

HOSTAGES OF INJUSTICE

**Genocide, Political Repression, and the Plight of
Armenian Hostages from Nagorno-Karabakh.**

Azerbaijan's Judiciary and the Failure of Justice.

Advocacy Report

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Table of Contents

1. Summary	3
2. The Importance of the Report	4
3. Introduction	5
4. Historical and Legal Context	7
• 4.1 Historical Evolution of Azerbaijan’s Judiciary	7
• 4.2 Legal Framework and International Obligations	7
5. Systemic Issues in Azerbaijan’s Judiciary	8
• 5.1 Lack of Judicial Independence	8
• 5.2 Corruption and Nepotism	9
• 5.3 Political Prosecutions and Due Process Violations	10
• 5.3.1 Political Opposition	10
• 5.3.2 Activists (Including Climate and Human Rights)	10
• 5.3.3 Journalists and Media Outlets	12
• 5.3.4 Academics, Researchers, and Students in Azerbaijan	14
• 5.3.5 Ethnic Minorities in Azerbaijan	15
• 5.4 Lack of Due Process	16
6. The 23 Armenian Hostages in Azerbaijan	18
• 6.1 Historical Context: In the Run-Up to COP29	18
• 6.2 Weaponizing Azerbaijan Judiciary	19
• 6.2.1 Lack of Due Process	20
• 6.2.2 Fabricated Charges and Lack of Evidence	20
• 6.2.3 Coerced Confessions Under Torture	21
• 6.2.4 Lack of Transparency in Trials	21
• 6.2.5 Denial of Legal Representation	21
• 6.2.6 Expedited and Pre-Determined Verdicts	22
• 6.2.7 Denial of the Right to Contact Family and Access to Clergy	22
7. International Condemnation and Calls to Release Armenian Hostages	22
8. Conclusion	23
Appendix: Profiles of the 23 Armenian Detainees	25
9. References	30
10. Bibliography	37

1. Summary

In 2025, a series of court trials are set to take place in Baku, Azerbaijan, targeting 23 Armenians detained by the regime after the forced deportation of 120,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. This report contends, first, that these “show trials” and their resulting verdicts are orchestrated to criminalize Armenians and legitimize their persecution. Second, it asserts that Azerbaijan’s judiciary is deeply compromised, operating as an instrument of the regime in Baku to suppress political opposition and minority groups, thereby further eroding the rule of law, and flagrantly violating international human rights standards.

The 23 Armenian hostages currently held in Azerbaijani jails are victims of an ongoing genocide, not terrorists. Their detention follows the systematic persecution and forced displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, actions that align with the legal definition of genocide as outlined in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Méndez, 2023). These individuals have been falsely accused and labelled as terrorists to delegitimize their suffering and deflect international attention from Azerbaijan’s deliberate policy of erasing Armenian presence and heritage in the region. Far from being combatants or threats, they are civilians and democratically elected leaders who were targeted precisely because of their Armenian identity. By criminalizing them, Azerbaijan seeks to obscure its genocidal actions and justify its broader campaign of ethnic cleansing and cultural erasure.

Azerbaijan’s judiciary system is plagued by political interference, systemic corruption, and violations of international legal norms. Despite constitutional guarantees of judicial independence, the system operates under substantial political influence from the executive branch, resulting in politically motivated prosecutions and widespread corruption (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Judges are often expected to align their rulings with government interests, and many cases involving political opposition, journalists, and activists demonstrate how the judicial system is manipulated to serve the interests of the ruling elite (Amnesty International, 2022). Moreover, Azerbaijan’s judiciary has consistently been used as a tool to suppress ethnic minorities, targeting communities such as the Lezgins, Talysh, and Armenians under the guise of fabricated charges (Duty to Prevent, 2021). Among those affected are 23 Armenian hostages, including civilians and former leaders from Nagorno-Karabakh, detained on fabricated charges such as terrorism and genocide (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In this report the use of the term “hostages” emphasizes the unlawful and coercive nature of their detention, highlighting that these individuals are being held not for legitimate judicial purposes, but as pawns in a political and power-driven agenda. Using “hostages” underscores the violation of international law, including the Geneva Conventions, and calls attention to human rights abuses and the broader context of using innocent lives as leverage in geopolitical conflicts. It also reflects the deliberate denial of due process and the inhumane treatment they endure, which are antithetical to the principles of justice and humanity.

The country's commitment to international legal obligations, particularly under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), has been repeatedly called into question due to Azerbaijan's failure to uphold the right to a fair trial, due process, and freedom of expression (European Court of Human Rights, 2022). Notably, Azerbaijan continues to imprison individuals based on politically motivated charges, and court rulings often lack transparency or fail to meet basic fair trial standards (Freedom House, 2023). The lack of judicial independence and the pervasive corruption within the judiciary undermines the rule of law, while the executive uses the judiciary as a tool of political suppression (Netherlands Helsinki Committee, 2016).

This report addresses these critical issues in the judiciary system, presents case studies, and evaluates Azerbaijan's compliance with international human rights standards. It outlines the political interference that affects judicial outcomes and provides an analysis of the corruption and due process violations that characterize the legal system.

This report argues that the detention and legal prosecution of 23 Armenian hostages illegally detained by the Azerbaijani regime constitutes the genocidal intentions of the regime sending a clear message to Armenians that, if returned, they will face arrest and prosecution.

2. Importance of the Report

The ongoing and upcoming trials of 23 Armenian hostages held by Azerbaijan's regime demand urgent global attention. Conducted under a judicial system marred by corruption and political interference, these cases are emblematic of a broader pattern of systemic human rights violations. This report seeks to equip activists, journalists, and policymakers with a comprehensive understanding of these injustices, empowering them to advocate for the unconditional release of detainees and hold Azerbaijan accountable on the international stage.

Azerbaijan's judiciary, deeply compromised by political influence, undermines the rule of law, and violates fundamental human rights. Weaponized to suppress dissent, target ethnic minorities, and advance the regime's objectives, it flagrantly disregards Azerbaijan's obligations under international treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Geneva Conventions.

The detainees—many subjected to torture, coerced confessions, and inhumane conditions—face fabricated charges under a judiciary devoid of transparency and impartiality. Shedding light on these abuses is critical not only to securing justice for these individuals but also to exposing the broader implications of Azerbaijan's actions for international law and human rights.

This report is a call to action. It provides evidence for activists to mobilize grassroots campaigns, for journalists to expose these abuses, and for politicians and diplomats to pressure Azerbaijan through international forums. Its goal is the unconditional release of Armenian

hostages and over 300 political prisoners of various nationalities, as well as holding those responsible for their mistreatment accountable.

Azerbaijan's continued failure to uphold international human rights standards not only tarnishes its reputation but also undermines its legitimacy on the global stage. As the country seeks to position itself as a global actor, hosting events such as COP29, heightened scrutiny of its human rights record is both necessary and inevitable. Justice and accountability must remain at the forefront of international engagement with Azerbaijan.

The plight of these 23 Armenian hostages is an urgent moral and legal concern. This report underscores that human rights and the rule of law cannot be compromised. Justice must prevail, and the international community must stand firm in demanding accountability and the immediate release of these detainees.

3. Introduction

In September 2023, Azerbaijan's actions mirrored those of past atrocities. For nine months, the Azerbaijani government imposed a blockade, depriving Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh of their basic human rights, and eventually subjected them to bombardments. This culminated in the incarceration of their leaders—tactics reminiscent of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The arrests and executions of April 24, 1915, mark the symbolic beginning of the Armenian Genocide. On that day, Ottoman authorities arrested approximately 250 Armenian intellectuals, political leaders, clergy, and prominent figures in Constantinople. Over the following weeks, the number rose to around 600–800 individuals. Most were executed or died from maltreatment, effectively decapitating the Armenian leadership, and leaving the community vulnerable to systematic extermination (International Association of Genocide Scholars, n.d.).

In just a few days in September 2023, fearing the threat of mass killings, over 120,000 ethnic Armenians were forcibly deported from Nagorno-Karabakh, abandoning their homes, belongings, churches, monasteries, graves, and their entire lives. On October 30, 2023, Juan Méndez, the first UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, stated:

“The decision to leave—caused by the attack but also by the nine months of deprivation of food and medicine—exposed the serious mental harm produced in all ethnic Armenians by the official policy and practice of Azerbaijan, which fits the definition of the genocidal act contemplated in Article 2(b) of the [Genocide] Convention: causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” (Méndez, 2023).

Among the victims of these atrocities are 23 individuals—including three former presidents and five other community leaders—detained by Azerbaijan. Their imprisonment represents a continuation of genocidal practices, sending a clear message to the Armenian community: returning to Nagorno-Karabakh means facing starvation, incarceration, or death.

As Méndez emphasized, “the arrest of the leadership of the community is a factor that must be considered as one of the leading causes” of the mass deportation and genocide. Azerbaijan has attempted to reframe these actions as counterterrorism measures, obscuring their genocidal intent (Méndez, 2023).

The UN Charter and subsequent international legal instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), recognize self-determination as a fundamental collective right. This principle includes the right to choose a form of government within an existing state (internal self-determination), as outlined in Articles 73(b) and 76(b) of the UN Charter. Historically, this framework has been essential for decolonization efforts while balancing territorial integrity (UN Charter, Articles 73(b) and 76(b); Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.).

Although the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide has raised alarms about the “risk of genocide and related atrocity crimes” committed by Azerbaijan against Armenians, the lack of independence within Azerbaijan’s judiciary severely undermines any realistic prospect of justice or the release of Armenian prisoners. This situation renders the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh victims of genocidal acts and hostages of the Aliyev regime.

The 2023 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report on Azerbaijan further highlights severe human rights abuses, documenting: “harsh and sometimes life-threatening prison conditions, arbitrary detention, and serious problems with the independence of the judiciary” (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Azerbaijan’s judiciary is tasked with ensuring the fair application of laws and safeguarding rights. However, the country’s judiciary has long been criticized for its lack of independence, political manipulation, and corruption. This report aims to explore the systemic issues facing Azerbaijan’s judicial system, focusing on key concerns such as:

- The lack of judicial independence and the influence of the executive branch.
- Corruption and nepotism within the judiciary and the lack of transparency.
- Political prosecutions of opposition leaders, journalists, activists, and ethnic minority leaders.
- Violations of due process and the right to a fair trial.

This report also examines Azerbaijan’s compliance with its international obligations, particularly those under the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

4. Historical and Legal Context

4.1. Historical Evolution of Azerbaijan's Judiciary

Azerbaijan's judicial system has its roots in the Soviet legal tradition, which was characterized by the subordination of the judiciary to the ruling party. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan attempted to modernize its legal system, but it has struggled to establish an independent judiciary. Over the years, the judiciary has become increasingly controlled by the executive branch, with political interference in judicial appointments and rulings.

In 2000, the Azerbaijani government established the Judicial Legal Council, an entity meant to oversee judicial appointments and maintain independence. However, despite these reforms, the judiciary remains subject to significant political influence, as the executive branch has retained control over the appointment and removal of judges. This has led to widespread concerns about the lack of judicial independence and the corruption that has permeated the legal system.

4.2. Legal Framework and International Obligations

Azerbaijan's Constitution guarantees the independence of the judiciary, stating that judges should be appointed based on merit and should make their decisions according to the law, free from external influences. Despite these constitutional protections, the judiciary is widely viewed as controlled by the executive branch, and judicial independence is often compromised. Azerbaijan is also a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), all of which require the country to ensure fair trials, prevent torture, and protect the right to liberty and freedom of expression.

However, Azerbaijan's track record in fulfilling its international obligations has been widely criticized. Numerous rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) have found Azerbaijan in violation of its obligations, particularly in cases involving political prisoners, arbitrary detention, and the right to a fair trial. These violations are compounded by Azerbaijan's failure to uphold principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), including the rights to freedom of expression, protection from arbitrary detention, and equality before the law. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's actions contravene International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as outlined in the Geneva Conventions, particularly regarding the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians during armed conflict. The lack of judicial accountability and pervasive systemic corruption has perpetuated human rights abuses, undermined the rule of law, and further eroded the country's ability to meet its obligations under international treaties and conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture (CAT). These failures highlight Azerbaijan's persistent disregard for international norms and its role in perpetuating a climate of impunity.

5. Systemic Issues in Azerbaijan's Judiciary

5.1. Lack of Judicial Independence

Azerbaijan's judiciary is widely recognized as one of the least independent and most corrupt in the world. International rankings and reports consistently highlight systemic issues undermining its impartiality and credibility. Freedom House classifies Azerbaijan as "Not Free," specifically citing the judiciary's subservience to the executive branch and its inability to function as an independent arbiter of justice (Freedom House, 2023).

The Azerbaijani constitution grants the president significant authority over judicial appointments, ensuring that the judiciary serves political interests rather than the rule of law (Constitution of Azerbaijan, n.d.). President Ilham Aliyev's control over appointments allows him to populate the judiciary with loyalists. The Council of Europe's Venice Commission has expressed concerns about the lack of transparency in Azerbaijan's judiciary, emphasizing that it renders the system vulnerable to executive interference. In its 2015 report, the Commission noted that "the institutional set-up grants particularly strong powers to the President and members of the executive, who exercise considerable influence on the legislature and the judiciary, including the Prosecutor's Office" (Venice Commission, 2015). This environment lacks transparency and is prone to political favouritism and corruption, undermining the independence of the judiciary. The Commission recommended reforms to enhance transparency and reduce executive influence to strengthen judicial independence in Azerbaijan.

Corruption within Azerbaijan's judiciary compounds its lack of independence. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Azerbaijan as one of the most corrupt countries globally, with a score of just 23 out of 100 (Transparency International, 2023). Bribery is widespread, with favourable verdicts often secured through payments. GAN Integrity and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) have documented this systemic corruption, noting how it erodes public trust and creates a legal environment dictated by wealth and connections rather than justice (GAN Integrity, 2023; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

A stark illustration of political interference in Azerbaijan's judiciary is the 2021 dismissal of Judge Mehriban Suleymanova after she issued a ruling unfavourable to a government-backed entity. This case underscores the climate of fear within the judiciary, where judges risk punishment for decisions that contradict government interests. Such examples highlight how deeply entrenched political loyalty and corruption are in Azerbaijan's judicial appointments.

The judiciary's lack of independence is further evident in politically motivated trials. Human rights defenders Leyla Yunus and Khadija Ismayilova were imprisoned on fabricated charges in proceedings that lacked due process. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch condemned these trials, noting procedural irregularities and the use of coerced confessions as evidence (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Another example of judicial subservience is the Ramil Safarov case. Safarov, who murdered an Armenian soldier during a NATO training session, was extradited to Azerbaijan, where he was

immediately pardoned, promoted, and celebrated. This case demonstrates the judiciary's complicity in advancing nationalist agendas rather than upholding international legal standards (BBC, 2012).

5.2. Corruption and Nepotism

The Azerbaijani judiciary is not only plagued by corruption but also deeply compromised by nepotism. Judicial appointments are heavily influenced by the executive branch, with President Ilham Aliyev personally overseeing the selection of judges for the Constitutional and Supreme Courts. This centralization of power ensures that judicial appointees remain loyal to the regime, prioritizing political interests over impartial adjudication. Family connections and political allegiance often dictate appointments and promotions, further compromising the judiciary's independence (Venice Commission, 2015).

Bribery is endemic in the judiciary, as documented by GAN Integrity and Transparency International. Judges frequently accept payments in exchange for favourable rulings, undermining the rule of law and denying individuals fair access to justice. This culture of corruption fosters a system where financial power determines legal outcomes, eroding public confidence in the judiciary (GAN Integrity, 2023; Transparency International, 2023).

Institutional corruption is perpetuated by a lack of accountability. Judges operate with impunity, protected by ineffective oversight mechanisms. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) highlights how this institutionalized corruption has hollowed out Azerbaijan's legal system, leaving litigants little recourse against unethical practices (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

5.3. Political Prosecutions and Due Process Violations

Azerbaijan's judicial system has been widely criticized for suppressing political opposition, minorities, and dissenting voices. Opposition leaders, journalists, activists, and ethnic minorities who criticize the government often face arbitrary detention, politically motivated charges, and trials that fail to meet international due process standards. The U.S. Department of State (2023) notes that there were "numerous credible reports of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in custody," highlighting concerns about the treatment of political prisoners.

Furthermore, the UN Committee Against Torture (2024) expressed concern over reports of widespread torture and ill-treatment in Azerbaijani detention facilities, particularly against political detainees and ethnic minorities. The Committee noted that these practices persist with little to no accountability for perpetrators, underscoring Azerbaijan's failure to adhere to its obligations under international human rights law (OHCHR, 2024).

These actions are compounded by a judiciary that has been described as functioning as an instrument of the executive branch rather than as an independent arbiter of justice. The European Parliament (2023) urged Azerbaijan to cease practices that undermine judicial independence and to release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience currently

detained. Similarly, the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly (2019) found that Azerbaijan has a systemic problem of political prisoners and called for fundamental reforms to meet its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2019).

5.3.1. Political Opposition

Azerbaijan has a long history of targeting political opposition leaders through arrests, harassment, and judicial persecution. These cases exemplify the regime’s strategy to eliminate dissent and consolidate power under President Ilham Aliyev.

Ilgar Mammadov

Ilgar Mammadov, a leader of the opposition REAL Party, was arrested in 2013 after participating in protests against the government. He was accused of inciting public disorder, despite no evidence linking him to any illegal activities. His detention was widely condemned, the ECHR Judgment in *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan* (2014) emphasized that the applicant’s detention was “not based on reasonable suspicion and was in fact politically motivated, violating Article 5 (right to liberty and security) and Article 18 (limitation on use of restrictions on rights).” Mammadov was sentenced to seven years in prison but was released in 2018 after serving five years (European Court of Human Rights, 2019). His case remains a symbol of the government’s misuse of the judiciary to suppress political opponents.

Ali Kerimli

Ali Kerimli, chairman of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, has faced continuous harassment and restrictions on his political activities. He has been subjected to travel bans, constant surveillance, and the arrest of his supporters. In 2020, Kerimli reported that his bank accounts were frozen, preventing him from funding his party’s activities. Several party members have been arrested on fabricated charges of hooliganism or incitement to violence. Kerimli’s persecution highlights the regime’s determination to cripple the opposition’s ability to organize or operate effectively (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Tofiq Yagublu

Tofiq Yagublu, a senior member of the opposition Musavat Party, has been arrested multiple times on politically motivated charges. In March 2020, he was accused of hooliganism after allegedly assaulting another driver during a staged car accident. Yagublu denied the charges, calling them fabricated. Despite international condemnation, he was sentenced to four years and three months in prison. Following widespread protests and pressure from international organizations, he was released in 2021. His case is emblematic of the judiciary’s role in silencing dissent through fabricated criminal cases (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

5.3.2. Activists (Including Climate and Human Rights)

Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society has targeted activists working on human rights, environmental issues, and government transparency. Repressive actions escalated significantly in the run-up to COP29, held in Baku in November 2024. These individuals often face harassment, imprisonment, and severe restrictions on their activities.

Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunus

Leyla Yunus, a prominent human rights activist and founder of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, was arrested in 2014 alongside her husband, historian Arif Yunus. The couple faced charges of treason, tax evasion, and fraud—allegations widely viewed as politically motivated retaliation for their advocacy work. Leyla was sentenced to 8.5 years in prison, while Arif received a 7-year sentence. Both were released in 2016 due to deteriorating health and international pressure. Their imprisonment underscored Azerbaijan's systematic suppression of human rights defenders (Amnesty International, 2016).

Rasul Jafarov

Rasul Jafarov, a lawyer and founder of the Human Rights Club, was arrested in 2014 on charges of embezzlement, abuse of power, and illegal entrepreneurship. His actual offence was organizing campaigns to document and expose human rights abuses in Azerbaijan. Jafarov's trial was widely criticized by international organizations, and the European Court of Human Rights ruled his detention violated international law (European Court of Human Rights, 2016). He was sentenced to six and a half years in prison but released in 2016 under a presidential pardon after serving nearly two years.

Climate Activism and COP29

In the lead-up to COP29, the Azerbaijani government intensified its repression of environmental activists. **Anar Mammadli**, a well-known advocate for environmental justice and transparency, was arrested in April 2024 on charges of smuggling, widely perceived as a fabricated case designed to suppress dissent ahead of the climate summit. Mammadli's detention highlights the growing risks faced by climate activists in Azerbaijan and the government's efforts to silence critical voices during a key international event (Amnesty International, 2024).

5.3.3. Journalists and Media Outlets

Independent journalism in Azerbaijan is virtually non-existent due to the government's systematic targeting of journalists and media organizations. Defamation laws, fabricated charges, and physical threats are commonly used to silence critical voices.

Khadija Ismayilova

Khadija Ismayilova, an investigative journalist renowned for her reporting on government corruption, particularly concerning President Aliyev's family, was arrested in 2014 on charges

of inciting suicide, later replaced with embezzlement and tax evasion charges. Her arrest was widely perceived as retaliation for her reporting, and the charges were deemed fabricated. Despite the lack of evidence, the court upheld her conviction, showcasing the lack of judicial independence and the judiciary's role in silencing dissent. Ismayilova was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison, prompting international condemnation. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International declared her a prisoner of conscience. She was released in 2016 but remains under a travel ban (Reporters Without Borders, 2016).

Mehman Huseynov

Mehman Huseynov, a prominent blogger and activist, was arrested in 2017 after accusing police of torture. He was sentenced to two years in prison on defamation charges. His arrest was widely condemned as an attempt to silence his anti-corruption investigations targeting high-ranking officials. Huseynov was released in 2019 after international advocacy efforts but continues to be a vocal critic of the regime (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Abzas Media and the Escalation of Media Repression in Azerbaijan in 2024

Abzas Media, an independent Azerbaijani news platform known for its investigative reporting, has faced intense government repression, reflecting broader efforts to silence critical media and stifle dissent. The government's retaliation has escalated significantly, with key personnel arrested on fabricated charges to dismantle the organization.

In November 2023, Ulvi Hasanli, CEO of Abzas Media, was arrested near his home while en route to the airport. Authorities searched his residence and the Abzas Media office, alleging the discovery of €40,000 as evidence of criminal activity. Hasanli was charged under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code for "smuggling by a group of persons" and placed in pre-trial detention. Critics have argued that these charges are baseless and intended to suppress Abzas Media's operations (OCCRP, 2023a).

On the same day, Sevinj Vagifgizi, editor-in-chief of Abzas Media, was detained at Heydar Aliyev International Airport upon her return from Istanbul. Her apartment was searched, and she was charged with the same smuggling allegations as Hasanli. Vagifgizi remains in pre-trial detention despite international calls for her release (OCCRP, 2023b).

Another journalist, Nargiz Absalamova, a key reporter at Abzas Media, was interrogated and formally charged on 30 November 2023, under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code. She was accused of complicity in the alleged smuggling scheme and detained for three months. Absalamova denies the allegations, stating her arrest was retaliation for her investigative reporting on corruption (OCCRP, 2023c).

The targeting of Abzas Media has drawn condemnation from international human rights organizations and media freedom advocates. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Amnesty International described the charges as politically motivated and called for the immediate release of the detained journalists (CPJ, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023).

The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee also expressed concern over the arrests, describing them as indicative of Azerbaijan's deteriorating press freedom. The U.S. State Department issued a statement urging Azerbaijan to uphold press freedom and human rights (EFJ, 2023; US State Department, 2023).

This crackdown on Abzas Media exemplifies Azerbaijan's escalating repression of independent journalism, particularly in the lead-up to elections. The arrests of Hasanli, Vagifgizi, and Absalamova undermine press freedom and serve as a warning to other journalists reporting on corruption and abuses of power. The international community must urgently address these developments, pressuring the Azerbaijani government to release detained journalists, protect independent media, and uphold its international human rights obligations.

5.3.4. Academics, Researchers, and Students in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has increasingly weaponized its judiciary to target academics, researchers, and students, including foreign nationals, who challenge government narratives or advocate for minority rights. These cases highlight how the Azerbaijani courts operate as instruments of the executive branch, disregarding judicial independence and due process to suppress dissent.

Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

Dr Gubad Ibadoghlu, a distinguished economist and academic at the London School of Economics (LSE), was arrested in July 2023 on charges of producing counterfeit money and organizing a criminal group. Dr Ibadoghlu has long been a vocal critic of the Azerbaijani government, particularly on issues of corruption and economic mismanagement. His detention has been widely condemned as politically motivated, intended to silence his critical voice, and discredit his work.

Despite his deteriorating health, Azerbaijani courts have consistently denied him adequate medical care, demonstrating their complicity in punitive actions orchestrated by the executive branch. Amnesty International (2023) described his arrest as a blatant misuse of the judiciary to persecute critics of the regime. This case exemplifies the judiciary's lack of independence, as it prioritizes government directives over justice.

Political Scientist Bahruz Samadov

In August 2024, political scientist, and researcher Bahruz Samadov, a PhD student at Charles University in Prague, was detained on charges of treason. Known for his critical analyses of Azerbaijan's regional policies and his advocacy for peaceful resolution in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Samadov's arrest highlights the government's intolerance of alternative narratives.

Azerbaijani courts expedited his detention based on vague accusations, ignoring his academic credentials and the lack of credible evidence. Human Rights Watch (2024) identified this case as part of an escalating crackdown on dissenting academics, driven by executive orders rather

than legal justification. This politically charged use of the judiciary underscores its role as an extension of the executive branch's oppressive policies.

Historian Igbal Abilov

Historian and researcher Igbal Abilov, who studies the history and culture of Azerbaijan's national minorities, was arrested in July 2024 on charges of high treason and incitement to national hatred. His arrest is widely perceived as an attack on his scholarly work, particularly his research on the Talysh people.

The charges against Abilov are largely based on fabricated evidence, and the legal proceedings lack transparency. The judiciary has enabled this persecution by adhering to government narratives and disregarding due process. Minority Rights Group (2024) highlighted this case as emblematic of the Azerbaijani government's targeting of intellectuals who promote cultural diversity and historical accuracy.

5.3.5. Ethnic Minorities in Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani government's actions against ethnic minorities demonstrate a deliberate strategy to marginalize non-dominant groups, stifle cultural expression, and prevent the formation of collective identities that might challenge the state's narrative of unity. The targeting of minority leaders and ethnic Armenians demonstrates a pattern of ethnic discrimination. The UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues (2023) highlighted that Azerbaijan's judiciary engages in "discriminatory judicial practices and arbitrary detentions" against Armenians and other minorities, violating international norms on equality and non-discrimination. This systemic abuse of judicial processes illustrates Azerbaijan's continued disregard for its obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The Talysh

The Talysh, an ethnic minority group primarily based in southern Azerbaijan, have faced systematic persecution. The case of Novruzali Mammadov, a prominent Talysh cultural activist and editor of the Tolyshi Sado newspaper, epitomizes the Azerbaijani government's strategy of using the judiciary to silence minority voices. Mammadov was sentenced to ten years in prison on unsubstantiated charges of treason. Throughout his trial, the evidence against him was either non-existent or fabricated, yet the judiciary upheld these charges to suppress his advocacy for Talysh cultural and linguistic rights. Tragically, Mammadov died in custody under suspicious circumstances, highlighting the severe consequences of Azerbaijan's misuse of its judicial system (Minority Rights Group, 2014).

The Lezgins

Similarly, members of the Lezgin ethnic minority, predominantly residing in northern Azerbaijan, have faced systematic persecution. The Azerbaijani government has targeted

Lezgin cultural organizations and activists under the pretext of combating separatism, despite the peaceful nature of their activities. Activists advocating for the preservation of Lezgin culture and language have been arbitrarily detained, harassed, or subjected to unfounded criminal charges. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has expressed concerns about the condition of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. In its 2022 recommendations, CERD highlighted the need for Azerbaijan to address issues affecting ethnic minorities and civil society within the country (ADC Memorial, 2022).

The regime's systematic oppression of ethnic minorities not only violates international human rights standards but also erodes Azerbaijan's rich cultural diversity, leaving minority communities vulnerable and voiceless.

5.4. Lack of Due Process

Azerbaijan's judiciary has faced widespread international criticism for systemic violations of due process. These include the use of fabricated charges, coerced confessions under torture, lack of transparency in trials, denial of legal representation, and expedited, pre-determined verdicts. The following cases highlight these recurring issues, drawing on documented evidence from credible sources.

5.4.1. Ilgar Mammadov: Fabricated Charges and Lack of Evidence

Ilgar Mammadov, an opposition leader and political activist, was arrested in 2013 after visiting the site of anti-government protests in Ismayilli. He was accused of inciting violence despite the lack of credible evidence linking him to the alleged crimes. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in 2014 that Mammadov's arrest was politically motivated and unfounded. However, Azerbaijan delayed compliance with the ECHR's decision to release him, leading to infringement proceedings by the Council of Europe. This case underscores Azerbaijan's disregard for due process and international legal obligations.

5.4.2. Taleh Bagirzade and the Nardaran Trials: Coerced Confessions Under Torture

Taleh Bagirzade, a Shia cleric, along with several residents of Nardaran, was arrested in 2015 on terrorism and extremism charges. Detainees reported severe torture, including beatings, to extract confessions, which were later used as evidence in court. Amnesty International criticized the convictions as based on fabricated allegations, while authorities failed to investigate credible reports of torture. This case exemplifies Azerbaijan's use of coerced confessions and fabricated charges to secure convictions in politically sensitive cases (Amnesty International, 2017).

5.4.3. Khadija Ismayilova: Lack of Transparency in Trials

Investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova was arrested in December 2014 on charges of embezzlement and tax evasion following her exposés on government corruption. Her trial was

marked by a lack of transparency, with court sessions closed to the public and her defence lawyers denied adequate access to case materials. International observers widely condemned her arrest as politically motivated, describing it as an attempt to silence critical journalism. Her conviction relied on insufficient and dubious evidence, further undermining the integrity of the judicial process in Azerbaijan (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014).

5.4.4. Mehman Huseynov: Denial of Legal Representation

Mehman Huseynov, a blogger and anti-corruption activist, was arrested in March 2017 on defamation charges after alleging torture by law enforcement. His detention was characterized by the denial of access to independent legal counsel, severely limiting his ability to mount an effective defence. International observers highlighted the retaliatory nature of his arrest, linking it to his activism against corruption. During his imprisonment, Huseynov reported further threats and mistreatment, illustrating the Azerbaijani government's use of detention as a punitive measure against critics (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

5.4.5. Giyas Ibrahimov and Bayram Mammadov: Expedited and Pre-Determined Verdicts

Giyas Ibrahimov and Bayram Mammadov, youth activists, were arrested in 2016 after painting a protest slogan on a statue of former President Heydar Aliyev. They were charged with drug possession, though human rights organizations dismissed these charges as politically motivated. Their trials lasted only a few days, with heavy sentences reportedly pre-determined. Both were sentenced to 10 years in prison, sparking condemnation from international rights groups. This case underscores the Azerbaijani judiciary's routine use of fabricated charges and disproportionate sentencing to suppress dissent (Amnesty International, 2016).

5.4.6. Alexander Lapshin: Lack of Transparency, Torture and Pre-Determined Verdicts

Alexander Lapshin, a travel blogger holding Russian, Israeli, and Ukrainian citizenship, became a high-profile victim of Azerbaijan's regime. Lapshin visited Nagorno-Karabakh in 2011 and 2012, prompting Azerbaijan to blacklist him. Despite this, he re-entered Azerbaijan in 2016 using Ukrainian travel documents. Azerbaijan issued an international warrant for his arrest, accusing him of "violating the state border" and supporting Nagorno-Karabakh's independence (BBC, 2017). Detained in Belarus in December 2016, Lapshin was extradited to Azerbaijan despite concerns from Israel, Russia, and Amnesty International about the risks of torture and unfair trials (Amnesty International, 2017).

Lapshin's trial was widely criticized for lacking transparency. In July 2017, he was sentenced to three years in prison for illegal border crossing. Observers noted that his prosecution was politically motivated, reflecting Azerbaijan's use of its judiciary to suppress dissent (RFE/RL, 2017). In September 2017, Lapshin was found unconscious in solitary confinement. Authorities claimed it was a suicide attempt, but independent assessments pointed to an assassination attempt. Shortly after, President Ilham Aliyev pardoned Lapshin, who returned to Israel.

Lapshin filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), alleging illegal detention, torture, and attempted murder. In 2021, the ECHR ruled in his favour, finding Azerbaijan responsible for rights violations, and ordering compensation (RFE/RL, 2021).

These cases highlight a systematic pattern of due process violations in Azerbaijan, which include fabricated charges, coerced confessions, lack of transparency, denial of legal representation, and pre-determined verdicts. Despite repeated calls for reform from international organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the European Court of Human Rights, Azerbaijan continues to demonstrate a disregard for judicial independence and human rights standards.

6. The 23 Armenian Detainees in Azerbaijan: Political Leverage Amidst Peace Negotiations

6.1. Historical Context: In the Run-Up to COP29

In recent months, significant international attention has focused on the plight of 23 Armenian hostages held by Azerbaijan, a critical issue for Armenia and its diaspora in the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Advocacy groups, human rights organizations, and officials have mobilized globally to raise awareness and demand the release of the hostages. The 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) became a focal point for addressing these issues. Social media has played a pivotal role in these efforts, with the hashtags #FreeArmenianHostages & #StopGreenwashGenocide emerging as a unifying call to action across platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook. Posts using the hashtag have highlighted the personal stories of the hostages, called for international action, and exposed Azerbaijan's alleged human rights violations. However, the campaign's growing prominence prompted a backlash, namely deliberate attempts to disrupt its impact.

A recent investigation by Global Witness, as reported in *The Guardian*, etc. revealed that Azerbaijan has allegedly employed networks of fake social media accounts to undermine advocacy campaigns. Accounts, such as Free Armenian Hostages, have been accused of spreading misinformation, flooding the hashtag with irrelevant or hostile content, and promoting pro-Azerbaijani official narratives, particularly in the lead-up to COP29. Such tactics have drawn condemnation from human rights advocates, who argue that these actions not only obstruct freedom of expression but also highlight Azerbaijan's broader attempts to manipulate public discourse. The findings have prompted calls for social media platforms to implement stronger measures against disinformation campaigns to ensure that critical humanitarian issues are not overshadowed by such interference (*The Guardian*, 2024).

Many viewed COP 29 as a potential opportunity for advancing a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan and securing the release of the hostages. On November 11, 2024, Armenia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Vahan Kostanyan: "There is no decision yet on Armenia attending COP29. It depends on the current processes." When asked by Azatutyun if the return of prisoners and the peace treaty are part of the same set of issues, Kostanyan replied: "Yes." (*Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2024, Azatutyun, 2024).

Adding to the tensions, U.S. Congressman Frank Pallone (D-NJ), co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, faced hostility during his visit to Baku for COP29. Pallone reported being targeted by Azerbaijani government-sponsored protests and was excluded from a bipartisan meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, further straining relations. Reflecting on the situation, Pallone remarked:

“Both the United States and Armenia had genuine expectations that COP29 could mark a turning point—that a peace treaty would be signed, and the hostages released. Unfortunately, Azerbaijan’s actions have shown a clear unwillingness to meet even the most basic international standards of justice and human rights” (Pallone, F. n.d.).

Pallone’s comments encapsulated the growing frustration among international stakeholders who had hoped for progress during COP29. The failure to secure a peace treaty and the continued detention of Armenian hostages underscored the enduring obstacles to reconciliation in the region. Armenia remains committed to raising awareness and pushing for justice. However, Azerbaijan’s use of hostages as political bargaining tools, combined with its efforts to manipulate public discourse, has highlighted the challenges of achieving a durable peace agreement.

Despite these hopes, COP29 failed to deliver a breakthrough. Azerbaijan’s refusal to release the hostages before the conference was widely seen as a strategic move to maintain leverage in ongoing negotiations. Armenia has emphasized that any peace treaty must address the release of hostages, accountability for war crimes, and guarantees for the security and rights of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and along its borders. The lack of progress at COP29 has deepened doubts about the feasibility of achieving sustainable peace in the region.

6.2. Weaponizing Azerbaijan Judiciary

The detention of 23 Armenians in Azerbaijan highlights the regime’s strategic use of the judiciary to advance nationalist objectives, suppress ethnic Armenians, and manipulate political prisoners as bargaining chips in peace negotiations with Armenia. Among the detainees are former Nagorno-Karabakh leaders, prisoners of war (POWs), and civilians, many accused of terrorism and genocide. Given the judiciary’s well-documented subservience to Azerbaijan’s executive branch and its disregard for fundamental principles of justice, it would be naive to expect these trials to adhere to constitutional or international norms.

The trials of Armenian hostages in Azerbaijan, both past and upcoming, strongly resemble Stalin-era theatrical show trials, where courts were weaponized to eliminate opposition and cement autocratic power. President Ilham Aliyev appears to be employing a similar strategy, using the legal system as a political tool to suppress dissent, target Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, and persecute even Azerbaijani citizens and foreign nationals who challenge his regime.

During the 1930s, Stalin orchestrated show trials to eliminate his old Bolshevik comrades, top military leaders, and secret police officials. These trials involved torture, forced confessions, and public spectacles that often led to executions. Framed as legitimate legal proceedings, they concealed Stalin’s brutal consolidation of power. At the time, mainstream media, including The New York Times correspondent Harold Denny, failed to expose the trials as fabrications, often presenting them as credible.

Similarly, Aliyev's regime seeks to project a façade of legitimacy through trials designed to frame Armenian hostages as war criminals, falsely accusing them of terrorism or genocide. These proceedings aim to reinforce nationalist narratives, silence opposition, and intimidate ethnic Armenians and others who oppose the regime.

The continued detention of these individuals serves two primary purposes: using their imprisonment as leverage in peace talks and sending a chilling message to ethnic Armenians who fled Nagorno-Karabakh: "Do not return; if you do, you will face arrest and a grim fate."

Unlike Stalin's era, however, today's world offers institutional mechanisms and international frameworks to expose and counter such abuses. Independent journalism, human rights organizations, and international courts provide tools to challenge Azerbaijan's politically motivated judicial practices. The international community must act decisively to ensure these mechanisms are utilized, preventing Azerbaijan's judiciary from perpetuating injustice under the guise of legality.

6.2.1. Lack of Due Process

The Azerbaijani judiciary has systematically denied due process to Armenian detainees, as highlighted by human rights lawyer Jared Genser and legal expert Siranush Sahakyan. Genser, who represents Ruben Vardanyan, criticized Azerbaijan's judiciary for functioning as a tool of political oppression, emphasizing systemic violations of international legal standards. Vardanyan faces numerous charges under Azerbaijan's Criminal Code, with alleged evidence presented in over 25,000 pages across 100 volumes, all in Azerbaijani. This has severely limited Vardanyan's and his counsel's ability to prepare a proper defence, highlighting systemic barriers to a fair trial (Armenian Weekly, 2024, Asbarez, 2024, Hetq, 2024). Sahakyan has corroborated these claims, documenting instances where Armenian prisoners of war (POWs) and civilians were subjected to closed trials, denied access to independent observers, and prevented from presenting evidence in their defence, all in violation of international human rights norms, including the Geneva Conventions (Meduza, 2024, Armenian Report, 2024).

Further evidence of Azerbaijan's discriminatory practices has been highlighted by international bodies. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has issued rulings calling on Azerbaijan to prevent racial hatred, yet Azerbaijan continues to use its legal system to arbitrarily detain Armenians (ICJ, 2023). Human Rights Network has reported extensively on the detentions and treatment of Armenian hostages (Human Rights Network, n.d.). Genser's conclusion underscores this, stating that Azerbaijan's judiciary operates as a mechanism to silence Armenians, perpetuate impunity, and undermine justice and due process (Armenian Weekly, 2024, Asbarez, 2024, Hetq, 2024).

6.2.2. Fabricated Charges and Lack of Evidence

The Azerbaijani government has brought charges of terrorism and genocide against Armenian detainees, including former Nagorno-Karabakh leaders, despite the lack of credible evidence to support these accusations. This may represent a unique case in modern history where

perpetrators of genocidal acts, war crimes, and crimes against humanity turn the tables to accuse their victims of the very same offences.

6.2.3. Coerced Confessions Under Torture

Human Rights Watch, Centre for Truth and Justice and many other reputable human rights organisations have been diligently collecting evidence of numerous tortures and coercions (Human Rights Watch, 2021, Center for Truth and Justice, n.d).

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) case of *Saribekyan and Balyan v. Azerbaijan* (2020) exemplifies the prevalence of torture and inhumane treatment in Azerbaijani custody. Manvel Saribekyan, an Armenian civilian detained under false pretences, was tortured, and died in custody, with Azerbaijani authorities claiming his death was a suicide. The ECHR ruled Azerbaijan had violated Article 2 (right to life) and Article 3 (prohibition of torture) of the European Convention on Human Rights, highlighting systematic failures to prevent torture and ensure accountability.

In June 2024, Ruben Vardanyan's legal team submitted an urgent appeal to Dr Alice Edwards, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, to condemn the alleged torture he endured. Vardanyan, arrested on 27 September 2023, during Azerbaijan's military actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, faced severe conditions during a hunger strike from 5 to 25 April 2024, including:

- Confinement in a punishment cell with continuous lighting, causing sleep deprivation.
- Denial of drinking water for over two days.
- Forced stress positions and prolonged standing.
- Lack of access to hygiene facilities and basic necessities.
- Isolation from legal counsel and family.

These actions violate Azerbaijan's obligations under the Convention Against Torture and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) (Reuters, 2024).

6.2.4. Lack of Transparency in Trials

Trials of Armenian detainees are held behind closed doors, breaching Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to a public hearing (United Nations, 1966). The OSCE has criticized the exclusion of observers, noting that this undermines the credibility of Azerbaijan's judicial process and violates international standards (OSCE, 2024).

6.2.5. Denial of Legal Representation

Armenian detainees are denied effective legal representation. Local lawyers who attempt to defend Armenian detainees often face intimidation or threats, deterring effective advocacy. This has created a chilling effect, leaving many detainees without competent legal representation. In cases where international legal teams are assembled, their access is blocked, effectively silencing independent oversight and advocacy. In Levon Mnatsakanyan's case, his court-appointed lawyer neither contested the charges nor presented exculpatory evidence. In Ruben Vardanyan's case, his international legal team was consistently denied access to him in Azerbaijan.

6.2.6. Expedited and Pre-Determined Verdicts

Trials of Armenian detainees are often expedited, leaving insufficient time for defence preparation. Hearings usually last only a few hours, with verdicts appearing pre-determined. Furthermore, trials are conducted in the Azerbaijani language with inadequate interpretation services, leaving defendants unable to fully understand the proceedings.

6.2.7. Denial of the Right to Contact Family and Access to Clergy

Armenian detainees are routinely denied family contact, with restrictions on correspondence exacerbating their isolation. Such practices violate international humanitarian standards. Additionally, detainees are systematically denied access to clergy of their faith, undermining their religious freedoms.

Azerbaijan's treatment of Armenian detainees represents a flagrant violation of international law and fundamental human rights. The judiciary's political influence, reliance on fabricated charges, use of torture, lack of transparency, denial of legal representation, expedited trials, and restrictions on communication and spiritual access collectively underscore a systematic campaign to suppress and dehumanize ethnic Armenians. As Jared Genser stated: "The international community must act decisively to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its egregious violations of justice and human rights" (Horizon Weekly, 2024).

7. International Condemnation and Calls to Release Armenian Hostages

Belgium: The Federal Parliament, along with the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital Region Parliaments, has condemned Azerbaijan's inhumane treatment of Armenian prisoners and called for their immediate release (Armenpress, 2024).

Luxembourg: The Chamber of Deputies has strongly denounced Azerbaijan's violation of international law and demanded the unconditional release of Armenian hostages (Panorama.am, 2024).

France: The France-Armenia Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group of the Senate has condemned Azerbaijan's ongoing detention of Armenians, urging compliance with international norms to ensure their release (Le Monde, 2024).

Italy: Thirty-nine Italian parliamentarians have united to condemn Azerbaijan’s unlawful actions and demand the immediate liberation of Armenian prisoners (ANSA, 2024).

Germany: The Bundestag’s Human Rights Committee and the CDU parliamentary group have criticized Azerbaijan’s violations of human rights, calling on FM Annalena Baerbock to take decisive action for the release of Armenian hostages (Deutsche Welle, 2023).

Switzerland: The city of Geneva has publicly denounced Azerbaijan’s actions, reaffirming the urgent need to release Armenian prisoners of war (Swissinfo.ch, 2024).

United States: The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the US Congress has strongly condemned Azerbaijan’s continued detention of Armenian prisoners and urged their unconditional release (Reuters, 2024).

Uruguay: Prominent Uruguayan leaders, including the President of the Chamber of Representatives Ana Olivera, former presidents, and over 45 parliamentarians, have united to demand the immediate release of Armenian hostages, condemning Azerbaijan’s clear breach of international norms (Wikipedia, 2024).

8. **Conclusion: The Call for International Pressure to Ensure Justice and Freedom**

Luckily, we are not in Stalin’s USSR of the 1930s, where silence enabled dictators to act with impunity. Today, we have the tools and platforms to speak out and hold oppressive regimes accountable. The findings of this report highlight the grave systemic failures of Azerbaijan’s judiciary, which operates as a tool of political oppression, devoid of independence or adherence to international standards when prosecuting “enemies” of Aliyev’s regime. The plight of the 23 Armenian hostages exemplifies a broader pattern of judicial abuse and human rights violations, reinforcing the urgent need for international advocacy and action.

The Azerbaijani regime’s judiciary cannot be relied upon to deliver justice. Trials marred by fabricated charges, coerced confessions, denial of legal representation, and expedited, pre-determined verdicts are emblematic of a deeply corrupt system weaponized to further nationalist objectives and suppress dissent. This environment negates any realistic prospects for fair trials or due process for the Armenian hostages.

Evidence of Success Under International Pressure

History demonstrates that sustained and widespread international pressure can influence the Azerbaijani regime to release political prisoners and adopt limited reforms. Notable instances include:

1. **The Release of Rasul Jafarov (2016):** A prominent human rights defender detained on baseless charges was released following significant international outcry and advocacy from the European Court of Human Rights.

2. **The Pardon of Leyla and Arif Yunus (2016):** These renowned human rights activists were freed due to international condemnation of their unjust detention.
3. **The Case of Mehman Huseynov (2019):** A prominent anti-corruption blogger released after a global campaign by human rights organizations and media outlets.
4. **The Case of Alexander Lapshin:** Demonstrating a pattern of the regime yielding to external diplomatic, economic, and reputational pressures.
5. **The Case of 32 Armenian POWs** released in December 2023 when the Republic of Armenia lifted its veto on holding the COP29 Summit in Baku.

These precedents affirm that Azerbaijan's leadership is susceptible to the collective weight of diplomatic engagement, media attention, and grassroots advocacy. The release of the 23 Armenian hostages is not merely a legal and political necessity but a moral imperative. Their continued detention constitutes a gross violation of international law and a stain on the global commitment to justice and human rights. By failing to act decisively, the international community risks emboldening authoritarian regimes that exploit their judicial systems to silence dissent and perpetuate repression.

It is crucial to recognize that the liberation of these hostages transcends the immediate crisis. Their freedom would symbolize a victory for justice, strengthen global human rights norms, and pave the way for broader peace and reconciliation efforts in the region. This report calls on all stakeholders to unite in unwavering advocacy, applying sustained and strategic pressure to ensure justice prevails and holding Azerbaijan accountable for its crimes against humanity and violations of its international obligations.

Profiles of the 23 Armenian Hostages

Political Leaders Detained in September 2023

1. Arkadi Ghukasyan

Role: Second President of Nagorno-Karabakh (1997–2007)

Arrest Date: October 3, 2023

Circumstances: Arkadi Ghukasyan, born on June 22, 1957, served as the second President of Nagorno-Karabakh from 1997 to 2007. On October 3, 2023, he was unlawfully arrested in Nagorno-Karabakh and transferred to Baku, where he has been held in pretrial detention. Ghukasyan has been denied the right to choose his attorney and is prohibited from receiving visits from friends or family.

2. Bako Sahakyan

Role: Third President of Nagorno-Karabakh (2007–2017)

Arrest Date: October 3, 2023

Circumstances: was born August 30, 1960, served as the third President of Nagorno-Karabakh, and is its longest-serving leader, holding office from 2007 to 2017 and then being re-elected for an additional three-year term. On October 3, 2023, he was unlawfully arrested in Nagorno-Karabakh and taken to Baku, where he has been held in pretrial detention since. He has been denied access to a lawyer of his choice and is not allowed visits from friends or family.

3. Arayik Harutyunyan

Role: Fourth President of Nagorno-Karabakh (2020–2023)

Arrest Date: October 3, 2023

Circumstances: born on December 14, 1973, served as the fourth President of Nagorno-Karabakh. On October 3, 2023, he was detained in Nagorno-Karabakh and transferred to Baku, where he has remained in pretrial detention. Since his arrest, he has been denied access to an attorney of his choice and has not been permitted visits from friends or family.

4. Davit Ishkhanyan

Role: Speaker of the Nagorno-Karabakh National Assembly

Arrest Date: October 2023

Circumstances: born December 27, 1968, served as the Speaker of the National Assembly of Nagorno-Karabakh from August to October 2023, when he was detained by Azerbaijani

military forces. Since his arrest, he has been held in pretrial detention, without access to a lawyer of his choice and permission for visits from friends or family.

5. *Ruben Vardanyan*

Role: State Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh (2022–2023)

Arrest Date: September 29, 2023

Circumstances: born May 25, 1968, served as State Minister in Nagorno-Karabakh from November 2022 to February 2023. On September 29, 2023, he was detained by Azerbaijan's State Security Service and taken to Baku to face criminal charges.

6. *Davit Babayan*

Role: Former Foreign Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh

Arrest Date: September 29, 2023

Circumstances: born on April 5, 1973, is the former Foreign Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh and served as an advisor to the President. He surrendered to Azerbaijani authorities on September 29, 2023, and has since been detained in Azerbaijan without due process.

7. *Levon Mnatsakanyan*

Role: Former Defense Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born on September 14, 1955, is the former Defence Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh. While en route to Armenia, he was unlawfully detained by Azerbaijan's State Security Service. A court in Baku subsequently ordered his confinement in a high-security isolation cell. Mnatsakanyan is the only Armenian political prisoner whose whereabouts remain unknown, as no video footage of him has been released since his arrest. His condition is unknown.

8. *Davit Manukyan*

Role: Deputy Commander of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army

Arrest Date: September 29, 2023

Circumstances: born on September 14, 1965, served as the Deputy Commander of the Defence Army of Nagorno-Karabakh. On September 29, 2023, he was detained without legal justification by the Azerbaijani State Security Service while en route to Armenia.

Prisoners of War (POWs) Captured in 2020 or Later

9. Alyosha Khosrovyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: October 3, 2020

Circumstances: born March 28, 1967, was taken as a POW. On August 2, 2021, he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to 20 years of prison.

10. Lyudvig Mkrtchyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: October 20, 2020

Circumstances: born on December 5, 1969, was captured as a prisoner of war. On August 2, 2021, he was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison in Azerbaijan on false charges of "torture and cruel treatment" against Azerbaijanis during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

11. Vicken Euljekjian

Role: Civilian (originally from Lebanon)

Arrest Date: November 10, 2020

Circumstances: born on December 7, 1979, was captured as a prisoner of war. On June 14, 2021, he was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison, charged as a mercenary in a military conflict. Originally from Lebanon, Vicken had relocated to Nagorno-Karabakh, where he had no history of military involvement. Since his imprisonment, he has reportedly endured torture and has been denied necessary medical care. On June 3, 2021, he was hospitalized.

12. Davit Davtyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: November 11, 2020

Circumstances: born on February 5, 1993, was captured as a prisoner of war. On July 28, 2021, he was convicted in Azerbaijan and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

13. Gevorg Sujyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: November 11, 2020

Circumstances: born on January 21, 1989. On July 28, 2021, he was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison in Azerbaijan.

14. Vagif Khachatryan

Role: Elderly Civilian

Arrest Date: July 29, 2023

Circumstances: born October 28, 1955, was unlawfully arrested while travelling to Armenia in an ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) van to seek urgent medical treatment. On November 27, 2023, an Azerbaijani military court sentenced him to 15 years in prison for charges of genocide. On January 15, 2024, the Azerbaijani Court of Appeal rejected his appeal.

15. Rashid Beglaryan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: August 1, 2023

Circumstances: born November 2, 1962. He was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison. His current condition is unknown.

16. Madat Babayan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 19, 2023

Circumstances: born September 15, 1952. No additional information is available regarding his condition in prison in Azerbaijan.

17. Erik Ghazaryan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: was captured as a prisoner of war in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. No further information is available regarding his condition while in custody in Azerbaijan.

18. Garik Martirosyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born in 1972, was captured as a prisoner of war during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in September 2023. No additional information about his current condition has been released.

19. Melikset Pashayan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born in 1971, was captured as a prisoner of war during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in September 2023. There are no additional details available about his condition while in custody.

20. Gurgen Stepanyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born in 1987, was captured as a prisoner of war during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in September 2023. There are no additional details available regarding his status or condition while in custody.

21. Levon Balayan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born in 1978, was last seen in September of 2023 in Nagorno-Karabakh when he was kidnapped and taken prisoner in Azerbaijan. No additional information is available regarding his condition.

22. Vasili Beglaryan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born in 1993, was captured as a prisoner of war in September 2023 in Nagorno-Karabakh. He was detained and transferred to Azerbaijan. No further information is available regarding his condition.

23. Davit Allahverdyan

Role: Civilian

Arrest Date: September 2023

Circumstances: born in 1988, was captured as a prisoner of war in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. No further details about his condition are currently available.

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Author: Gabriel Gavin

Publisher: Hurst & Company, 2025

Description: Provides a detailed account of the events leading up to and following the September 2023 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Armenian forces surrendered to Azerbaijan within 24 hours, resulting in a significant humanitarian crisis. Through narratives of ordinary Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Gavin explores the historical and geopolitical factors contributing to the conflict and its aftermath.

“Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War”

Author: Thomas de Waal

Publisher: NYU Press, 2003

Description: A balanced and detailed account of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, providing historical context, analysis of the key events, and perspectives from both sides.

“The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Legal Analysis”

Author: Heiko Krüger

Publisher: Springer, 2010

Description: Focuses on the legal and international law aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

“The Caucasus: An Introduction”

Author: Thomas de Waal

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2010

Description: A comprehensive introduction to the Caucasus region, including a discussion of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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Author: Svante E. Cornell

Publisher: Routledge, 2001

Description: Discusses the dynamics of ethnic conflict in the Caucasus, with significant coverage of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Cultural and Social Perspectives

“Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry”

Authors: Laurence Broers

Publisher: Edinburgh University Press, 2019

Description: Analyses the deeply rooted rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan, exploring the historical narratives and identity politics involved.

“Nagorno-Karabakh: The Invisible Line”

Author: Shirin Akiner

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001

Description: Explores the cultural and ethnic dimensions of the conflict, highlighting the human aspects of the struggle.

“Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin”

Author: Timothy Snyder

Publisher: Basic Books, 2010

Description: While not solely about Nagorno-Karabakh, this book places conflicts in the region within a broader historical and geopolitical context.

First-Hand Accounts and Reports

“War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia’s Troubled Frontier”

Author: Vicken Cheterian

Publisher: Columbia University Press, 2009

Description: Examines the geopolitical implications of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other Caucasus disputes.