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TENSION OVER THE LACHIN CORRIDOR BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

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Disagreements between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the final peace agreement process that started after the 2020 Karabakh war have still not been fully resolved.

In the meetings between the two countries at various levels in Brussels and Moscow, the most important topics on the agenda have been the determination of the borderline and the transportation route of Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan in accordance with the 9 November declaration. Although there have been statements from the EU and Russia (who have hosted these negotiations for 2 years) that they are close to a final solution, the statements from the two countries indicate that the thorny issues have not been eliminated yet. The unwillingness of the Armenian side concerning the opening of the Zangezur road, which will provide access from Baku to Nakhichevan, and the attempt to impose certain demands on Azerbaijan for the rights of the Karabakh Armenians in a *fait accompli* manner, are the main factors triggering tensions.

As can be remembered, the corridor extending from Armenia to Khankendi, known as the Lachin corridor, was reconstructed and reopened by Azerbaijan in August 2022 in accordance with the provision in the Article 6, paragraph 2 of the November 9 declaration:

> With the agreement of the parties, **within the next three years**, a plan will be determined for the construction of a new route along the Lachin corridor, which will ensure communication between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, and for the subsequent redeployment of the Russian Peacekeeping Contingent to protect it."[1]

A short time after the opening of the road, it was observed that Armenia displayed an uncompromising attitude in the negotiations concerning the Zangezur road and even created some difficulties regarding the use of the newly opened Lachin road. Subsequently, Azerbaijani officials announced that they detected illegal military transportation to Khankendi from Armenia via unpaved roads connected to the old route. [2] Armenia, on the other hand, denied these allegations and stated that those individuals were there as officials of the so-called government in Karabakh. However, the distance of

the area where the passing vehicles are located from Khankendi has been considered by Azerbaijan as a violation of its sovereignty rights. Consequently, it was announced that a decision was made to establish a customs checkpoint on the Lachin road using sovereign state rights at the border with Armenia.[3]

It can be observed that with the starting of border surveillance that Armenia has placed greater emphasis on the claims in the international arena that access to Khankendi has been blocked and that the Armenian community living there is at the edge of a humanitarian crisis. Similar claims were previously raised by Armenia during peaceful protests organized by Azerbaijani environmental activists on the Lachin road, accusing Azerbaijan of condemning Karabakh Armenians to starvation. However, Azerbaijani officials continue to state that there has been no blockade on transportations since last year.

Indeed, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, in an interview with *EuroNews* news agency on August 1, responded to the reporter's question about allegations of blockade on the Lachin corridor by stating that Azerbaijan has not prevented any passage except for illegal crossings.[4] President Aliyev conveyed that the Red Cross aid vehicles, which were claimed to be blocked, were being used for smuggling purposes, and that items such as tobacco, cellphones, and fuel were found in the intercepted vehicles. From previously reported news, it can be understood that the Red Cross organization did not deny the mentioned incident and furthermore, it appears that they terminated the employment of personnel attempting to pass with the mentioned vehicles[5]. Azerbaijan's exercise of its sovereignty rights in combating smuggling, an issue also approached with sensitivity by the international community, is entirely understandable. Moreover, considering Armenia's commitments to the Cooperation and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU, which was signed in 2018 and addresses smuggling[6], it is expected that Armenia should support Azerbaijan's efforts against this illicit traffic directed from its own borders to Azerbaijan. However, the Armenian side, at best aware of its negligent behavior, is attempting to portray Azerbaijan's efforts within its sovereign borders as an act of "ethnic cleansing".

At this very point, it is worthwhile to focus on the proposal put forth by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani officials emphasize that the Askeran road, which can be used via Aghdam to reach Khankendi, could be employed for urgent needs such as food, medicine, and healthcare supplies, in line with humanitarian concerns. Although the Lachin road is the sole route connecting Armenia to Karabakh, it is not the only way to access the region. The Askeran-Khojaly road through Aghdam can also provide access to Khankendi. The proposal by Azerbaijan received support from EU High Representative Joseph Borrell as well. He indicated that if facing a humanitarian crisis, this route could also be utilized. However, initially, Armenians in Khankendi opposed this proposal. Subsequently, a group of protesters, mainly composed of young Karabakh Armenians, erected physical barriers on the Askeran road, declaring that they would not allow any passage from the Azerbaijani side.[7]

These protests cast doubt on the claims of a humanitarian crisis among Armenians in

Karabakh. The fact that the possibility of eliminating the lack of food and medicine through Azerbaijan can be denied so easily demonstrates that the claim of being under a blockade is unfounded. On the other hand, it is consistently observed that the Azerbaijani government regards the Karabakh Armenians as its own citizens. Azerbaijan's offer to provide assistance to its own citizens within its territory is met with a hostile response from the so-called administration in Karabakh, which directly indicates the source of the unyielding stance in the peace process. President Aliyev stated in an interview with *Euronews* that peace between peoples is hindered by individuals like the so-called leaders in Karabakh, and that people should not blindly follow them[8].

The disinformation campaign that spreads the allegations of "ethnic cleansing against Armenians on national and international platforms in the context of the Lachin corridor issue is fundamentally related to the topic of Karabakh Armenians' rights, which Armenia frequently raises within the framework of the peace agreement. During negotiations, Armenia asserts that it will recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity only when the rights of Karabakh Armenians are guaranteed, and it continues to search for a way that will provide official status to the Karabakh Armenians. However, this stance contradicts the principle of respecting Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. By maintaining this stance, Armenia is pushing the final peace agreement process towards an unresolved status, a tactic employed numerous times throughout Armenia's foreign policy history. It thus becomes evident that Armenia aims to revert the status of the Karabakh issue into a frozen conflict and intends to provide a lifeline to the so-called leadership in Khankendi.

[1] Tutku Dilaver, Azerbaycan Karabağa Giden Yeni Yolu Açıyor, AVİM, 26 August 2022, 2023, https://avim.org.tr/tr/Analiz/AZERBAYCAN-KARABAG-A-GIDEN-YENI-YOLU-ACIYOR

[2] Azerbaycan askeri, Karabağ'da Ermeni silah konvoyunu yakaladı, çatışma çıktı, Aydınlık, 5 March 2023, https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/azerbaycan-askeri-karabagda-ermeni-silah-konvoyunu-yakaladi-catisma-cikti-azerbaycan-askerlerleri-ile-ermeni-gucleri-nicin-catisti-372649

[3] Ruslan Rehimov, Laçın Koridoru'nun başlangıcındaki sınır kontrol noktasına Azerbaycan bayrağı dikildi, Anadolu Agency, 26 April 2023, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/lacin-koridorunun-baslangicindaki-sinir-kontrol-noktasina-azerbaycan-bayragi-dikildi/2881631

[4] Anelise Borges, Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında barış mümkün mü? Aliyev ve Paşinyan yanıtladı, EuroNews, 1 August 2023, https://tr.euronews.com/2023/08/01/azerbaycan-ve-ermenistan-arasinda-baris-mumkun-mu-aliyev-ve-pasinyan-yanitladi.

[5] Azerbaycan, Laçın koridorunu geçici kapattı, Ermenistan uluslararası topluma çağrı yaptı, EuroNews, 11 July 2023, https://tr.euronews.com/2023/07/11/azerbaycan-lacin-koridorunu-geci-kapat-ermenistan-uluslararasi-topluma-cagri-yapti

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[6] Article 16, in *COMPREHENSIVE AND ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part*, Official Journal of the European Union, (2018): 12.

[7] EU Again Backs Baku, This Time Touting Azerbaijans Supply Line via Aghdam, Asbarez, 19 July 2023, https://www.asbarez.com/eu-again-backs-baku-this-time-touting-azerbaijans-supply-line-via-aghdam/.

[8] Anelise Borges, Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında barış mümkün mü? Aliyev ve Paşinyan yanıtladı, EuroNews, 1 August 2023, https://tr.euronews.com/2023/08/01/azerbaycan-ve-ermenistan-arasinda-baris-mumkun-mu-aliyev-ve-pasinyan-yanitladi.

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