Khojaly massacre was so strong that on 6 March President Mutalibov bowed to opposition pressure and stepped down. His position was filled temporarily by Yagub Mamedov until new presidential elections could be held. In reality, the Communists had already lost power, and this was made official on 7 June, when the leader of the APE, Abulfaz Elchibey, won the election and took office. A new stage in the history of Azerbaijan began.

Despite the turbulent military and political events of the period, it is noteworthy that the criminal situation did not on the whole worsen. The overall crime rate in Azerbaijan was only one fifth of that, for example, in Russia – 320 crimes per 100,000 adults. It was the lowest crime rate in the South Caucasus: in Armenia it was higher by 40 percent and in Georgia 34 percent. Furthermore, crime in Azerbaijan was perpetrated by individuals – organised crime was only one-sixth the USSR average.

²⁸ Report of the Azerbaijan MOI headquarters on the situation in the Republic, 28 December 1991.

²⁹ *Azadlyq*, 24 January 1992.

³⁰ Report of the Azerbaijan MOI headquarters on the situation in the Republic, 18 December 1991.

³¹ *Aziatskii vestnik*, No. 2 – *Analiticheskii vestnik agentstva Postfactum*, ed. Pavlovskii G (Moscow, 1992), p 7.

³² Yunusov A, *Azerbaijan segodnya*, p 5; op cit Arasly p 19.

As regards to robberies, particularly involving the use of firearms, Azerbaijan had one of the best records in the CIS.³³

1992: Establishment of the armed forces

In 1992 the process of setting up the Azerbaijani Armed Forces and procuring weapons took on the large-scale proportions appropriate for a newly independent state, although it went through several phases. Rahim Gaziev played a key role in this process. He was one of the founders and leaders of the APF who withdrew from engagement in politics for what he regarded as the greater good of his country and devoted himself to the problem of Nagorno Karabakh. It was he who created the first well-armed units in Azerbaijan, and it was he who dealt with the problem of acquiring weapons for the NAA units who fought in Nagorno Karabakh.

After the first two battalions of the NAA had ceased to exist in January 1992, Gaziev formed a new 'Azerbaijani Karabakh' brigade in Baku on 31 January 1992 numbering 109 men and set off with it to Karabakh. On 3 February the brigade arrived in Shusha and was officially registered there as a volunteer self-defence force for Shusha. News of the arrival of Gaziev's brigade had an inspirational effect on many on the Azerbaijani side. Volunteers from all over Azerbaijan started to flood into Shusha, and by 5 May there were already 700 fighters in the brigade.³⁴ Gaziev, who was exceptionally popular, was named commandant of Shusha on 10 February 1992, and by 17 March he had been named Minister of Defence.

In this period the most pressing question was procuring weapons for the newly-formed NAA. The original phase, in which weapons and military equipment was acquired from DOSAAF schools, armed security services, the police, and sporadic attacks on, and bribery of, Soviet Army officers was over. In December 1991 the USSR ceased to exist, and Azerbaijan and Armenia became sovereign states, making the conflict between them an inter-state war. This would require the use of much greater human and material resources.

Acquisitions from Russian stocks

There was only one way to acquire large amounts of armaments and weapons in Azerbaijan, and this was from the locally-based units of the former Soviet Army – which were now Russian. In Soviet times a colossal amount of arms and military technology, military arsenals, bases and depots had been concentrated in the South Caucasus. Given its population (16 million) and area (186,000 km²), this was one of the most militarised regions not just in the USSR, but in the whole world. Along a strip of land 300-700 km wide, an infrastructure had been created with weapons and ammunition reserves for two districts (the Transcaucasian Military District and the Transcaucasian Border District), and also for the 19th anti-aircraft defence army, the 34th air army, the Caspian Sea flotilla, a subdivision of ships from the Black Sea fleet and a large number of units, bases and arsenals under central control.

Furthermore, the largest share of weapons, technology and ammunition was concentrated in Azerbaijan. In December 1991, according to the records, the 4th Army located in Azerbaijan included four motorised infantry divisions, the 23rd with headquarters in Ganja, the 60th with headquarters in Lenkoran, the 75th with headquarters in Nakhichevan and the 295th with headquarters in Güzdek, near Baku. The 104th paratrooper division, which did not count as part of the 4th army, was also stationed in Ganja. Between them, at the end of 1991 these forces had 309 tanks, 599 units of armour and 387 units of artillery at their disposal. Including other equipment, and excluding the weapons of the 104th division, the 4th army had 1,310 units of heavy weaponry at

³³ *Aziatskii vestnik*, pp 20–21.

³⁴ Prosecution document in the case of the surrender of the towns of Shusha and Lachin. Baku, July 1994, pp 3–4.

its disposal, which was 15 percent more than the Soviet Army forces had in Armenia and 27 percent more than in Georgia.³⁵

Moreover, there were 124 military aeroplanes (mostly MiG-25s, MiG-21s and Su-24s and Su-25s), 50 troop-carriers, and 24 military helicopters stationed at the five military aerodromes in Azerbaijan. In addition, there was a strong garrison in Baku (11,500 men at the Salyan Barracks) and a Military Academy. Not far from Baku, on the island of Nargin, was the huge naval base of the Caspian military fleet, and in total the flotilla numbered 6,000 people. Overall, at the end of 1991 there were 62,000 servicemen in Azerbaijan, of which only a small proportion (about 12,000) were Azerbaijanis.³⁶

Significantly, Azerbaijan contained a great deal more ammunition stores for land and aviation weaponry. There was a strategic ammunition store (in Gilazi, to the north of Sumqayit) with a capacity of 7,200 wagons³⁷; two regional stores (in Ağdam and in Nasosnyi, just to the north of Sumqayit) with a capacity of 1,100 wagons each, and four division stores (in Güzdek, Ganja, Lenkoran and Nakhichevan) each with 150-200 wagons. Thus the overall capacity was more than 11,000 wagons of ammunition. By comparison, there were 2,000 wagons of ammunition in Georgia, and 500 wagons in Armenia.³⁸ It is important to note that there were more than 160,000 units of SALW in the former Soviet units and bases located in Azerbaijan.³⁹ Russian military analysts calculated that had it all been at the disposal of the NAA, it would easily have been able to carry out highly intensive operations for an entire year.⁴⁰

Naturally, the Azerbaijanis very much wanted everything to be left at their disposal. The August 1991 coup and its failure allowed Azerbaijani politicians, particularly opposition leaders, to publicly explore this possibility for the first time. At the end of October, under opposition pressure, parliament declared that all materiel and assets of the Soviet Army located in the republic was the property of Azerbaijan. Yet on 1 November, Araz Alizade, a member of the National Defence Council and a parliamentary deputy, stated in an interview that a document was being prepared about the full privatisation of all arms and military materiel in Azerbaijan. On this basis, Araz Alizade undertook negotiations with the USSR Minister of Defence, Evgenyi Shaposhnikov, on behalf of the National Defence Council.⁴¹

Protracted talks failed to produce concrete results, as the Soviet military leadership was far from willing to transfer even the smallest quantity of its weapons and materiel. Instead, Marshal Shaposhnikov suggested forming joint or peacekeeping forces in the South Caucasus to maintain peace. This was rejected by every country in the region. Not surprisingly, these talks ultimately failed.

When Moscow realised that sharing out the weapons and ammunition in the South Caucasus was unavoidable, the Russian Military Command decided to withdraw as many of the most modern arms from the region as possible, and to concentrate the more outdated weapons in the key bases and leave them there until political agreements could be reached between the Russian government and the governments of the South Caucasian republics.⁴²

However, the Azerbaijani population and in particular the opposition resisted this fiercely. Hence, as the 23rd and 295th motorised infantry regiments were being withdrawn from the border area, part of the forces were stopped and disarmed by the local population. The 295th motorised infantry regiment alone, as it was withdrawing from the Karabakh zone towards Baku, lost 81 units of armoured tank materiel on the

35 Simonov V, 'Potentsial smerti' in *Zerkalo* (Baku), No. 11, 30 January 1993; Baranets V, *Genshtab bez tain*, (Moscow, 1999), p 242.

36 Gafarly M, 'My mirnye lyudi, no bronepoezd – nash' in *Megapolis-Express*, 16 January 1992.

37 A wagon is a Soviet measurement of ammunition, equivalent to 38m³.

38 Op cit Baranets p 247; Simonov V, 'Zakavkaz'e'.

39 Op cit Baranets p 242.

40 Ibid p 247.

41 Yunusov A, 'Natsionalnaya armiya'.

42 Op cit Baranets p 241.

march, and a lot of other weapons. According to official figures from the Russian command, in the first quarter of 1992 Azerbaijanis attacked the 4th army 85 times and captured four multiple missile-launching units, 14 tanks and 141 units of armour and 2,929 units of SALW. In the same period the Caspian flotilla lost more than 250 SALW. Significant batches of SALW and ammunitions were seized from other anti-aircraft defence units and border forces.⁴³

In actual fact, however, as many discussions with former NAA officers who were responsible at the time have shown, everything happened somewhat differently. The collapse of the USSR led to groups of former Soviet forces in Azerbaijan being left to their own devices. Officers were not paid for months, virtually no reinforcements arrived, and local commanders had many social and other problems which they could solve only with the help of the local authorities. Consequently, for an agreed price the two sides soon came to an agreement. Russian officers transferred weapons and armaments to Azerbaijanis, who could take them unhindered and later simulate an attack and capture by 'armed revolutionaries'. Often not even that was necessary. According to one officer of the Azerbaijan MOD who wishes to remain unnamed, Surat Huseynov, one of the Azerbaijani military leaders, captured the strategic store in Gilazi for the tidy sum of several tens of millions of dollars. Another officer, colonel Ayaz Mamedov, the former deputy head of the home front administration of the MOD, reported that former Azerbaijani deputy Minister of Defence, Baba Nazarli, acquired the weapons and military equipment of the 23rd motorised infantry division in Ganja from its commander, major-general Yuri Pakhomov, in mid-June for twenty million dollars.⁴⁴ But this was the largest sum that was mentioned in the course of the interview. Other figures quoted for bribes to Russian officers were less ranging from several thousand up to 10 million dollars. The stores in Sanqachaly (not less than 1,000 SALW) and in the Azi Aslanov area of Baku (about 15,000 SALW) were also acquired in exchange for money in March 1992. The district store in Ağdam was also transferred to Azerbaijani control on 23 February 1992 without any money changing hands or any attacks, thanks to the good relations between the regional leadership and the military. 728 wagons of artillery ammunition, 245 wagons of rockets and 131 wagons of cartridges for SALW passed into Azerbaijani hands.⁴⁵

Withdrawal of the Russian forces

The withdrawal of the Russian Forces began in the first half of 1992. The accession of the APF, with their anti-Russian and pro-Turkish sentiments, in June 1992 led to a very hostile relationship with the Russian military and political leadership. This had an immediate effect on attempts to procure weapons and armaments. Previously Moscow had given its consent, in accordance with the Tashkent agreement of 15 May 1992, to the sharing out of the military materiel and arms of the former Soviet Army. Accordingly, the Russians should have transferred all the materiel and weapons of the Trans-caucasus Military District (ZakVO) in accordance with a quota of 220 tanks, the same amount of armour, 285 units of artillery, 100 military airplanes and 50 helicopters to the republics of the South Caucasus. Yet Moscow clearly did not wish to hand over such a quantity to the now anti-Russian Azerbaijan. The ZakVO leadership was instructed to form operational groups to withdraw part of the weapons arsenals to the North Caucasus. As recalled by the former deputy Commander of Forces in the region, Major-General Gennadyi Klement'ev, 'weapons were withdrawn using exactly the same methods that the Azerbaijani nationalist forces had previously employed. At night, without warning, we drove in, broke in to the military unit, opened up the stores and loaded mostly small arms into vehicles. We were covered by *spetsnaz* [special forces] teams. The weapons were sneaked off in helicopters to Krasnodarsk krai [in southern Russia] and to aircraft shelters. As soon as the shelter was full, the gates were

⁴³ Op cit Arasly p 21; Dokuchaev A, 'Armiya Azerbaidzhana nastupaet. No uspekha eto ne garantiruet' in *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Moscow), 24 June 1992.

⁴⁴ Interview with Colonel Ayaz Mamedov, 23 April 2002.

⁴⁵ Myalo KG, *Rossiya i poslednye voyny XX veka (1989–2000)*, (Moscow, 2002), p 72.

locked, a powerful minefield was laid around it ... armoured materiel was taken out on Il-76s'.⁴⁶

On the order of the Russian Defence Minister, Su-25 low-flying attack aircraft (from the Sital-chay aerodrome) and Su-25 bombers (from the Kurdamir aerodrome) were flown out *en masse* on the night of 10 June and re-based in Russia. The aerodromes' equipment and technology was also put out of action. Moreover, acts of sabotage were also committed, as a result of one of which the divisional ammunition store in Guzdek was blown up. In response, Rahim Gaziev ordered Azerbaijani control to be established over the remaining aerodromes and military sites.⁴⁷

After this, Gaziev made personal contact with the Russian Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, and consequently the latter issued a secret order to hand over the remaining weaponry to Azerbaijan. Therefore, according to Russian sources, only about 40 per cent of the almost 160,000 units of SALW belonging to the 4th army in Azerbaijan at the end of 1991 was transported by the Russian military to the North Caucasus.⁴⁸ In other words, more than 90,000 units of SALW from the former Soviet Army came into Azerbaijani hands. Moreover, in accordance with the Tashkent Agreement (according to Russian figures) 325 tanks, 789 armoured vehicles, 458 artillery installations and a large number of planes and helicopters were placed under NAA command.⁴⁹

Azerbaijani figures are somewhat different: under the Tashkent Agreement, by August 1992 Azerbaijan had actually received 307 tanks, 449 armoured vehicles, 130 mortars, 33 *Grad* multiple missile-launching units, almost 2,000 machine-guns, and 57,000 semi-machine-guns and 17,000 pistols from Russia.⁵⁰

In any case there is no doubt that the leadership of the Azerbaijani MOD succeeded in coming to an arrangement with the Russian military leadership and receiving more than the agreed quota of weapons and materiel. It is significant that later, after his removal as Minister of Defence and his arrest by the Azerbaijani authorities, Gaziev stated at his trial that he managed to procure weapons and military materiel from Russia with an overall value of \$282.2 million (1992 prices) without taking any money from the state budget.⁵¹ Furthermore, he made reference to several people who had the means to buy weapons. The Muslim leader, Sheikh ul-Islam Allakhshukur Pashazade, gave Gaziev \$5,000 'pocket money' in 1992, which went into the MOD Treasury. The Minister of the Interior Iskender Hamidov gave him \$250,000 in cash to buy arms. And the prominent businessman Rasul Guliev gave Gaziev \$980,000 for the nation's defence.⁵²

Almost 40,000 men were called up into the ranks of the NAA by mid-1992. Of these, about 21,000 officers and soldiers were in the combat zone in summer 1992.⁵³ In addition, the experienced OMON detachments (up to 4,000 people) and the volunteer battalions of the APF and other parties (up to 7,000 people) also actively participated in battles with Armenians in summer 1992.⁵⁴ All of this had a rapid affect and throughout 1992 NAA units launched successful attacks, capturing two regions from Armenian control.

Rise in crime

The criminal situation in the country undoubtedly worsened in 1992. This was entirely predictable, for in a short period of time not only NAA units but also volunteer

⁴⁶ Op cit Baranets pp 248–9.

⁴⁷ Op cit Arasly p 26.

⁴⁸ Op cit Baranets p 242.

⁴⁹ Ibid pp 243–4.

⁵⁰ Information from the former chief of the Analysis and Information Centre of the Azerbaijan Ministry of Defence, Leyla Yunusova – Report from the Sharq press agency (Baku), 9 January 1997. See also: *Aziatskii vestnik*, p 6.

⁵¹ *Bakının sesi* (Baku), 7 September 1994 (in Azerbaijani).

⁵² Ekho, 10 July 2002.

⁵³ Information from Leyla Yunusova – Report from the Sharq press agency.

⁵⁴ *Aziatskii vestnik*, p 7.

brigades had large quantities of weapons at their disposal. Furthermore, these developments took place in wartime and in the absence of strict control. An example of this was brought up during the trial against Rahim Gaziev: on 8 May 1992 he went to the town of Yevlakh to hand over 245 machine-guns to those defending Shusha. The machine-guns were received by the Shusha chief of police, who took them off to the front line. Soon after, however, the chief of police returned to Baku without these machine-guns, which had disappeared; to this day it is unknown into whose hands they fell.⁵⁵ In this period several field commanders considered the weapons they had obtained by their own means to be their personal property, and sometimes refused to obey orders from the MOD or to use any of their weapons for national defence.⁵⁶

There are no statistics available for 1992, but it is clear that in comparison with the preceding period the situation worsened, and that time is remembered by the population as the year in which criminal activity worsened. A not insignificant proportion of those who were called up into the army, some of whom even fought successfully at the front, later abandoned their positions without permission and headed off into the heart of Azerbaijan, committing burglaries and robberies. Here we should note that in the autumn of 1992 the authorities had for patriotic reasons decided to pardon all prisoners who expressed a desire to fight for their Motherland at the front. Although the MOI tried to convince President Elchibey that after the first pardons the only people left in jail were murderers and rapists, a decision was nonetheless taken to send even those prisoners to the front. The first group of volunteers was sent to the front on 15 September, the second group on 6 October. In all, 701 prisoners were sent to the front. According to the former Minister of the Interior, Iskender Hamidov, most of these former prisoners fought in earnest. More than 60 died, about 120 were wounded, and up to 15 were awarded medals by the state.⁵⁷ But it is clear that a significant proportion were not at the front, and indeed had weapons at their disposal. Undoubtedly, this mistaken decision, taken for what were regarded as patriotic reasons, only worsened the criminal situation in the country.

Finally, 1992 drew a line under the Azerbaijanis' Soviet past. People who had previously been law-abiding citizens gradually realised through their constant clashes with the authorities from 1988 to 1991 that they could only get decisions made if they put the authorities under pressure. In 1992 there were three changes of power one after the other: on 6 March, after the massacre of Azerbaijanis in Khojaly, President Mutalibov was forced under pressure to quit his post; on 15 May, with the help of his supporters, he returned to power through a coup; but a day later, following a countercoup by the APF and its supporters, Mutalibov again fled the country and the APF took power. Hence the population became convinced that problems could be quickly solved using violent methods, and even that this was the best way to do so.

1993–1995: The years of chaos

The military successes of 1992 were not consolidated in the following year. On the contrary, the political crisis that had arisen between the APF leadership and one of the heads of the MOD, the corps commander Surat Huseynov, allowed the Armenians to move onto the offensive and close on the NAA. The Azerbaijani authorities blamed Huseynov and tried to remove him from office. But the leaders did not take into account Huseynov's resources. A successful businessman, he had obtained weapons from Russian army units at the start of the 1990s with his own money. Furthermore, the leadership of the 104th paratrooper division stationed in Ganja backed Huseynov and used every means possible to provide him with military and technical support.

⁵⁵ *Ekho and Zerkalo*, 10 July 2002.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Zerkalo and Sharq* (Baku), 28 June 2002.

This was down not only to the good personal relationship between them, but also to the fact that Huseynov was pro-Russian and did not conceal it.

In response the APF leadership demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from the country and the transfer of all weapons to Azerbaijani control. At the end of May 1993 the last sub-units of the 104th division left Azerbaijan, but handed all their arms and military equipment to Huseynov. The authorities' attempts to use force to pressure units in Ganja loyal to Huseynov failed completely, and these started moving in June towards the capital in a coup. In the south of the country, in the town of Lenkoran, Aliakram Humberov declared the establishment of the Talysh-Mugan Autonomous Republic. Furthermore, he refused to be subordinate to the existing authorities in the country and entered into contact with Huseynov.

The APF leadership, which had completely lost its way, called for the help of the former Communist leader of the country, Heidar Aliev. But this did not stop Huseynov, who continued his advance on Baku. The APF leader, President Elchibey, fled the capital, leaving full power to Aliev. Aliev was also able to reign in Huseynov, who became prime minister.

Aliev became president of the country several months later and began strengthening his power. By August he had already crushed Humberov's uprising in Lenkoran without a problem, arresting him and having him subsequently sentenced to death (later commuted to life imprisonment). But the main focus of his attention were his genuine opponents. He disbanded all 33 volunteer battalions that were under the control of the APF and various other parties.⁵⁸ This led to disaster for the Azerbaijanis on the front, for it was the most able units, numbering some 7,000 men, that were disbanded. Amid an Azerbaijani internal crisis, Azerbaijan lost seven regions in and around Nagorno Karabakh in Armenian attacks at the end of the year.

Realising that without urgent action Azerbaijan might suffer further losses, Aliev urgently began forming new NAA units. Several military drafts were called. New consignments of weapons and materiel were purchased in Turkey and Ukraine. At the same time up to 2,500 mercenaries from Afghanistan arrived on the front in Karabakh. In fact, they were of little use, since they were experts in guerrilla warfare and sabotage, not in large-scale offensive actions. Moreover, reports soon spread that they had started carrying out robberies in Azerbaijani-populated areas. Problems also arose in the international arena relating to their presence in the country and the constant denunciations by the Armenians. Hence the authorities gradually got rid of them, sending them back to their homeland or on to Yugoslavia. Yet up to 400 mercenaries from Afghanistan remained, and this subsequently affected the rise of Islamic extremist organisations in Azerbaijan.

In any event, Aliev failed score notable successes on the front, and on 12 May 1994, under pressure from Russia, the warring sides signed a ceasefire agreement which remains in place to the present day.

Suppression of the armed groups

Criminality in the country has noticeably increased, since an armed opposition appeared alongside the political opposition. If the leaders of the overthrown APF and its allies (Müsavat and others) preferred to lead the struggle against the new government with protest meetings and articles in the media, this did not particularly worry the experienced Aliev. More dangerous were those who had money and armed paramilitary groups. This included the prime minister, Surat Huseynov, who had his own armed units loyal only to him, and also Rovshan Javadov, the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs and commander of OPON (the Special Police Force, formerly OMON).

⁵⁸ Op cit Arasly p 40.

By autumn 1994 around 600 members of OPON had been stationed partly in Baku, where their main base was, partly in the north-west of the country, in the Qazakh-Ağstafa region. After the May 1994 ceasefire, OPON forces found themselves without work and some of them turned to criminal activity, in particular racketeering.

On 2 October 1994 a conflict arose in Baku between the Public Prosecutor General and Makhir Javadov, the brother of Rovshan Javadov. In response, an armed OPON unit led by Rovshan Javadov captured the Public Prosecutor's office and took 40 hostages, including the Public Prosecutor, Ali Omarov. In response the building was besieged by army troops using five tanks, an armoured car, and an armoured personnel carrier (APC). On the morning of 3 October there was a short battle between the two sides and a tank fell into the hands of the OPON forces. After long negotiations the armed OPON forces vacated the Prosecutor's office on 3 October and returned to their headquarters in a district of Baku.

On the same day a state of emergency was established by presidential decree, which turned out to be extremely fitting on the next day, when Prime Minister Huseynov attempted a coup. After talks on the evening of 4 October Rovshan Javadov and his supporters joined Aliev's side. In return, OPON was not disarmed. This allowed Aliev to send loyal NAA units against Huseynov and his supporters in Baku and Ganja and defeat them totally. Huseynov quickly fled to Russia, and many of his supporters were arrested and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Later, the Russian authorities handed Huseynov over to Azerbaijan, and he was sentenced to death in 1996 (later commuted to life imprisonment).

After this the only significant forces not under Aliev's control were the Javadov brothers and the OPON troops who supported them. A new clash was inevitable, and it happened in mid-March 1995. The incident happened on 12 March on the border with Turkey in the west of the country when police officers stopped four cars containing armed OPON troops who were carrying contraband goods (50 tonnes of copper) bound for Georgia.

In response the Qazakh OPON, together with armed civilians, seized the town police station and the military quarter of Qazakh. Having captured several units of armoured materiel, they started advancing on the towns of Ağstafa and Tovuz. Following Aliev's orders, on 13 March NAA units attacked the mutineers and routed them. Some of the OPON troops surrendered, others managed to escape into Georgia, and from there into Russia.

On 14 March the Azerbaijani Minister of Internal Affairs issued a decree disbanding the OPON. The OPON commander was ordered to hand over all technical equipment and weapons within three days. In return it was promised that OPON troops who served the state honestly would be transferred to other positions in the MOI. However, by the appointed date only about 100 OPON troops had followed the order, the rest (almost 500 men) refusing to disarm. Then, on the night of 16–17 March, an armed clash took place between the mutineers and government forces, after which the former OPON troops surrendered. The injured Rovshan Javadov died in hospital, while his brother managed to escape. All in all, in the course of the events of March 1995, 45 people died (including eleven OPON troops and seven civilians) and 117 people were injured. A total of 710 people – OPON troops and their sympathisers – were arrested on charges of taking part in a coup.

1996–2002: Building the armed forces

After these events no armed groups remained in Azerbaijan outside the control of the central authorities, and regular military and security structures began to be constructed. In the initial stage of his rule, Aliev followed a course of co-operation with the CIS countries, particularly with Russia. This was done both for political and military

reasons. On the one hand, Russian influence on the negotiation process over the Karabakh conflict and indeed in stabilising the region was already too strong to resist. On the other hand, the Azerbaijani army had from the start been constructed following the standards of the former Soviet Army, and the weapons it possessed were mostly Soviet (and now Russian). In the course of the Karabakh conflict, particularly in 1992–4, Azerbaijan had used some SALW that were not of Russian origin, mostly weapons captured from the Armenians or acquired from Turkish military arsenals. But it was an insignificant quantity and they were not of very good quality. Experience during the fighting had demonstrated the superiority of Russian SALW, and thus the NAA continued to use SALW of Russian origin.

Political realignment

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's political orientation was gradually changing. In 1993 the Azerbaijani government came to a political understanding with the CIS and signed the Tashkent Agreement on Collective Security. In order to strengthen his power, however, Aliiev began a rapprochement with the West, in particular with the US and Turkey. The signing of oil contracts in September 1994 was the starting point of Aliiev's new policy, returning to what the APF leader Elchibey had started in 1992. Now this policy was implemented much more deeply. Azerbaijan pursued a course of close integration into the NATO bloc, in particular with Turkey and also the US. In such conditions it made little sense to be in the bloc of another system, indeed it might even prove dangerous. In 1999 the Azerbaijani authorities refused to support the extension of the Tashkent Agreement on Collective Security and withdrew from the agreement.

Continuing this policy, the Azerbaijani authority refused to condemn NATO bombing raids during the crisis in Yugoslavia, unlike the other CIS countries linked to Russia. On the contrary, in response to an appeal by NATO to its partner-states to take part in the peace-keeping mission in Yugoslavia, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs made an offer to the US to send an Azerbaijani platoon as part of a Turkish battalion. They were to join Turkish ranks because the Azerbaijani officers by themselves were too inexperienced.⁵⁹ This offer was accepted.

Azerbaijan's action did not go unnoticed: the US announced that it would further strengthen its political and economic ties with Azerbaijan.

These ties were strengthened further after the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001. Azerbaijan categorically supported the US and strongly condemned terrorism. To a large extent this was also linked to what Azerbaijanis widely regarded as Armenian terrorism in Karabakh in 1986–1994, and in particular with the Armenian terrorist organisation, the ASALA, which had attacked Turkish targets around the world between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. Although the ceasefire agreement has been in place in Karabakh since 1994 and Armenians are no longer carrying out attacks on Azerbaijani territory, people have still not forgotten the two terrorist attacks on the Baku metro that caused hundreds of casualties, the explosions on buses, ferries, and so on. Immediately after the terrorist attacks on 11 September there were even reports of volunteers enlisting to fight against the Taliban. But most importantly, the Azerbaijani leadership granted the US Air Force the right to fly through Azerbaijani airspace and offered use of their aerodromes and other military sites. At the same time the need for a NATO base in the country and for closer military integration into Western structures began to be openly discussed in Azerbaijan. At the present time this policy is starting to be realised. For one thing, the Azerbaijani Army has accelerated its transition towards Western military standards under the leadership of Turkish military instructors. For another, US military specialists have started to arrive regularly in the country, and they too are giving every assistance to the Azerbaijani army.

At present, defence expenditure is continuously rising. According to official data, \$74m

⁵⁹ Skosyrev V, 'Azerbaidzhan gotov poslat' mirotvortsev v Kosovo', *Izvestiya*, 27 March 1999.

was spent on defence in 1997, which accounted for 10 percent of the budget. In the following year, defence expenditure rose to \$79m, or 11 percent of the state budget. The year after, \$99m was officially spent on defence, almost 12 percent of the budget. After this, defence expenditure continued to rise, growing to \$101m in 2000, and \$112m, or almost 13 percent of the budget in 2001 – about the same as was spent on social security and half the amount spent on education.⁶⁰ An even larger figure, of almost \$126m, has been earmarked for 2002. It should be noted that 12–13 percent of the budget is being spent on defence, which is a significant amount in itself. Yet considering the state of modern Azerbaijan, these official figures do not seem credible. Figures from the International Institute for Strategic Studies put defence expenditure somewhat higher: from \$130m in 1996, it reached \$193m in 1998, \$203m in 1999, and \$217m in 2000.⁶¹

Current security actors

There are currently about 72,000 men in the Azerbaijani armed forces, which subdivides into ground forces (about 62,000 men), the air force (7,900), and the navy (2,200). On the staff of the MOI there are about 10,000 police officers, and another 5,000 serving in the border guards. If necessary, about 576,000 reservists can be called up into the ranks of the army and other security structures.⁶² Such calculations put the number currently serving in Azerbaijan at more than 87,000 people. However according to local experts, there are actually more people in the NAA ranks, at least 110,000. There are also more weapons and more military equipment than is permitted under the 1992 Tashkent Agreement. Because this agreement places strict limits on Azerbaijan's ceiling of both servicemen and military equipment and weaponry, Azerbaijan has had to conceal the real figures. Yet Azerbaijan needs to maintain larger forces because it is at war with Armenia, which although it is also required by agreements to have similarly limited soldiers, keeps a significant proportion of its forces and weapons on occupied Azerbaijani territory.

In any case, the only forces in Azerbaijan belong to the MOD, MOI, and other security structures – there are not currently any troops that are not under governmental control. Correspondingly, all existing weaponry and materiel has been taken into account. It is not currently possible to place everything currently available in Azerbaijan under complete control. As our research shows, particularly in the zone of the Karabakh conflict, SALW periodically fell into the hands of the general population, which is the hardest to account for. This is particularly true of pistols and revolvers.

At the moment there are no parties or other political structures possessing even covert paramilitary units. Admittedly, since 1998 there have been more and more frequent reports in the press suggesting that alongside the official, existing Presidential Guard, the government is secretly creating or already possesses unofficial armed groups whose tasks include the destruction of the political enemies of the regime if it proves necessary. The first time reports about such groups appeared was during the events of March 1995, when alongside NAA servicemen and other security forces, a certain number of plain-clothed armed personnel appeared on the streets of Baku, ready to take part in action if necessary. The next time these groups were mentioned was after opposition meetings in 1998 and 2000, when plain-clothed personnel, admittedly unarmed, took part in breaking up meetings and beating up those who were present, trying in particular to attack the leaders of the opposition party. These groups, who had become known to the public as the 'Nakhichevan *spetsnaz*', came to the forefront again in early June 2002, when a conflict broke out between residents of Nardaran (a small town near Baku) and the government. With the MOI and internal troops appearing powerless, the government sent the 'Nakhichevan *spetsnaz*' into the neighbouring village of Shikhovo. Locals estimated that there were between 1,500 and 5,000

⁶⁰ Ekho, 5 June 2002.

⁶¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2001/2002*, (London, 2001).

⁶² Ibid.

such troops.⁶³ However, the government resisted using these forces again against the residents of Nardaran, and thus nothing more was learnt about the ‘Nakhichevan *spetsnaz*’. Indeed, given the lack of more precise information, it is impossible to say anything concrete about these groups at all.

Since the start of the Russian-Chechen war, however, and particularly since the second war began in September 1999, the arrival in Azerbaijan of Chechen refugees – 10,000 by mid-2001 – has provided an additional source for the procurement of SALW. The overwhelming majority of these refugees are women, children, and old men, but a small proportion are armed fighters, and some still have weapons when they arrive in Azerbaijan. At present at least half the Wahhabis⁶⁴ in Azerbaijan are Chechen, but the number of Azerbaijanis is rising by the day. Thus the influx of Chechen refugees has worsened the criminal situation in the country.

At the end of the 1990s, for a number of reasons, the influence of radical pro-Islamic organisations in Azerbaijan increased. Some of them were linked to Iran (*Vilayati Al-Fagikh Hezbollah*, *Jeyshullah* and the Islamic Party), which provided arms and equipment, including SALW. Others were linked to Arab countries, among them the ‘Egyptian Islamic Jihad’, and also *Hizb-ut Tahrir al-Islami*. The Azerbaijani government recognised the increasing threat in good time and began fighting Islamic terrorism. From 1998 to 2002 the media has constantly reported announcements from the Azerbaijan Ministry for National Security of arrests and trials of members of these radical Islamic organisations.

Conclusions and recommendations

Since the start of the Karabakh conflict and the collapse of the USSR the problem of SALW proliferation in Azerbaijan has passed through several stages. During the first stage (1988–91), the Azerbaijani authorities, then completely oriented towards Moscow, did not allow the creation of private armed forces. Accordingly, all attempts by the population and by opposition forces to procure weapons, including SALW, were somewhat chaotic. There was no single centre where weapons could be procured or stored, nor any office to co-ordinate registration and legal usage. In this period the people and the opposition forces acquired arms by collecting old weapons from the general population, seizures from the police and other state services possessing weapons, and also from Soviet Army units. However, the authorities and the military leadership largely succeeded in preventing the population gaining access to weaponry. The general population was nevertheless in possession of several thousand units of SALW, mostly obsolete.

After nationalist forces came to power in Azerbaijan in 1992, the situation changed fundamentally. On the one hand, all power was now in the hands of the Azerbaijani leadership, which took control of the arms procurement process. This proved rather difficult, however, given the state of war with Armenia and the political chaos of 1993–95. A certain quantity of arms, mostly SALW, did find their way into the hands of the population. Political parties (the APF, the National Democratic Party, the Social Democrats, ‘Bozqurd’) or particular individuals (such as Huseynov) even had their own military or paramilitary groups.

In 1995 the political situation in Azerbaijan began to stabilise. All military and paramilitary structures not under governmental control ceased to exist. Arms proliferation was kept under appropriately tight control. There was even some success in collecting weapons that had been in the possession of the general population.

⁶³ *Ekho*, 6 June 2002.

⁶⁴ Wahhabism is a name given to an extreme Islamic ideology that originated in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism is not restricted to the Caucasus and thrives throughout the world.

At the same time, however, it was not possible to completely cut off the channels through which arms, and particularly SALW, were sold, especially along the frontline. In addition, the process of constructing appropriate state institutions, with defence and security forces in the form of the MOD, the MOI and the Ministry of National Security, is still in its early stages.

It is not to the government's credit that a great number of infringements of the law are perpetrated by the government itself, particularly in the way that opposition demonstrations are broken up. The belief still prevails that problems can be solved by force alone, and this could have grave consequences in the future.

Finally, Azerbaijan is situated at the epicentre of the geopolitical confrontation between East and West and the effectiveness of government actions in the fight against various types of terrorist organisations is at present crucial.

The problem of small arms proliferation in Azerbaijan and the related rise in crime in the country are to a large extent linked to two factors. The process of building a genuinely independent national state is continuing, yet has to take place against the background of an ongoing war with Armenia.

In order to solve these problems the following steps are necessary:

- Azerbaijan should be helped to further continue the process of building an independent national state. It must be taken into account that for several reasons Azerbaijan is at the epicentre of a conflict of interests between the regional powers (the USA, Russia, Iran and Turkey). Hence Azerbaijan should be helped to avoid the presence of all foreign forces on its land. At the current stage this refers to the Russian military base at Qabala. The creation of new bases, including NATO bases, will not guarantee security, and could in fact become a source of new conflicts.
- The process of building a national state is impossible without the democratisation and placing under civilian control of all defence and security structures.
- As quickly as possible the conflict with Armenia should be settled and a compromise should be reached on the Karabakh question. If this were to happen, a large-scale demilitarisation of the region could be initiated.
- Assistance should be provided to state structures in their fight against terrorist organisations, which are becoming a new source of destabilisation.

About the author

Arif Yunusov graduated from the History Department of Baku University, then worked for almost 20 years (1973–1992) in the History Institute at the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, and completed his doctorate on the 'History of Military Operations in Azerbaijan in the Middle Ages' in 1986. After the outbreak of the Karabakh conflict in 1988, he participated in many negotiation processes as a military expert. In 1992–93 he was head of the Information and Analysis Department of the Press Service of the Office of the President of Azerbaijan. From 1993 to 1997 he represented Caritas, an international humanitarian organisation, which has been working to help refugees in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Since 1997 he has been head of the Department of Conflict and Migration Studies at the Institute of Peace and Democracy. He has published almost 200 articles on issues such as conflict in the Caucasus, national minorities, refugees, migration and regional security, and has written two books.

Saferworld's research project on arms and security in the Caucasus

This chapter is part of a wider Saferworld report, entitled *The Caucasus: Armed and Divided – Small arms and light weapons proliferation and humanitarian consequences in the Caucasus*, which collects together case studies from local experts on the situation in their particular geographical region. The report focuses on the conflicts in the region, the relationship between conflict and levels of arms possession, and the effects of small arms proliferation since the break-up of the Soviet Union. It also includes a chapter on Russia's policy towards the small arms issues in the Caucasus.

To obtain a copy of the complete report, please contact Saferworld at: general@saferworld.org.uk or visit www.saferworld.org.uk