

Liberated Karabakh

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Our “Great Return” to Aghdam, the Hiroshima of the South Caucasus

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The city of Aghdam was established in 1828, although people have lived there for thousands of years.¹ In fact, Aghdam is one of the oldest settlements in Azerbaijan: in a settlement called Uzerlik Tepe (Harmal Hill), there are traces of life belonging to the Middle Bronze Age period. Aghdam is located in the center of Karabakh, on the western part of the Kur-Araz lowland. The area of the region is 1,150 square kilometers.² During the First Karabakh War, 709 square kilometers of the region was occupied by Armenian military forces. Before the First Karabakh War, Aghdam was one of the key cities in Azerbaijan in terms of its population, workforce, economy, and infrastructure.

In fact, Aghdam was one of the most populated regions of Azerbaijan. Before the Armenian occupation, 158,000 people lived in the city and its surrounding villages.³ As a result of Armenian aggression, more than 143,000 people became internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 1993.⁴ The city itself, which was completely destroyed, was home to more than 32,000 people prior to the war. During the war, Aghdam was the region with the highest number of martyrs: nearly 6,000 people became martyrs for the motherland.⁵ The number of prewar residents and postwar IDPs demonstrates the tragic consequences of the atrocities committed by the Armenians during the First Karabakh War.

With great sadness we must begin from the fact that Armenian vandals destroyed every building in Aghdam city throughout the occupation years. The only building that somehow survived was the Juma Mosque, and the reason behind it was that its minarets were used for military purposes by Armenian soldiers. The occupiers not only demolished the buildings, but they also insulted our religious beliefs and our cultural and historical heritage. The very existence of the city became an Armenian target: the aim was to erase the legacy of Azerbaijanis in Aghdam and to effectually render our return impossible. This is crystal clear when we gaze upon the completely destroyed mosques, the Khan's Palace, and the various museums where they kept pigs, sheep, and other animals.

ECONOMY

Aghdam is located at the intersection of major trade routes, in the center of Azerbaijan, and is one of the country's oldest settlements. All these factors resulted in Aghdam's economic prosperity: imagine, then, a city with nearly 20 industrial enterprises that were destroyed.⁶ The impact of this war on the economy of Azerbaijan back in those days was thus extremely high. Factories were operating in several industries such as food processing, construction materials, textile, mechanical engineering, even the aerospace industry. Aghdam was the economic center of the entire Karabakh region. Of course, one of the key objectives of rebuilding Aghdam after the liberation is to recover its status as an economic center of Karabakh. To that end, Aghdam is now part of the Karabakh Economic Region, which was established on 7 July 2021 by a decree signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.⁷

Aghdam was the backbone of Karabakh's economy. Before the occupation, it played host to 17 industrial, 31 construction, 753 trade, 397 public catering, and 220 household enterprises. Those numbers show the advanced stage and competitiveness of Aghdam's economy. The agricultural sector was one of the core industries of the region. The main tendencies in agriculture were viticulture, cotton-growing, grain-growing, and cattle-breeding. The average area of wheat, cotton fields, and vineyards in the 1980s were 7,660 hectares; 7,565 hectares; and 13,042 hectares,

respectively.⁸ Moreover, the residents of Aghdam had demonstrated proficiency in various kinds of entrepreneurial skills. A lot of small- and medium-sized enterprises had been established before the onset of the Armenian occupation during the First Karabakh War. All told, Aghdam's prewar economy was characterized by its diversity, as there existed various types of meat-processing, dairy-processing, silk, carpet, wine production, cannery, and machine-tool construction factories.

CULTURE AND LANDMARKS

Aghdam also has a wealthy cultural heritage. There are many historical and cultural monuments, palaces, and tombs located there. As stated above, the city was one of Azerbaijan's ancient settlements. This factor affected the Aghdam's cultural and historical legacy. Residents there had a special commitment to, and interest in, the arts and culture, which was made possible by the existence of a drama theater, a museum of local lore, 71 libraries, and 13 houses of culture.⁹

Mugham celebrations, carpet weaving activities, the Khari-Bulbul Music Festival, painting with national ornaments workshops, and the sewing national costumes were all parts of city's culture. So were public poetry readings, inspired no doubt by the life of the daughter of the last Karabakh khan, Mehtikuli-khan, Khurshidbanu Natavan, a famous Azerbaijan poetess who lived and wrote in Aghdam.

Moreover, Aghdam is very famous for its landmarks. The most famous is Imarat, a palace complex that was built in the historical center of the city by Panah Ali Khan, the founder of the Karabakh Khanate and the builder of the Shusha fortress. Even the name "Aghdam," which can be translated as "White Roof," is related to the architectural style of this palace building. Aghdam is famous for its white stone, and the roof of Imarat was constructed from such stones. Later, the residents of Aghdam likewise begun to build their houses in this manner, with white roofs. Thus, this architectural style contributed to the formation of the city's name. Panah Ali Khan and some members of his dynasty were also buried in Imarat, a complex marked by the building of culturally significant tombs. However, during occupation years, our hateful neighbors kept pigs and sheep in Imarat, and the tombs

were heavily damaged or destroyed. After the liberation, seven truckloads of animal droppings had to be removed from this historical palace complex. Even Khurshidbanu Natavan's tomb and the adjacent monument, which were located there, had been totally destroyed, and her remains had been removed by the occupiers.

Another famous landmark is the Juma Mosque, which was built in 1868 in a particular architectural style characteristic of Karabakh by Karbalai Safikhan Karabakhi. One can see different mosques in the same style in other parts of Karabakh, such as the Yukhari Govher Aga and Ashaghi Govher Aga mosques in Shusha, the Imamzada complex in Barda (itself modeled after the one in Ganja): they all share a style with the Juma Mosque.

Juma was not the only mosque in Aghdam. Another one, which was built in the seventeenth century, is the Giyasli Mosque. As a result of Armenian vandalism, however, its existence has been entirely erased: only parts of its outer walls now remain.

Panah Ali Khan also built the Shahbulag fortress in Aghdam for defensive purposes. Although he later moved to Shusha, the military significance of the Shahbulag fortress did not decrease, for it is surrounded by mountains from three sides, making it a strategically significant building at that time.

Overall, Aghdam is full of historical buildings, mosques, tombs, and monuments. Unfortunately, during the period of Armenian occupation, most of these were destroyed, burnt, or used as pigsties or cowsheds. These actions were done on purpose and were aimed at erasing the historical and cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people.

THE OCCUPATION PERIOD (1993-2020)

Today Aghdam is one of the most damaged cities in Azerbaijan due to the war, perhaps the most damaged. During the First Karabakh War, Aghdam gave nearly 6,000 martyrs, the highest number amongst the occupied regions. Also, 3,531 inhabitants became disabled, and 1,871 children were orphaned.¹⁰ In the occupation years, the highest level of destruction took place in Aghdam. As a city, it stood completely ruined at the moment of

liberation: as one scholar has written, Aghdam represents Azerbaijan's largest urban tragedy of the First Karabakh War. This builds on the image of Aghdam as the Hiroshima of the South Caucasus. Only one building was not eradicated; the Juma Mosque. As stated above, the reason why the Armenians did not totally demolish the mosque is that they used its minarets as military observation points—yet another form of desecration.

In the wake of the liberation, we conducted a detailed survey of the damage—of the destruction and losses incurred during the occupation. The results are as follows: villages and settlements: 122; dwelling houses: 24,446; industrial and construction establishments: 48; service establishments: 1,317; schools: 160; healthcare facilities: 65; cultural establishments: 373; theatres and museums: 3; and mosques: 3.¹¹

The pillaging of Aghdam's natural resources constitute another category of loss incurred in the region during the occupation. Aghdam is very famous for its construction materials, especially its sawn stone, limestone, gravel, and clay deposits. Between 1993 and 2020, the Armenians occupiers illegally utilized these resources. Moreover, construction materials are not the only natural resources that were used unlawfully and plundered during the occupation. More than 3,000 hectares of forest were severely damaged as a result of Armenian atrocities. There were 85 plane trees in Aghdam that were more than 1,000 years old, of which 82 were cut down and destroyed—a significant natural loss.¹²

As it is evident from the statistics provided above, the loss of the region in terms of human capital, infrastructure, natural resources, and pollution is enormous.

POST-LIBERATION PERIOD (2020-)

After 30 years of occupation, Azerbaijan liberated Karabakh thanks to the purposeful and sagacious domestic and foreign policy strategy of our Victorious Commander-in-Chief, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, as well as the bravery of the soldiers and officers of the victorious Azerbaijani Army that had been able to undergo a progressive development path. On the battlefield, the Azerbaijani Army

showed such courage that on the 44th day of the war, the defeated enemy was forced to sign a tripartite statement. According to the terms of this statement, Aghdam was liberated on 20 November 2020.

President Aliyev subsequently stated that we will turn Karabakh into a paradise. As his Special Representation in the liberated parts of Aghdam, I have no doubt as to the veracity of his words. My team and I believe that Aghdam will become the center of this paradise. On 28 May 2021, President Aliyev visited Aghdam, where the city's master plan was presented to him. On that date, various groundbreaking ceremonies took place, involving the start of construction of the Barda-Aghdam highway, 125 hectares of a strip of forest surrounding the urban core of the city, the first residential building and school, an industrial zone, the open sky Occupation and Liberation Museum, and the city's Central Square.

Every detail was taken into consideration in drawing up the city's master plan. We analyzed the best practices from various cities around the world regarding housing, infrastructure allocation, communication lines, the location of social facilities, and road-transport infrastructure. We are determined to build a city in which all residents will have accessibility, comfort, and a plethora of employment opportunities. We have planned for the city to become a residence for 100,000 people. This number will make Aghdam the fourth-largest city in Azerbaijan in terms of population.

The city itself will be built on an area of 1,750 hectares, with a surrounding suburban forest strip of 2,450 hectares. We envision Aghdam becoming a green city, so there will be four large and 23 city parks. The total area of parks will be 344 hectares. There will be at least one city park within a 400 meters radius of every residential building. Like the green zones, schools and kindergartens also will be accessible for the city's residents: the plans call for one school or kindergarten to be located within a 500 meters radius of every residential building.

The designs for Aghdam are intended to promote a healthy lifestyle for the resettled population whilst at the same time minimizing environmental pollution. In the city's transportation strategy, for example, pedestrian movement was taken as a priority. We want to encourage people to walk more and to use private cars less. Of course, we will have roads that meet contemporary global standards: the width

of streets will be between 20 and 60 meters, and so on; however, core transportation forms will be cycling and public transportation. Special, fully electric, zero-emission trams will operate in the city; additionally, there will be 79 kilometers of bicycle paths.

We plan to build multistorey residential buildings and private houses. For now, only the master plan of the city has been approved, so the specific designs of these buildings have not yet been finalized. However, the contours have been established: Aghdam will feature 1-2 story private houses, and 3-16 story residential buildings, and 1-2 story non-residential buildings. These buildings will be built around a canal that will run through the city center. All in all, we believe that such plans will lead to growth of the city's tourism prospects in the future.

Of course, the aforementioned construction and reconstruction works are not enough for people to move back into the city. There should be workplaces for people so they can return and live prosperous lives. Taking this into account, we will build a very large industrial zone in Aghdam, where thousands of people will be able to work. This industrial zone will be located close to the city center and its transportation hub. We will do our best to establish favorable conditions for people to be gainfully employed or to start their own businesses. Thus, the planned industrial zone will be sectioned into several quarters: a construction material zone, a technical zone, a SME zone, and a food processing zone. The city's residents will be exempt from various taxes and customs duties for a period of 7 to 10 years.

However, we neither can nor wish to build a totally new city: we do not want to start from scratch. We intend to preserve as much of our cultural and historical heritage whilst building up a new city: restoration, conservation, and the rebuilding of cultural and historical monuments in Aghdam is one of our core targets. Throughout the occupation period, most of the cultural and historical legacies of Aghdam were either vandalized or destroyed. In my capacity as Special Representation of the President in Aghdam, my team and I have ensured that sufficient resources will be devoted to prioritizing the restoration and preservation of our monuments, tombs, and mosques. Of course, this will take some time, because it is necessary to work very carefully on those buildings so that the legacy of history and culture of Aghdam is not further demolished.

Moreover, we will build an open sky Occupation and Victory Museum Complex. The main aim of this museum will be to show the bitter consequences of the war whilst conveying a message of peace to the general public. The complex will consist of several parts. Here we can mention two of the most important. The first of these will be the Museum of Occupation. There will be several rooms where video footage of the occupation will be shown, and other forms of information will be provided. There will even be a room in which the environmental controls will be set to wintertime, so that visitors can experience the sort of suffering our ethnically-cleansed compatriots from Khojaly underwent during their travails. A second museum within the Complex will be the Museum of Victory, which will be made of iron and glass. The glass will show the transparency of our victory and the iron will demonstrate the “Iron Fist” operation. Third, there will be a path from the Museum of Occupation to the Museum of Victory, which will take visitors through the city’s ruins. We will not do a reconstruction process on that part of the city so that the visitors will be able to see firsthand the evidence of Armenian vandalism; this will represent an opportunity for the world to be provided with a very open message about the consequences of the Armenian occupation upon the city and its inhabitants.

THE GREAT RETURN

We want the reconstruction process of Aghdam to be science-based and to be supported by the academic community. We believe that scientists and academics can make a considerable contribution to the rebuilding process of the city’s economy.

To that end, in mid-September 2021 we organized an inaugural scientific conference in liberated Aghdam under the moniker “Building A New Economy in Karabakh: Development Impulses from Aghdam.” Leading Azerbaijani scientists and academics, including several ADA University faculty members, took part by preparing conference papers and providing concrete suggestions to ensure prosperity and economic flow in Aghdam. International guests were also invited to join, as a result of which their views on future plans and goals were able to be shared with our planners and experts. There were foreign guests from Belgium, Switzerland, Turkey,

and the United States. More than 100 academic papers were submitted—evidence of considerable interest in the reconstructions process that demonstrated our desire for the scientific and academic community to be a part of the rebuilding program. The event was organized by the Special Representation of the President in Aghdam, with the support of the Karabakh Revival Fund, the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Azerbaijan National Academy of Science. Participants also had a chance to receive a congratulation letter from the First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Mehriban Aliyeva, which were presented during the conference.

My most crucial task—in my capacity as Special Representation of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the liberated part of the Aghdam district—is to rebuild the city and create favorable conditions for people from Aghdam to return and prosper. We call this process “The Great Return,” which consist of different stages. I can say with great pride that the execution of one of these stages has already begun, which we have termed the “Our Way to Aghdam.” Beginning on 5 September 2021, we have hosted groups of former Aghdam residents to fulfill their hopes to return to their sorely missed yet never-forgotten city. Weekly tours of busloads provide IDPs a long-awaited opportunity to walk the streets of their childhood and see firsthand the devastation of the Armenian occupation. Even the youngest Azerbaijanis—those who never had the chance to grow up in Aghdam—now dream of coming back to see what has been forever ours: to feel the power of our soldiers and remember the thousands of lives sacrificed for the freedom of Karabakh. Although some people left Aghdam when they were children, they still remember where they used to play under a peaceful sky just prior to the Armenian invasion of Karabakh. Now those children are elders who still cannot hold back the tears when returning to Aghdam.

More than anything else, “Our Way to Aghdam” drives my work as Special Representative of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the liberated part of Aghdam district. My team and I have rededicated our efforts to do everything possible to build a more beautiful and stronger Aghdam; and in so doing, wipe away the tears of our people, remove the stain of a brutal occupation, and ensure a sustainable future for all who will return to a great city in the heart of Azerbaijan.

NOTES

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