

Quid pro quo in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations

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Experts tend to believe that the success of Azerbaijani offensive in the fall of 2020 was due to the high degree of Ankara's involvement in the Karabakh war. Moreover, there is an opinion that the Turkish factor has played a decisive role in the Karabakh war. Firstly, the operation was planned and implemented by generals of the Turkish General Staff. Secondly, the airspace of the Karabakh War was controlled by the Turkish aviation. Thirdly, Syrian terrorist units recruited by Turkey and transferred to Azerbaijan, played a significant role in the war.

Baku claims that the victory in Karabakh was primarily due to the Azerbaijani army and political leadership². However, in Turkey, it is increasingly asserted that the military solution of the Karabakh issue in favor of Baku was made possible by Turkey's decisiveness³. R. Erdogan's statement in July 2024 about *the de facto* Turkish capture of Karabakh caused irritation in Baku, where *“the significant support of Ankara in the fight against Armenians”* is always emphasized, but the Turkish involvement is never placed at the forefront of the “Karabakh success”. For the regime of I. Aliyev, it was important to establish the “correct” order of the components of Azerbaijani success: the “*decisiveness*” of Baku's political leadership, the “*heroism*” of the Azerbaijani people, the “*professionalism*” of the Azerbaijani command, and only then – the help of the main ally. Ankara denies this sequence of factors behind the “*success of Azerbaijani arms*” since it does not contribute to the formation of ideas in the Azerbaijani society about the exceptional role of Turkey in the Karabakh war. Consequently, Azerbaijani society and authorities can always distance themselves from the moral obligation to provide similar assistance to Turkey if necessary. In Ankara, they understand that the “*Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey*” itself, which does not impose any clearly defined obligations on Azerbaijan⁴ for direct participation in a war conducted by Turkey, will not help the cause. Turkey itself took an active part in the Karabakh war of 2020 without any allied declaration. Baku, however, can quite well abstain from providing military assistance to Turkey even with one in place.

Nevertheless, experts agree that Ankara will demand Azerbaijan to repay the military-political “debt” for Karabakh if necessary, while Baku will look for ways to refuse “payment” if it contradicts its interests. Ankara is more interested in the fact of Azerbaijan's participation in Turkish military initiatives than in the practical contribution itself. Thus, the essence of the issue is not in the military sphere but in the political one, where Ankara will strive to complete the process of finally binding Baku to Turkish geopolitical projects.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 04.02.2025.

² “Ilham Aliyev participated in the opening ceremony of a new residential complex in the city of Jabrayil”. President.az, (in Rus.), 04.10.2025, <https://president.az/ru/articles/view/67016> (download date: 02.02.2025).

³ “President Erdogan reminded Israel of the fate of Karabakh”. TRT, (in Rus.), 28.07.2024, <https://www.trtrussian.com/novosti/prezident-erdogan-napomnil-izrailyu-sudbu-karabaha-18188820> (download date: 02.02.2025).

⁴ “The Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey”. President.az, (in Rus.), 16.06.2021, <https://president.az/ru/articles/view/52122> (download date: 02.02.2025).

And here is a revealing example in this context: on January 24, 2025, the Azerbaijan's Deputy defense minister, Ground forces commander, Colonel general Hikmet Mirzoyev, visited Turkey and held a meeting with Turkish Defense minister Yasar Guler and Turkish Ground forces commander Army general Selcuk Bayraktaroglu⁵. Official sources in Ankara and Baku did not mention that Mirzoyev departed from Ankara to the Turkish-Syrian border, where he held a series of meetings with high-ranking Turkish army officers, particularly with the commander of the army special forces.

Given that Mirzoyev himself was once the commander of Azerbaijan's army special forces, Middle Eastern sources claim that Turkey is preparing to involve Azerbaijani special forces in a large-scale operation against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Rojava and the PKK units. Based on the total number of forces that Ankara plans to deploy against the Kurds – Syrian National Army (SNA) units and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) within the New Syrian Army and the regular Turkish units, promised by R. Erdogan for the campaign⁶ – the Azerbaijani “support” cannot be significant. The Turkish-Syrian military grouping numbers at least 100-120 thousand people, and a few brigades of the Azerbaijani special forces will not contribute significantly from a purely military perspective. However, the same cannot be said about the political aspect, as Azerbaijan's participation in the planned Syrian war will affect Baku's position in regional and international arrangements. It is not just about Azerbaijan taking an anti-Kurdish stance but also an anti-American and anti-Israeli stance if Washington and Tel Aviv choose to support Rojava as they have promised. It can be assumed that Turkey is striving for this by forcing Azerbaijan to join the anti-Kurdish coalition under the *quid pro quo* formula, thus positioning itself against the American-Israeli tandem.

Meanwhile, similar actions of Turkey to complicate Azerbaijani–Russia relations can be observed. In this case, by provoking a situation, which is fraught with deepening of the Azerbaijani-Russian crisis. We are talking about a document leaked to the media, sent by the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party, Erdogan's closest ally, D. Bahceli, to the Turkish foreign minister H. Fidan⁷. The document contains instructions to initiate destabilization in the Russian-controlled Abkhazia by generating anti-Armenian sentiments in this republic. According to D. Bahceli, participation of Abkhaz Armenians in the “*Karabakh separatist movement*” could be used as a pretext for inciting ethnic strife. Bahceli points to the need to involve Azerbaijan in the hunt for “*Abkhaz Armenian terrorists*”, which is a direct attempt at interfering in Moscow's geopolitical sphere of influence. It is clear that Turkey has calculated the impact on this ethnic group, as well as the plan to involve Baku in the destabilization program. Maybe Baku itself was unaware of Bahceli's plan to drag Azerbaijan into the internal Abkhaz crisis and was simply presented

⁵ “The Minister of Defense of Turkey received the Commander of the Land Forces of Azerbaijan”. Anadolu Ajansi, (in Rus.), 25.01.2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/турция/глава-минобороны-турции-принял-командующего-сухопутными-войсками-азербайджана/3461876> (download date: 02.02.2025).

⁶ “Erdogan promised to put an end to the terrorist organisations in Syria”. Gazeta.ru (in Rus.), 25.01.2024, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2024/12/25/24714200.shtml/> (download date: 03.02.2025).

⁷ “The Turkish attempts to neutralize the Armenians of Abkhazia”. Narod.am, (in Rus.), 23.01.2025, <https://narod.am/archives/1518/> (download date: 03.02.2025). See also ARVAK Center comment, 02.02.2025, <https://arvak.am/en/%d0%bobkhazia-and-russian-turkish-confrontation/> (download date: 03.02.2025).

with the facts. It is also possible that there is no actual anti-Armenian plan of Bahceli, and the “leak” of the document was orchestrated by the Turkish side in order to further complicate Azerbaijani-Russian relations. Ideally, after the scandalous incident involving the crash of an *AZAL* passenger liner on February 25, 2024, the “Abkhaz case” could finally break the strategic partnership between Baku and Moscow, depriving I. Aliyev of the opportunity to maneuver between Turkey’s and Russia’s interests.

Thus, the analysis of the incoming information allows us to conclude that Turkey is already demanding that Azerbaijan repay the favor “*for Karabakh*”. At first glance, the limited participation of Azerbaijani forces in the anti-Kurdish military campaign and the provocation against the Abkhazian Armenians are not associated with major military-political costs for Baku. However, in reality, Turkish initiatives are fraught with unpredictable consequences for the Caspian republic. The prospects for the degradation of Baku's relations with Russia, the Kurds, and possibly the US and Israel, are on the agenda, which Ankara is persistently seeking, as it has its own plans for Azerbaijan's disposition in the region. It can be assumed that the forecasts about Turkey’s “*bill for Karabakh*” are coming true, and the potential influence that Ankara has earned over Baku in recent years allows R. Erdogan to demand I. Aliyev steps that do not fully correspond to Azerbaijan’s interests.