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THE IMAGE OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR:  
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

MA thesis

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Tartu 2021

## **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to understand the image of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 from a constructivist perspective. It aims to provide insights on how 'war' can be a subject constructed by norms and meanings. More specifically, we pay attention on the role of the Internet and social media platforms in constructing the war image. This research conducts a discourse analysis within Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework of discourse. By deconstructing the storylines from government officials, think tanks and social communities through official websites, Twitter and Facebook, we are able to form the narratives of both sides which present the overall image of this war. The result illustrates that the narratives of both sides are contradicting with each other based on their different beliefs, values and the otherness they applied in their storylines.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research Problem- The Image of the Nagorno-Karabakh War

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the South Caucasus, featuring the rivalry between Armenians and Azerbaijanis<sup>1</sup>, has been considered as one of the most difficult conflicts to solve nowadays. It is a conflict with both complicated internal matters and geopolitical matters that are pulling bigger regional powers into the picture. The conflict involves debates ranging from historical and cultural legacies to the topics of self-determination and territorial integrity. While Armenians and Azerbaijanis are considered to be the mainly involved parties, Russia, Turkey and Iran are often considered by scholars as the regional players in the conflict. This variety of challenges led to a deadlock of the conflict with little effective third-party mediation. In 2020, we witnessed an escalation of the conflict in autumn, when both sides accused each other for the provocation of the war. Yet, this war had a new face when compared to the past. The available resources and tools in this digital era allowed parties from both sides to tell their part of the story to the world. By making use of the newly available empirical data, *the objective of this paper is to understand the image of the Nagorno-Karabakh war constructed by Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 2020.*

The war in 2020 is one of the examples of the emerging ‘Internet Wars’ in this digital era, when the Internet becomes the virtual battlefield of the war besides the actual military attacks launched. This study is approached by conducting a discourse analysis on the storylines presented to the world by both parties. Discourses from officials, think tanks and social communities of both sides are studied. By conducting a discourse analysis, we are able to deconstruct their discourses and understand the messages underneath. It enables us to identify the storylines from both sides. These storylines are parts of the narratives that the parties wish to tell the world. Thus, by understanding their storylines,

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<sup>1</sup> For the coherence of the paper, ‘Armenians’ and ‘Azerbaijanis’ are written in this order throughout the entire paper. It is based on the alphabetical order of their second English letters.

we are able to conclude their narratives. According to constructivism, these narratives construct the image of war the participants wish to present to the world.

As such, this paper could be important to provide references and insights on how discourses are constituted nowadays with the prevalence of social media or the Internet in general. On social media platforms, participants are allowed to engage and tell their storylines by utilising a variety of functions, such as attaching different resources to support their arguments with hyperlinks or resharing others' posts. Compared to the past when it often took a significant amount of time for knowledge and meanings to be transferred, interpreted and evolved, this process is speeded up by the available and handy communicative functions on social media nowadays. In addition to this, understanding the war image presented by participants from both sides allows researchers and policy makers to open another pathway to understand the meaning of war in the contemporary era. More specifically, this paper could possibly be able to provide an understanding on how 'war' could be a constructed concept.

The following explains the structure of this paper. With the research problem stated above, this chapter (chapter 1), the introductory part of this paper will be continued by an overview of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It will provide a brief explanation of the history and the complicated political matters involved in this conflict. Chapter 2 will explain the theoretical framework of studying war images. This chapter will start off by providing the readers a literature review of both the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the constructivist framework on studying war images. Then it will be continued by the author of this paper explaining the theory of discourse selected, in light of the theoretical framework applied in this paper. The paper will then proceed to the methodological chapter of this research (chapter 3), which will include an explanation on the empirical data collection and the overall structure of the analysis. Chapter 4 and 5 are the empirical chapters where in-depth analysis from the Armenian side and the Azerbaijani side will be written respectively. Each of these two chapters include three subchapters, presenting the three narratives from each side. The paper will be finally concluded by chapter 6 with a discussion of the limitations of this research and the possibility of further research on the topic.

Before going into the research, the author of this paper would like to express her gratitude to Johan Skytte Institute of Political Sciences and her thesis supervisor Dr. Eiki Berg. This thesis could not be completed without their guidance and support.

## **1.2 Overview of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict mainly involves two nations in the South Caucasus, i.e. Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh region is a region internationally recognised as a part of the Azerbaijani territory. Yet, the region is heavily inhabited by ethnic Armenians. It is neighboured by Armenia with seven surrounding districts occupied by Armenian forces before the war in 2020, which were considered by Armenia as buffer zones for security reasons. The region is also governed by a de facto government Republic of Artsakh.

There are still controversies over the history of the conflict. It could possibly date back to a thousand years ago. The tensions were intensified by the Russo-Turkish power struggle in the 19th century. When Russia was in control of the region, Armenians were favoured by Russia while Azerbaijanis were considered to be untrustworthy due to its linguistic affinities shared with the Turks (Cornell, 1999). Similarly, Armenians were untrusted by the Turks. The national hatredness has been growing from that point.

The noticeable rivalry between Armenians and the Turks (including the Turkic Azerbaijanis) was unveiled in the early 20th century. There was a widely recognised murder of Armenians committed by the Ottoman Empire during WWI. It is considered to be a genocide among Armenians but such genocide has been denied by Turkey.

### **The First Karabakh War**

While the conflict has a long history that could date back to earlier ages, the first Karabakh war officially started in 1988 when everything else of the USSR was also falling apart. During the Soviet period, the minority enclave inhabited by Armenians within the territory of Azerbaijan was established as an autonomous oblast (Britannica, 2020). When the Soviet period was collapsing, the fear of being ethnically cleansed by Azerbaijan

marked the movements of Armenians (Cornell, 1999). The movement of Armenians aiming for unifying Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia was also a result of the demonstrations during the Glasnost period, when movements typically escalated from an ecological level to a political level (Cornell, 1999). These movements led to the parliament of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) voting to unify with Armenia. Yet, things turned violent later with ethnic cleansing from both sides against the nationals of each other. Since 1993, seven districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh have been occupied by the Armenia forces as security zones surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The districts were retaken by the Azerbaijani forces during the war in 2020.

The ceasefire agreement of the First Karabakh War was signed in 1994, brokered by Russia. As a result of this war, there were a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons from both sides. Yet, with the support from Armenia, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh gained political control of the region and the surrounding districts.

### **Karabakh War in 2020**

After 1994, there were also constant clashes along the frontline between the two forces with military servicemen being killed. In 2020, it was escalated into a war in which a massive number of civilian casualties were reported by both sides.

27th September 2020 was the mostly recognised starting date of war in 2020 because of the attacks reported by both sides. There were multiple attempts of ceasefire deals but all failed as clashes continued and both sides accused each other of being the offensive. The war lasted till the 9th November when both sides finally signed a truce brokered by Russia. As the result of this war, Azerbaijan regained the control of the territory including the second largest city, i.e. Shusha and the seven districts which were under the control of Armenia before the war.

The war in 2020 ended in November when both parties came to a ceasefire brokered by Russia. Yet, the conflict remains uncertain in the future due to its complicated nature both internally and geopolitically. The Karabakh War in 2020 featured an 'Internet war' on social media platforms. Clashes between the two sides were observable on the Internet.

There were also occasions of false claims of attacks from both sides by posting photos and videos that were either irrelevant to the war or not up-to-date.

### **Historical Controversies**

One of the biggest controversies is the historical accuracy of the facts available about the region. Both Armenians and Turks had inhabited the region as an ethnic majority respectively in different time periods. Thus, this region has both Christian and Muslim heritages which Armenians and Azerbaijanis nowadays claim as the evidence of them being the ethnic origin of Nagorno-Karabakh. Such complicated ethnic history of the region can also be told by the name ‘Nagorno-Karabakh’, as it contains meanings stemming from Persian, Turkish and Russian linguistics (Cornell, 1999).

### **Complications of the Conflict**

The internal issues of both nations, the ethnic and religious hatredness stemmed from history have complicated the conflict. Most importantly, one of the complications of this conflict lies in the fact that it involves two de jure states and an unrecognised republic (Cornell, 1999).

Besides, while the conflict mainly involves the two South Caucasian nations, it is always viewed as a regional conflict since the power struggle between bigger regional powers such as Russia and Turkey is concerned. Even Iran is also sometimes considered as a party due to its strategic relationship with the South Caucasus. Although Russia has been the broker of ceasefire, it has been suspected that Russia attempts to remain both nations under its control by being the main supplier of arms to both countries (International Crisis Group, 2017).

On the other hand, Turkey has been suspected to be actively involved in the conflict. While the introduction of Turkish military equipment by the Azerbaijani forces could not possibly provide concrete evidence of Turkey intervening in the war in 2020, the public statement from the Turkish government on politically supporting Azerbaijan has undeniably illustrated its interest in the South Caucasus. While the current political relationship between Russia and Turkey remains seemingly stable, both of them are



asserting influence in the South Caucasus and attempting to keep the power of each other in check.

### **Mediation by Third Parties**

Mediation by third parties has been initiated on various occasions. Nonetheless, mediators are often mistrusted by both parties as they suspect the interests of the mediators and their ability to ensure stability in the region (International Crisis Group, 2017). Therefore, the international community has never been keen on dealing with this conflict. They have been “half-hearted at best and exiguous at worst” (Cornell, 1999, p.1) when it comes to mediation. Needless to mention, there are difficulties in third-party mediation also because of the respective national interests in the international community.

The current third-party mediation of the conflict mainly relies on the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, co-chaired by the US, Russia and France. Out of the three countries, Russia, is the most active in mediating the conflict by brokering truces for both wars in the late 90s and 2020. For the US, this conflict might not have been much of its national interest, considering the South Caucasus has always been under the political influence of the regional powers. It was especially true in 2020 with the US foreign policy under Trump’s administration. The stance of France on the issue has been highly suspected by Azerbaijan during the war in 2020, with Macron’s public statement of supporting Armenia, at least at a rhetorical level.

The future of Nagorno-Karabakh is still ambiguous due to the unresolved complicated nature of the conflict and the struggle of geopolitical power involved. The lack of interests among the international community to mediate this conflict leaves the future of the South Caucasus unstable.

## **2. Understanding War Image through Constructivism**

### **2.1 Literature Review on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

Since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has a long history with complicated political matters involved, it has been widely studied in the scholarship. Because of the internal and external matters involved, literature about this conflict has attempted to explain and interpret this conflict from various angles.

There is a considerable amount of literature studying this conflict in light of geopolitics. This conflict has been analysed as the power struggle of regional powers. Overall, when it is viewed under the light of geopolitics, it is often considered as a conflict under the power struggle of Turkey and Russia, this includes studies such as Companjen (2010), Baba & Önsoy, (2016) and Warhola & Bezci (2013). In fact, many of the studies have also included energy concerns in their analysis. Turkey is one of the focuses in these studies, such as the study conducted by Winrow (2013). Mohapatra (2017) suggests the concerns of geopolitics and energy security have become more important in the field of international relations nowadays.

The studies mentioned above focus more on the external matters of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While for internal matters, the conflict is often studied in the light of ethnic struggles and disputes. Some literature put the focus on the matter of independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. This topic has been more often discussed since the case of Kosovo, which is suggested to be a trigger of the trend of self-determination in different parts of the world. Secession of Nagorno-Karabakh is considered to be an internal power struggle that is subject to the calculation of available resources and international norms (Caspersen, 2013). Besides, their secession issue is believed to be complicated by ethnic struggles (Geukjian, 2016). There are also studies analysing the conflict in light of liberalism, suggesting how the liberal world order leads to the socialisation of non-state actors who advocate democratic values (Gardner, 2008). Overall, they suggest the internal matters of this conflict are difficult to solve due to the ineffective external help and mediations.

It is noticeable that some studies are conducted based on certain political interests. At the same time, there are studies particularly focusing on one party of the conflict when it comes to analysis. Although there have already been a significant amount of literature on this conflict, since the method of communication and the theories of international relations are constantly evolving, there is still a large room for interpreting this conflict and studying how this conflict could reflect upon our understanding about international relations.

## **2.2 The Constructivist Theory**

As mentioned, this research aims at understanding international relations from a constructivist perspective. The following will explain how the research problem of this paper is related to constructivism and how war image construction has been understood by scholars.

### **2.2.1 Constructivism and International Relations**

Unlike realist arguments which suggest states are the main driving actors in international relations, constructivists emphasise the importance of knowledge, meanings and perceptions constructed through social interactions. Constructivism suggests that norms and practices constitute international relations. For example, diplomatic practices constitute our understanding about state capacities (Farrell, 2002). Norms and practices also constitute actors and actions and regulate them by defining the appropriateness with social rules (Farrell, 2002). In fact, constructivism suggests our world is overall a socially constructed reality where knowledge and meanings are flexible and being shaped continuously. To be precise, knowledge is not absolute. Guzzini (2005) argues that we live in an intersubjective reality because knowledge and meanings, though exist, are altered through our interaction and usage. Guzzini (2005) explains that:

it is not subjective, since it exists independently of us to the extent that language is always more than its individual usages and prior to them. It is not objective, since it does not exist independently of our minds and our usage. (p.498)

Constructivism has become popular in the academic field as scholars have been identifying limitations that the traditional schools fail to overcome.

### **2.2.2 Literature Review on War Image Construction**

The understanding of war has been evolving. In light of the constructivist perspective, we could also understand war as a constructed subject. When we consider war as a constructed subject, we are suggesting that there is an image of war which is made up by norms and meanings. To be precise, it is the narratives told that construct the image. With the narratives from each side of the war, the image of the war becomes apparent. “While we have become accustomed to think in terms of national enemies, the truth is that a nation cannot hate, only citizens can” (Houten, 2013, p.6). According to Houten (2013), national enmity is a collective concept. In other words, it is people’s perspectives that construct what national enemies mean to them. Similarly, it would be people’s perspectives that construct the image of war.

In fact, studying the construction of war images is not something new in the academic field. The construction of war images is often studied by conducting a discourse analysis (O’Tuathail, 2002; Montgomery, 2005; O’Tuathail 2008; Steuter & Wills, 2009; Hodges, 2011) or a visual framing analysis (Griffin & Lee, 1995; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017) depending on the empirical data the authors attempted to analyse. Discourse analysis is conducted for analysing textual empirical sources in speeches, interviews, and news channels while visual framing analysis is applied to analysing images, photos and pictures published on visual mediums.

Regardless of the research methods on war image construction, media representation of wars has been widely discussed. It has always been criticised as biased and promoting escalation of wars (Griffin & Lee, 1995; Kempf, 2006). Media is often selective on the sources when they present them to the world. Tuchmann (1978), Herman and Chomsky (1988) suggest that media content is never independent from political, social and ideological influence, as cited by Fahmy and Kim (2008). For instance, they might put emphasis on certain issues and let people use the resources they put out for discussion and interpretation, according to Tuchman (1978) as stated by Fahmy and Kim (2008).

In recent years, communication has become more convenient on the Internet. The consumption of news by individuals through social media platforms has been increasing. According to Biały (2017), the Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 2016 with a result showing that 62% of US citizens read news from social media platforms, regardless of the variation in frequency. It illustrates the significance of the role of social media on spreading information and knowledge. As such, storylines could be told through different media channels, having different levels of participants engaging in their storytelling. Social media has become an indispensable medium for storylines to be created, told, interpreted and made use of. As such, social media has become an important non-state actor to construct norms in our world. It also opens up the opportunities for both the bottom-level participants to express their opinions and the opportunities for researchers to conduct analysis on the content posted online.

Undoubtedly, the role of social media in spreading information and shaping politics has been widely recognised. For instance, the conflicts in Ukraine and Middle East have demonstrated how social media maximise military operations such as intelligence collection and cyber warfare (Biały, 2017). The Ukrainian Crisis has also been studied by Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017). According to Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010), as cited by Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017), war has been connected by different levels of participants in a way that was impossible before the Internet era. Yet, Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) also suggests that such phenomenon makes patterns of war framing become more difficult to predict.

Since there is the difficulty to predict war framing as mentioned by Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) and that currently there is still inadequate research on the effect of discourse on social media, it is believed that a study conducted on social media would be beneficial to enhance our understanding of war and international relations in the contemporary era.

Empirical wise, while there is a wealthy amount of research conducted on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as mentioned in the previous section, there has not yet been adequate discourse analysis conducted on the narratives presented by the two conflict parties. The conflict escalation in 2020 with the utilisation of media platforms by different levels of

participants creates an opportunity for a discourse analysis that allows us to understand the construction of the war image.

## **2.3 War Image and Discourse Analysis**

Understanding how people perceive is significant for understanding how a war is constructed. In order to understand their perception, the most practical way would be studying the meanings they present to the world. Discourse analysis is the best tool to achieve this goal.

### **2.3.1 The Discourse Theories**

The following explains why discourse analysis should be applied in this research and which discourse theoretical framework is applicable for this empirical case. The detailed research design based on the chosen method of discourse analysis will be explained in the chapter of methodology.

Discourse analysis is often applied when we attempt to understand the world through a constructivist perspective. Discourse analysis holds the assumption that norms in our society are given birth by discursive practices and representations are fundamental for understanding our reality (Holzschieder, 2014). Taking language as the fundamental access to our reality, discourse emphasises the shaping process of meanings is achieved with the representations created by the usage of language (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). At the same time, these representations themselves are also contributing to the construction of reality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, discourse analysis has become a common tool in constructivist research.

There are various types of discourses analysis, with Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) being the most renowned in the field. Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory is a post-structuralist perspective which holds assumption that our objective world is made up by discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Besides, it also emphasises discourses are constantly competing and conflicting with each other on significations and none of the discourses can solely structure the social

reality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, it is also important to note that their theory does not reject the independent existence of facts or events in our world but emphasises how meanings can be generated and understood just through our discourses (Dabirimehr & Fatmi, 2014).

On the other hand, Fairclough's CDA emphasises that our reality is not solely made up by discourses as discourses are also influenced by social practices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These social practices include political culture and norms of that particular society. From Fairclough's perspective, language is also being historically situated and involved in a dialectical relationship with different social aspects (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, Laclau and Mouffe's approach and Fairclough's CDA are located in different positions on the constructivist spectrum.

By taking references from Kratochwil (2001) and Wendt (1999), Holzscheiter (2014) emphasises there is a distinction between the perspectives of thick and thin constructivism. In her article, she states that thick constructivism perceives norms and social facts as the sole elements constituting our realities. While for thin constructivism, she states that such norms and social facts are believed to be also possible to exist independently in individuals' minds and are often considered to be one of the social logics constituting our realities. By citing Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), Rear and Jones (2013) suggests that while Laclau and Mouffe's theory is located at the opposite end against the Marxist theory, Fairclough's CDA would be located somewhere between them. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe's approach is close to the thick constructivist framework suggested by Kratochwil and Wendt, while Fairclough's approach is closer to the thin constructivist approach.

### **2.3.2 The Applicability of Laclau and Mouffe's Framework**

This research introduces a methodological design inspired by the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe since this research holds the assumption which suggests the conflicting discourses from Armenians and Azerbaijanis constitute the image of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, i.e. the meaning of this war in our social reality. We believe that the image of this war is undoubtedly a constructed concept that is always contested by different discourses reflecting the struggles between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This is

just as Laclau and Mouffe's theory suggests, i.e. the social phenomena are constantly contested by different versions of definitions because of the existing social struggles (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

At the same time, we also believe that the narratives constituting the image of Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 are the discursive representation of identities the two parties hold. In other words, the image of the war they present to the world reflects their identification of themselves regarding the war. In fact, according to Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), Laclau has also adopted Jacques Lacan's idea in the discourse theory, i.e. the subject is constantly being constructed through discourses. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) also states that in Lacan's idea, discourses provide certain instructions for people to identify themselves with certain labels. In this research, we believe the discourses from both Armenians and Azerbaijanis provide criterion for the identification of the 'self' and 'other'. It implies that only certain qualities being fulfilled could be considered as the 'self'. These certain qualities could be identified from the discourses they produce. Thus, conducting the research within Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theoretical framework is reasonable as we believe there is otherness in their storylines that defines the narratives.

Although it is commonly known that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse is considerably built on the post-structuralist theories by borrowing ideas from post-structuralist philosophers such as Foucault, we believe their theory of discourse is also beneficial for this research. Post-structuralist perspectives emphasise that in order to understand certain phenomena, one has to study how such knowledge is produced. The epistemological approach of post-structuralists could help us understand the meanings of our words and why they are used. As such, it allows us to deconstruct the storylines participants present to the world, which is a crucial step for us to reconstruct the narratives that constitute the image of the war.

While we also hold the belief that the discourses observed are also constituted by the political culture and social practices, understanding how such social practices contribute to the discursive practices is not one of the objectives of the paper. It would be irrelevant to the research question of this paper, i.e. the image of Nagorno-Karabakh war presented. Besides, taking social practices into account requires further analysis, which would be



out of the scope of this paper. Thus, Fairclough's CDA is not applicable in this research. Nonetheless, we should not rule out the possibilities that certain phenomena could be observable among the discourses from different levels of participants within the same society. That is, for instance, how statements from government officials were being interpreted and reproduced by other participants. Yet, these observations could hardly be the sufficient evidence to point out the existence and influence of certain social practices in that society.

Besides, it is important to note that while discourse analysis can be also applied in analysing individual identity, only collective identity from both sides are focused as it is believed that the storylines they produced were based on their collective identity, i.e. their national identities of being Armenians and Azerbaijanis respectively.

Finally, while visual framing analysis has been particularly applied for analysing pictures and images presented by the media, this paper conducts a discourse analysis under which visual images are studied and analysed in the same way as textual content. We believe images and texts have the same discursive power in producing storylines in this empirical case. It is also explained by Jørgensen & Phillips (2002) that visual images are commonly analysed as if they were textual content within discourse analysis in general.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter is going to explain the methodology of the research. The analysis involves three main steps. Firstly, we will collect the empirical data. Secondly, we will deconstruct the storylines observed by applying Laclau and Mouffe's approach to discourse. In order to do this, we will deconstruct the discourse the participants produced through the textual and visual content they uploaded. Thirdly, we will reconstruct their storylines into narratives and present them in this paper. As a result of reconstruction, these narratives from both sides are believed to be presenting the image of this war. The narratives from the two sides will be written in this paper separately.

#### **3.1 Terminology**

The following explains the key terms applied in the analysis.

War image- War image is the meaning of the war in our social reality. 'Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020' is regarded as a floating signifier in this research, the meaning of which will be explained in the following. The signified content of this 'war' is contested by the narratives presented by each side of the conflict.

Narratives- Narratives present the image of war. We assume the narratives from the two sides are conflicting with each other. We assume that all of the narratives from each side are surrounded by the same ideology respectively, such as 'democracy'. The ideologies supporting the narratives are considered to be the central signifiers, which will be explained in the following.

Storylines- Storylines are what we deconstruct and attempt to understand in this research through discourse analysis of the empirical data collected. Narratives presented in this paper are constituted by the deconstructed storylines told by different levels of participants from each party.

Signifiers- According to Dabirimehr and Fatmi (2014), signifiers in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse are "abstract or real entities, concepts, phrases, and symbols. If they

are located in a particular discourse, they will imply some specific meanings. Meaning and implications of a signifier are called signified ”(p. 1284). The meaning of signifiers and signified content as explained by the quote will also be applied in this research.

Central signifiers- A central signifier in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory is suggested to “a person, symbol, or concept around which other signifiers are collected and articulated” (Dabirimehr & Fatmi, 2014, p.1284). In other words, the signified content of other signifiers is assigned according to these central signifiers.

Floating signifiers- According to Dabirimehr and Fatmi (2014), the signified content of floating signifiers can never be fixed due to how different political parties attempt to provide their own meanings to the terms. In this research, for instance, the Nagorno-Karabakh war is a floating signifier as different groups of people were trying to assign and fix the signified content of this signifier in accordance with their wish and belief.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

Since this research aims at understanding the image constructed and presented to the world, only English materials published and posted via media by both sides will be analysed. Besides, the research only looks at the content released during the period from the 27th September 2020 (the start of the 2020 war) to the 18th October 2020 (The day after the announcement of the first ceasefire). It is believed that the storylines told within these three weeks is sufficient for the deconstruction and the analysis of the hidden messages about the war. The materials studied in this paper includes the hyperlinks attached by the posts or the articles released if there are any.

The image of the Nagorno-Karabakh war is constructed by conflicting discourses. These conflicting discourses came from the two opposing sides involved in the war, i.e. Armenians and Azerbaijanis. At the same time, there were various levels of participants from each side producing their own discourses. In this research, we will study the discourses produced by different levels of participants from the top level (elites) to the bottom level (general public) within a society respectively. In this methodological design, participants from the two sides are categorised into three levels:

- 1) Government officials and elites
- 2) Think tanks (experts and scholars)
- 3) Social communities

Data from all the three levels will be collected via social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter<sup>2</sup>) while traditional media is also observed for the data from the levels of officials and think tanks. Among all the social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook are two of the most popular platforms used around the world. Twitter is a platform more suitable for celebrities or important figures to establish their personal profiles. Therefore, it is believed that Twitter is a better platform for data collection from individual figures. On the other hand, unlike Twitter, Facebook allows individuals from the communities to form groups on the platform and run the Facebook pages. Besides, Facebook allows users to write longer posts than Twitter. It is believed that the better networking functions of Facebook allow more people to engage themselves in the social communities and express their thoughts.

In the following, data collection from each level of participants will be explained in detail.

### **Government officials and elites**

For the level of officials, Twitter accounts of government officials and the content released by the news agencies will be analysed. During the set time frame for observation, government officials from both sides of the conflict were active on Twitter by posting statements, announcements and related interviews that supported the stance of the government. At the same time, news agencies actively released news updates of the war and the actions taken from both parties.

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<sup>2</sup> Although posts on Twitter are commonly known as ‘tweets’, all the posts from social media platforms, including both Twitter and Facebook, are all referred to ‘posts’ in this paper for coherence.

From the Armenian side, the content and materials released from the Twitter accounts of Nikol Pashinyan (Prime Minister of Armenia) and Armen Sarkissian (President of Armenia) will be studied. While from the Azerbaijani side, the Twitter account of Ilham Aliyev (President of Azerbaijan) will be studied. The content studied includes the hyperlinks and media attached with the Twitter posts. This selection of elites is based on the political institutions of the countries. In Armenia, it is observed that there is a clearer distribution of duties between the head of state (President) and the head of government (Prime Minister). On the other hand, this distribution of duty is ambiguous in Azerbaijan. Besides, Pashinyan and Aliyev were the representatives to sign the ceasefire truce of the war in 2020. Thus, we believe that Pashinyan, although not being the head of state, also has had a very important and active role on the Nagorno-Karabakh issues.

The content released by news agencies is considered to be discourses from the level of officials as they support the government's stance and points of view. All the data from news agencies will be collected from their official websites. For the Armenian side, the content released by Armenpress will be studied and analysed. Armenpress is a leading state-run news agency in Armenia. The agency is aiming at countering Azerbaijani propaganda and drawing international attention to Turkey's denial of Armenian genocide (Armenpress, n.d.). While for the Azerbaijani side, this research studies the content released by Azertag, News.Az and AzerNews during the set time frame for observation. According to the information and missions written on their websites, there are some differences among these three news agencies. Azertag is the only news agency that releases official government news (Azertag, n.d.). News.Az claims to be a private news agency with the aim of enhancing awareness of the international community about Azerbaijan (News.Az, n.d.). For AzerNews, it claims to be the first English news agency in Azerbaijan that has joined the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) (AzerNews, 2012). Yet, all the three Azerbaijani news agencies have the same objective and mission, i.e. enhance the awareness of the world about Azerbaijan. They are run under the approval and appreciation from the Azerbaijani government.

### **Think Tanks**

For the level of think tanks, not only the materials released officially from the websites of the organizations will be studied. The research will also look into the Twitter accounts

of the key spokespersons of the respective think tanks. Here is the list of think tanks that will be studied.

For the Armenian side:

Armenian Centre for National and International Studies (ACNIS)- It is a renowned think tank of national and international politics in Armenia that is based in Yerevan. According to their mission, one of their aims is to promote the pan-national discourses in Armenia (ACNIS, n.d.). The editorials and weekly updates released during the set time frame will be studied.

Regional Studies Center (RSC)- It is another renowned think tank based in Armenia and famous for regional politics and strategic analysis surrounding the South Caucasus (RSC, n.d.). Nonetheless, the official website of the think tank did not release any relevant data during the observed time frame. Thus, instead of the official website, the content and materials released by the Twitter account of the director of the think tank, i.e. Richard Giragosian, will be studied.

For the Azerbaijani side:

Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)- This think tank was established by President Aliyev in 2019. It is the main political think tank in the country conducting analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The content released both by the official website and the Twitter account of the board member Gulshan Pashayeva during the observed time frame will be studied.

### **Social Communities**

Data from the level of social communities will be collected through Facebook posts written by Facebook users from both sides during the observed time frame. In order to collect relevant data for analysis, the author of this paper will utilise the Facebook searching engine by searching relevant posts through specific hashtags. The chosen hashtags have a very high popularity in usage. On average, each of the hashtags has been

applied in approximately 50K posts. Facebook posts that contain the following hashtags will be studied in this research.

For the Armenian side:

#StopAzerbaijaniAggression

#StopTurkey

#ArtsakhStrong

For the Azerbaijani side:

#StopArmenianAggression

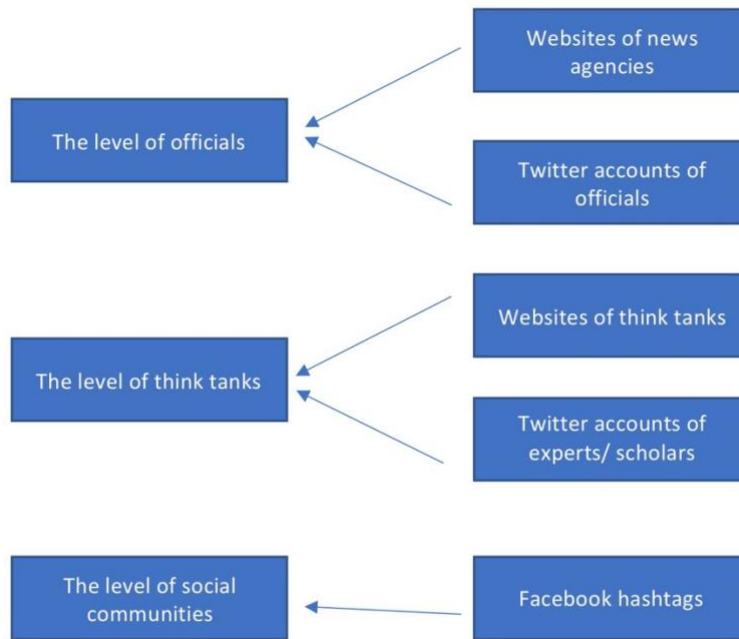
#StopArmenianOccupation

#KarabakhisAzerbaijan

Although social communities are generally interactive by engaging in conversations through the replies in the comment sections, these comments are not a part of the empirical data of this research. Only the Facebook posts, written as a single and a new post or status are considered as a part of the empirical data for this research. We believe studying these Facebook posts is adequate to understand their storylines.

The following is a diagram summarising the method of data collection.

Figure 1



As such, the narratives will be constituted with the storylines presented by these three levels of participants.

### 3.3 Expectations From the Analysis

By learning the conflict background in general, it is assumed that Armenians and Azerbaijanis produced conflicting narratives based on their beliefs of the history of Nagorno-Karabakh, how ‘territory’ should be defined and who were the offensive party that provoked the war. In other words, we assume there is a contradictory perception of the ‘self’ when compared to the ‘other’ described by the opposing side.

Besides, we assume the central signifiers are consistent among the narratives presented in this paper for both the Armenian side and the Azerbaijani side respectively. It is because we believe that all the storylines they told are based on their central beliefs. These central beliefs are assumed to be defining their identity and the values they embrace.

We also assume that their discourses were consumed and reproduced at the same time. The logic behind is the reflexive nature of constructed realities, as mentioned by Guzzini



(2005), where meanings are both consumed and produced simultaneously. It is assumed that different levels of participants were interactive in building their storylines. We expect to see this manifested in the form of, for instance, reshares of content released by other levels of participants through hyperlinks.

### **3.4 Structure of the Analysis**

For the empirical part of this paper, the narratives of Armenians will be presented first (chapter 4), followed by the narratives of Azerbaijanis (chapter 5). The data collected will be deconstructed and analysed. Then, they will be reconstructed into different narratives by the author of this paper. Each narrative portrays a version of the war image that the participants wished to present to the world. The whole image of war is constituted by the contested narratives.

As the result of the research, there are three narratives from each side of the war.

The narratives from the Armenian side:

1. Genocide 2.0
2. Patriotic War
3. War on Western and Christian Values

The narratives from the Azerbaijani side:

1. Armenian Terrorism
2. Liberation of 'Self'
3. International Justice

## 4. Armenian Narratives

### 4.1 Genocide 2.0

The narrative of this war as the second genocidal attempt committed by the Turks was prevalent among all the levels of participants from the Armenian side. In this narrative, although Azerbaijan was still the aggressor in the war, it was Turkey being portrayed as the main enemy. It illustrated Turkey having its own expansionist agenda behind its intervention in the conflict. Turkey aims to rebuild its Ottoman Empire by expanding its influence and conquering territories of others. Armenian people were suffering from an existential threat because of Turkey's genocidal policy carried out with Azerbaijan. Turkey had direct involvement in the war as the Azerbaijani military was backed and supported both politically and militarily by the Turkish government.

#### **“Existential Threat” of Armenians**

Different levels of participants portrayed this narrative by telling the world how Turkey has denied the genocide of 1.5 million Armenians committed in the last century. This war of Nagorno-Karabakh became Turkey's second attempt of genocide through the hands of the Azerbaijani forces.

At the level of officials, Pashinyan stated the intention of Turkey to commit a second genocide of Armenian people, with the aim of expanding its influence and territories. For multiple times, he used the word “existential threat” to describe the situation Armenian people were facing. In the interview with *The Spectator* (Komireddi, 2020), he said, “So far, Turkey has not only refused to recognise the fact of the Armenian genocide —Turkey is in fact continuing its genocidal policy towards the Armenians” (para. 14). On the other hand, according to Sarkissian, this second episode of genocide was carried out by Turkey through the hands of Azerbaijanis (Armenpress, 2020b). To explain how this war has become a genocide of Armenians, Pashinyan stated that an attack on Nagorno-Karabakh was an attack against the Armenian people because more than 80% of the population currently living there are ethnic Armenians (BBC News, 2020). In addition, in order to

illustrate the danger Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh were facing during the war, for instance, Pashinyan posted on Twitter about the destroyed homes in Martuni, a city in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Pashinyan, 2020c).

At the level of social communities, most of the participants were telling the world how Turkey and Azerbaijan were the aggressors in the war, targeting innocent Armenian civilians. There were a number of posts illustrating how the Armenian nation was under the existential threat with innocent civilians being attacked by the Azerbaijani forces. For example, there were photos comparing the first genocide and this war by putting them side to side and combined them into a single picture (Rubenyan, 2020). Such display of photo showed the similarity of what happened in the first genocide and what was happening in this war. Besides, the following are some quotes from Facebook illustrating the existential threat of Armenians under the attacks. “Azerbaijan has just dropped a bomb on the Armenian Church in the city of Shushi, Republic of NagornoKarabakh (Artsakh). How else you define a genocide? Pure barbarism” (Garo, 2020, para. 1). “Artsakh needs our help as 100K Ethnic Armenian Christians flee to escape yet another genocide by Turkey” (Zetilyan, 2020, para.1).

Moreover, the attacks against Stepanakert were often emphasised among the social communities. Photos of homes and family cars being destroyed were posted. Here are some of the quotes describing the attacks against Stepanakert. “Amnesty International confirms the usage of cluster munitions by the Azerbaijani armed forces backed by Turkey targeting civilian infrastructures and the Armenian population of Stepanakert, Capital of Artsakh NagornoKarabakh” (EAFJD, 2020, para. 1). “Stepanakert continues to be under fire. Civilian casualties are already confirmed. For the 8th day Azerbaijani and Turkish drones and air force target peaceful towns and civilian infrastructures” (Papoyan, 2020, para. 1).

At the same time, the social communities asked for the attention from the international community on the existential threat of Armenians. “As many of you might already know, Armenia is going through hard times, trying to stand firm and fight for its right to live as a nation” (Little Singers of Armenia, 2020, para. 3). The post of Marcianò (2020) suggested that, “In Armenia and Artsakh, the artists who pave the way towards the collective healing of our communities are now required to become soldiers to protect their

families and neighbors” (para. 2). There was a clear message from these posts, which were asking the international community for their help to fight against the brutal ‘other’.

Another reason it was considered as an existential threat to Armenians is because of the small-sized population of Armenia. The number of Armenian inhabitants living in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh is much smaller than the Armenian diaspora all over the world. The concern was also raised by Pashinyan and was more prevalently discussed by the social communities on Facebook. For example, according to Baghdassarian (2020), their brothers and friends were sent to the battlefield because of the full military mobilisation that came with the declaration of martial law. From such, it could be observed that Armenians were concerned of this war causing danger to their families and friends not just because of the attacks, but also because their loved ones were sent to the battlefield.

### **Turkey’s Expansionist Policy**

The narrative of genocide 2.0 was backed by participants from different levels by providing evidence on Turkey’s intention to expand its influence and territories.

Pashinyan expressed his concern about the Turkish expansionist policy multiple times. Particularly, in the interview with France 24 (2020), he suggested that Turkey will continue its expansionist policy after Armenia, just as how it has been doing in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. Pashinyan said, “Armenia is the last obstacle in the way of Turkey and their expansion towards the north, and the east” (France 24, 2020, para. 3). In another interview with Russia Today (Sarkissian, 2020), Sarkissian rebutted Turkey’s claim of protecting Azerbaijanis from Armenians, who intended to heat the pipeline that connects Baku. According to him, this claim was unreasonable because Turkey could have stopped the pipeline from being built in earlier stages. Thus, it was suggested that Turkey’s interference in the conflict had a political intention behind it.

At the level of think tanks, they also affirmed it was the expansionist policy of Turkey driving its decision to intervene in the conflict. Although it was not often explicitly emphasised that the war of Nagorno-Karabakh was the second genocide committed by

Turkey, a direct political and military involvement of Turkey in the war was affirmed. By citing Los Angeles Review of Books (2020), ACNIS (2020f) affirmed that Nagorno-Karabakh was being ethnically cleansed by Azerbaijan and Turkey with the Turkish expansionist agenda.

Moreover, they expressed the concern of the war being escalated to a regional one, pulling other bigger powers, such as Russia, Iran and China into the picture. For instance, in the editorial article ACNIS (2020a), it was mentioned that the war has been transformed from one between Armenians and Azerbaijanis into one between Armenians and Turks. The article also stated how the general public underestimated the intention and unpredictability of Turkey in the past couple of decades. Furthermore, according to another article ACNIS (2020c), the actions taken by Turkey have reflected the rise of the imperial ideology Neo-Ottomanism and Pan-Turkism, which is a threat challenging the current world order. This article suggested that while it is certainly threatening the countries with geographical proximity with Turkey, it is particularly dangerous to small countries such as Armenia. Thus, Armenian as a small nation, became the first to suffer from this expansionist policy. In addition, the Armenian scholar Giragosian, the director of RSC, posted various articles he wrote about this conflict on Twitter during the time frame observed. He suggested that Turkish expansionism has become a regional struggle with the confrontation between the bigger powers, Russia and Turkey (Giragosian, 2020a; Giragosian, 2020b). Besides, in these articles, he also argued that this war has illustrated the possible instability in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region.

At the level of social communities, they were echoing the messages the other levels are expressing. They also suggested it was the Turkish expansionist agenda being involved and Azerbaijan's policies being led by the Turkish administration. For example, in a post written by Marcianò (2020), it argued that "a war was started by Azerbaijan, under the military and political leadership of Turkey" (para. 1). In fact, there were many Facebook posts telling the world that Turkey was a terrorist. For instance, by listing the countries Turkey had problems with, Ohanian (2020) urged the world to recognise Turkey as a terrorist country since it had problems with every country. At the same time, the social communities directly accused Turkey of being the sponsor of ISIS in the region, who aimed to commit genocide on Armenians (Vahanyan, 2020). Azerbaijan was considered to be an ally of Turkey. Therefore, Azerbaijan was also considered as a terrorist country.

Moreover, in one of the posts (Gabyan, 2020), there was a video attached portraying the Turkish President Erdogan as the new ‘Hitler’ by giving him an alternative name ‘Erdogitler’. The video attempted to draw the attention of the audience to look at the similarities of what happened in WWII and what was happening to the Armenian people in this war. In the same video, Aliyev was portrayed as the puppet under the control of the Turkish government. This post has been shared more than 8,000 times. There was another post putting Hitler and Erdogan’s pictures side to side, illustrating how much their faces looked alike (Hovhannes Switch Stepanyants, 2020). By portraying Erdogan as Hitler, it expressed a clear message to the world that the actions taken by Erdogan were equivalent to what Hitler did in the past. Besides, another post on Facebook (Avedikian, 2020) described Erdogan as a ‘monster’. “Terrorist Erdogan is pouring oil on fire and destabilizing the region. The monster has officially bragged about it” (Avedikian, 2020, para. 1). Erdogan was not only considered as the new Hitler or a monster, but also a self-identified Sultan. “It’s the same goal that almost all Sultans had throughout the history of Turkey: make Istanbul the center of the world by conquering it” (Barseghyan, 2020, para. 2). In the same post, it was also stated that, “Just take a look at the map. On the left is Turkey and on the right are all the nations that are related to Turkey ethnically. We Armenians are like a stick stuck on their throat” (Barseghyan, 2020, para. 1). On one hand, these posts described the war as a part of the terrorist policy of Turkey, they also clearly indicated the existential threat that Armenians were suffering under Turkey’s terrorist agenda. In addition, when looking at the Facebook posts through the particular hashtags picked for this research, it was noticeable that people also used other hashtags on the same posts. Although not as prevalent as the hashtags we studied for this research, hashtags such as “StopErdogan” and “StopGenocide” were also used in the posts studied. Such usage of hashtags, again, illustrated the storyline of Turkey being the evil ‘other’ who was committing a genocide against Armenians and that its actions had to be stopped.

### **Turkey’s Military involvement**

Turkey’s military involvement in this narrative emphasised how history has been repeated. As suggested, participants argued that this war was the second genocide committed by Turkey. In fact, Turkey’s military involvement in this war became the supporting

evidence of their narrative about this war being the second genocide. Participants across the levels were telling the world how Turkey was directly intervening in the conflict with its military involvement. According to them, Turkish military equipment was being adopted by the Azerbaijani forces. The equipment employed included the F-16 combat aircraft and Turkish drones. Turkey was also accused of bringing Syrian militants to the battlefield.

At the level of officials, Pashinyan pointed out in *The Washington Post* that the attacks launched by Azerbaijan against the Verdenis area with a Turkish F-16 shot down a S-25 fighter from the Armenian side (Ignatius, 2020). Pashinyan also accused Turkey of bringing forces from the Middle East to Nagorno-Karabakh in a number of his Twitter posts during the observed time frame.

Similarly, at the level of think tanks, ACNIS (2020b, 2020d) suggested the possibility of Turkey's direct military involvement by citing articles written by different Western media channels e.g. *New York Times* and *Forbes*. This included Turkey recruiting Syrian refugees to the Nagorno-Karabakh battlefield and its provision of military equipment and training to the Azerbaijani forces.

At the level of social communities, many of the posts were condemning the military involvement of Turkey. Their posts often echoed the officials, such as pointing out the employment of Turkish F-16 aircraft by the Azerbaijani forces. In general, the storyline on military involvement of Turkey from the social communities was consistent with other levels. Again, such argument about the Turkish military involvement became their evidence of their narrative, suggesting the history of genocide being repeated.

### **Conclusion of the Narrative**

In the narrative of genocide 2.0, Armenians attempted to assign “genocide 2.0” as the signified content of this war. In this narrative, the war was considered to be the second genocide committed by the brutal ‘other’, i.e. Turkey, against the Armenian ‘self’, which was the victim of this war. In fact, the ‘self’ as a nation was emphasised. As mentioned, there were Armenians posting photos of the first genocide and compared them to what happened in this war. From this, we could observe how this war triggered the collective

memory of the 'self' as a victimised and traumatised nation. In other words, their collective identity in this narrative was a traumatised nation that was facing the existential threat repeatedly because of the brutal 'other'.

According to them, the followings are the evidence of this war being the second genocide. Firstly, Armenians witnessed their innocent civilians being killed. Secondly, they saw how Turkey had problems with various countries. They believed Turkey was intervening in this war in accordance with its expansionist agenda. Thirdly, they pointed out there was suspicious Turkish military involvement in the war, which included bringing international terrorists to the battlefield.

For Azerbaijan, they were on the same side with Turkey, being the brutal 'other' against innocent Armenian civilians. Yet, it is important to note that Azerbaijan's policies were driven by Turkey in this narrative. According to them, Azerbaijan was a puppet controlled by the Turkish government.



## **4.2 Patriotic War**

This is a narrative where the ‘nation’ was emphasised. In this narrative, the war was a patriotic war to Armenians because Armenians around the world were fighting for the entire nation. Armenians in Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and all over the world were one nation standing together. In this narrative, national unity across borders was the most important component of ‘self’. This ‘self’ had an ethnic liberation struggle because the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh could not unite with Armenia. This ethnic struggle could only be resolved through self-determination. With this national unity, the ‘self’ was strong enough to stand against the evil ‘other’, i.e. Turkey and Azerbaijan.

This is a narrative mostly constructed by the officials and the social communities. The level of think tanks neither explicitly portrayed it as an ethnic liberation struggle nor demonstrated an apparently patriotic spirit.

### **Ethnic Liberation Struggle- Self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh**

The war was portrayed as an ethnic struggle in which the Armenian nation could only be liberated when Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh were able to achieve complete independence from Azerbaijan through self-determination. The Armenian side emphasised that Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh had the rights of self-determination and their independence should be recognised by the international community. During the war in 2020, Armenians were fighting at the frontline because the international community has been failing to recognise the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Both the levels of officials and think tanks, to a varied extent respectively, portrayed the war as one between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. While at the level of social communities, such differentiation was ambiguous. Nonetheless, many of the Facebook posts still emphasised Armenians all over the world were trying to assist those living in Nagorno-Karabakh to gain their recognition of independence.

At the level of officials, it was clearly stated by Pashinyan that the role of the entire Armenian nation is to assist and support the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh for their

rights to self-determination, according to his interview with France 24 (2020). He pointed out that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict nowadays is not an Armenian-Azerbaijan one but one between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan (France 24, 2020). In another interview with *The Spectator* (Komireddi, 2020), Pashinyan also suggested the essence of the conflict does not lie in the matters of territorial disputes. He stated that the main issue of this conflict is how Azerbaijan has failed to recognize the self-determination of people in Nagorno-Karabakh and how it has been violently oppressing the peaceful movements of self-determination (Komireddi, 2020). Pashinyan posted a number of photos on Twitter showing the Armenian diaspora asking for recognition of independence of Nagorno-Karabakh with the national flags being waved all over the world (Pashinyan, 2020h). Thus, there was a clear message in Pashinyan's discourse that Armenian unity in this war referred to the support to the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and their rights to self-determination. Besides, to Pashinyan, when the Armenian nation was united, it would be victorious for the nation. As what he wrote on twitter, "For the fatherland, for victory" (Pashinyan, 2020b, para. 2).

At the level of think tanks, there was no obvious or specific focus on the rights of self-determination during the time frame observed. Nonetheless, similar to Pashinyan, they were also calling the war the "Artsakh-Azerbaijan dispute" (ACNIS, 2020f, para. 3). The name 'Artsakh' has the implication of self-determination of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, we could observe that at the level of think tanks, this war was also considered as an ethnic struggle between Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

While at the level of social communities, by using the hashtag #ArtsakhStrong, the Armenian diaspora were writing posts to express their support of the rights to self-determination of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. They believed self-determination is the fundamental right of the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. "They are now on the forefront of civilization fighting an enemy that has no regard for international law and human rights. They are fighting for their fundamental rights to self-determination" (Stambulyan, 2020, para. 2). It was also clearly illustrated that this liberation struggle was an ethnic struggle at the level of social communities. For example, by quoting an international lawyer Alfred de Zayas, Ghaplanyan (2020) suggested on Facebook that "It is time to reject the obsolete idea of one ethnic group ruling over another

ethnic group” (para. 1). It pointed out that people from Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh belong to different ethnic groups. Thus, Nagorno-Karabakh should no longer be ruled by Azerbaijan. Moreover, in a post written by Boycott Turkey (2020), It was pointed out that according to the UNSC resolutions, Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region have been considered as a party involved in the conflict. This post also emphasised that the Armenian people of the Nagorno-Karabakh region have never been recognised as a part of Azerbaijan.

### **National Unity as the Strength at the War**

At both the level of officials and the level of social communities, Armenians emphasised national unity as a part of their ‘self’ against the others. To Armenians, the ‘self’ was strong in the war because the nation was united. The ultimate message presented by the social communities regarding national unity was how the war has brought the Armenian nation together. Furthermore, it was stressed that even though Armenia is a country with a small population, the nation is strong because Armenians all over the world were united and the Armenian soldiers were brave. In this narrative, it emphasised a nation should not be determined by borders. In other words, the defensive ‘self’ of Armenians in this war was borderless.

For instance, Pashinyan emphasised that in order to win the war, Armenians had to be united. In one of his posts on Twitter (Pashinyan, 2020a), he said:

All Armenians must unite to defend our history, our homeland, identity, our future and our present. And we will win and there is only one prerogative, that we promise ourselves that we won't retreat a single millimeter from defending our people and our Artsakh. (Para. 1)

Unity was portrayed by Armenians as their approach to peace and their embracement of the value of human rights. The demonstration of unity of Armenians all over the world was the most observable at the level of social communities. The photos uploaded by social communities about the peaceful movements for independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and condemnation of terrorism demonstrated their desire to portray Armenian unity as borderless. At the same time, they told the world that Armenians and the Armenian Army

were fearless when it came to protecting their nation. For example, various posts were showing the Armenian Army dancing before going into the battlefield, such as the post uploaded by Armenians in Lebanon (2020). They illustrated the Armenian spirit by telling the world how the diaspora were coming back to their homeland for the patriotic fight. For example, a post was showing a group of diaspora cheering on the plane during their flight to Yerevan (Jacobs, 2020). They also suggested both Armenian men and women were embracing this national spirit. Seeds Of Armenia (2020) told the world with photos that Armenian women were strong and brave to join the frontline and protect their homeland. By showing the photos, this post indicated these Armenian women were role models for Armenian young girls.

Moreover, it was especially the social communities who attempted to demonstrate they were striking for peace in a peaceful manner. They wished to portray that the peaceful ‘self’ was distinctive from the brutal ‘other’. For instance, there were posts expressing their regards to Nagorno-Karabakh through art forms, such as music. “Sometimes music speaks more than words” (Garabedian, 2020, para. 1). “Not all weapons are deadly, music is one of the most important weapons that has for centuries inspired, motivated, united, and fueled hope in times of war” (Art Simon Production, 2020, para.1). Another example to illustrate how they emphasised they were demonstrating in a peaceful manner could be the video of Armenians in Czech Republic standing in silence with banners in their hands condemning Azerbaijani aggression (Ghazaryan, 2020).

### **Conclusion of the Narrative**

In this narrative, the war in 2020 signified a patriotic mission of the entire Armenian nation. As mentioned, the ‘self’, i.e. the Armenian nation, regardless of where they were located, were unified in the war to stand against the ‘other’. The ‘self’ was borderless. While the ‘other’, i.e. Turkey and Azerbaijan were brutal. Because the Armenian nation was unified, they were the stronger party in the war.

Besides, ‘unity of the Armenian nation’ here signified the peaceful movements of Armenians around the world and across borders. These peaceful movements had two objectives. They asked for international recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh independence and the condemnation of terrorist activities conducted by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

### **4.3 War on Western and Christian Values**

Similar to the narrative of Genocide 2.0, the narrative of war on Western and Christian values portrayed the brutality of Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, unlike Genocide 2.0, Armenians in this narrative were portrayed as ‘saving the world from the evils’. While Genocide 2.0 described how the brutality was threatening the ‘self’ of Armenians as a nation, this narrative took the ‘self’ to a global level. It portrayed how the world suffered from the brutality of Turkey and Azerbaijan. The ‘self’ in this narrative was democratic, humane and legitimate. According to them, the Western and Christian values were the universal values of human rights embraced by civilised societies. While the ‘other’ was authoritarian, terrorist and illegitimate, who undermined the Western and Christian values of human rights. It is a narrative in which Armenians were fighting for the world to protect human rights. In this narrative, countries which embrace the same values with Armenia should take up the responsibility and help Armenia fight against the evil ‘other’. The international community were condemned by Armenians because of how they failed to act upon such responsibility.

#### **Fighting against International Terrorism**

Labelling the war as a part of the international terrorism, Armenians emphasised it was a threat to the civilisation. Besides, international terrorism in this narrative was often associated with radical Islamic ideologies.

On Twitter, Pashinyan mentioned that, “This terrorism equally threatens the United States, Iran, Russia, and France” (Pashinyan, 2020e, para. 1). When Pashinyan was explaining the reason Turkey was committing the second genocide of Armenians, he suggested it was the Turkish expansionist agenda at play (France 24, 2020). He also stated that, “Don’t be surprised if they attempt to incorporate into their empire not only the Greek islands but expand further into continental Europe. If Turkey succeeds in this, wait for them in Vienna” (France 24, 2020, para. 5). Pashinyan’s statements clearly pointed out it was

Turkey committing international terrorism. If it was not stopped, not just Armenia but the global security would also be threatened.

At the level of social communities, Armenian diaspora all over the world were urging the international community not to stay silent to the brutality of Azerbaijan and Turkey, by providing photos as evidence of them attacking the civilian homes. The social communities also photoshopped pictures to tell the world this war was driven by international terrorism. For instance, the post written by Beberian (2020) suggested this was “a war against civilization” (para. 1) with a picture featuring Turkey as a terrorist. There were also various posts calling this war a war crime. For example, the post of Deem Communications (2020) was calling it a war crime and attaching pictures that requested different countries to stop the war crime and protect the respective Western values of human rights these countries claim to uphold.

In fact, Armenians illustrated what would happen to the world if the terrorism was not stopped. “Azerbaijani-Turkish union with the radical Islamic groups attacked Artsakh. They are targeting the peaceful population and the civil infrastructures, which can lead to an environmental disaster” (Vardanian, 2020, para. 2). Besides, Khzrtian (2020) suggested the attacks by the Azerbaijani side during the outbreak of Covid-19 created more political instability and turmoil on a global scale. It illustrated there was international terrorism involved in this war and global disasters could be waiting ahead. They asked for the international community to take actions and stop this terrorism before it is too late.

### **Democratic ‘Self’ VS Authoritarian ‘Other’**

In this narrative, another noticeable storyline was the otherness applied between democracy and dictatorship. It was about dictatorship as the evil ‘other’ challenging humanity by attacking the democratic ‘self’. The Armenian side was representing the democratic side in this war.

At the level of officials, Pashinyan clearly stated that the Armenian side was fighting for democracy. In the interview with *The Spectator* (Komireddi, 2020), he said, “It is a fight for democracy because it is the war of dictatorship against democracy” (para. 26).

This was also echoed by the level of think tanks. Giragosian wrote in *Institut Montaigne* (2020) that the danger Azerbaijan posed to the world came from its lack of legitimacy as an undemocratic authoritarian regime. In that article, he also suggested such authoritarian nature being in contrast with Armenia’s democracy was a reason behind its attacks. To emphasise the contrast between Azerbaijan’s autocracy and Armenia’s democracy, Giragosian wrote that, “While Armenia has emerged as a fully respected and legitimate democracy since its 2018 revolution, the political power in Azerbaijan is derived from family, with power passing from father-to-son through the rule of the Aliyev dynasty” (*Institut Montaigne*, 2020, para. 6). By describing the authoritarian nature of Azerbaijan as dangerous, it was consistent with the arguments about this war being fought against threatening ideologies.

Similarly, the social communities also spoke against the evil ‘other’ by labelling the difference between a regime of dictatorship and democracy. For example, when describing the brutal aggression of Turkey and Azerbaijan, Nazaretyan (2020) stated, “This is what happens when a democratic state deals with a dictatorship sultanate duo where the presidency is passed from father to son” (para. 7). Iskajyan (2020) also mentioned that, “Dictatorship of Aliyev family, where foreign journalists and all social media channels are banned, continues to attack together with Terrorist Erdogan” (para. 2).

### **Christian ‘Self’ VS Muslim ‘Other’**

Under the narrative of fighting against international terrorism, Armenians’ claim of protecting Christian values from the radical Islamic terrorism was observable. This storyline was the most prevalent at the level of social communities. Armenians considered themselves as the Christian ‘self’. This Christian ‘self’, similar to the democratic ‘self’ and the ‘self’ that embraces the Western values of human rights, was rhetorically associated with the rest of the world who shared the same values, including most of the

Western countries. In this storyline, the Muslim ‘other’ was considered to be invasive because this ‘other’ was threatening to the Christian values that the ‘self’ upholds.

The Christian ‘self’ was portrayed as defensive in the war. There was a post written by a page called This is Christian Mesopotamia. In the post, an old woman holding a gun was shown in the photos (This is Christian Mesopotamia, 2020). In the same post, it was stated that “Elderly Armenian Christian grandmother protects her home against the army of Azerbaijan” (This is Christian Mesopotamia, 2020, para. 1). The Christian ‘self’ was defending themselves because they were threatened by radical Muslims. In fact, Armenians believed Turkey and Azerbaijan were being international terrorists not only because of the employment of the Syrian mercenaries. A post written by Boris Abadzhyan for Missouri (2020) condemned the use of the word “Ghazwa” by Erdogan in his statement. Because this word, according to Boris Abadzhyan for Missouri (2020), has the implication of eliminating non-Muslim population. Another example could be Pusley (2020) quoting words from the Bible and applying it to the situation of this war, accusing Turkey and Azerbaijani of committing crimes that God hates and would not allow.

Another reason behind their belief that when Armenia is attacked, the Christian ‘self’ is attacked stemmed from their pride of the Armenian nation being the first Christian nation in the world. For example, A post posted by Written By Lena (2020) suggested that “Armenia – the world’s first Christian nation – is under attack” (para. 1). It then continued by stating that, “An early cradle of Christianity - a proud sentinel on the frontiers of global faith and freedom - is, today, in existential danger” (para. 2). When the war was described as a war of global faith, the statement associated Christianity with humanity. It emphasised the importance of Armenia, not only to the Christian values, but also to humanity.

At the level of think tanks, this religious othering was also briefly applied. According to the weekly update between the 10th-17th October by ACNIS (2020f), “It is mostly caused by obsessive Turkish-Azeri hatred against Armenians, and a delusional belief that historically Armenian lands are not Armenian, and that these lands should instead belong to Muslim Azeris or Turks” (para. 3). Nonetheless, such othering at the level of think tanks did not illustrate how the Armenians considered themselves to be protecting the Christian values from the Muslim ‘other’.



## **Armenians are the Protectors of the ‘Self’**

While Armenians apparently differentiated the ‘self’ and ‘other’ according to the contrast of values upheld in this war, there was also an internal split of the ‘self’ observed in their storylines. The split was between Armenians themselves and the international community. Armenians were seeing themselves fighting at the frontline, as a protector of these values, unlike the international community who failed to act upon the values they uphold. They also called upon the international community to take the appropriate actions.

At the level of officials, the internal split of ‘self’ was not an obvious storyline. Generally speaking, Pashinyan was telling the world that Armenians were fighting to protect the world at the frontline and the international community should show their support to the ‘self’ by recognising the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, since the right to self-determination is a value that the ‘self’ of this narrative was upholding. When Armenian forces were fighting at the frontline for the world at the battlefield, Pashinyan described the border of Nagorno-Karabakh as the “civilizational frontline” (Pashinyan, 2020e, para. 1) against international terrorism and protecting the global security (Pashinyan, 2020e). In other words, by writing this post, Pashinyan pointed out that the frontline of this war was not only a frontline on the battlefield, but also the frontline of the entire civilisation, i.e. the world. Besides, according to him (Pashinyan, 2020d):

It is no longer merely the Karabakh issue, nor a security issue of the Armenian people. It is now an issue of international security, and today, the Armenian people are defending also international security, assuming what may be a new historic mission. (para. 1)

From that, Pashinyan’s rhetoric portrayed the role of the Armenian nation as the protector of the world, i.e. the ‘self’ of this narrative. Moreover, in a Twitter post of Pashinyan, he wrote “Artsakh- symbol of world justice” (Pashinyan, 2020g, para. 2). In the same post, he called upon nations “who pursue justice, freedom and love & who are against violence, corruption, terrorism” (para. 1) to support the Armenians who were fighting for these values. Firstly, this phrase expressed the values of ‘Artsakh’ upholding. In fact, the name ‘Artsakh’ signified the rights to self-determination of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-

Karabakh. The name has been used widely by Armenians when expressing their view upon the rights to self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh. By associating ‘Artsakh’ with world justice, it implied a message that self-determination is a universal human right which symbolises world justice. Secondly, the rhetorical effect here connected the Armenian side with the democratic countries and included them as a part of the “self”. Being this “self” together with Armenia, these countries shared the responsibility of protecting the values together with Armenia.

At the level of think tanks, there was no content explicitly describing the internal split of the ‘self’. However, when describing how the international community acted on their own policies, ACNIS (2020e) suggested “when they came to power, they proclaimed about their commitment to those values as a state policy. But it is wrong to think that international relations are anchored on those value systems” (para. 5). This quote showed how ACNIS (2020e) believed that the international community failed to implement the policies in compliance with the values they were supposed to be committed with. Yet, there was no specific context mentioned in the article.

Nonetheless, at the level of social communities, the implication of an internal split of the ‘self’ was obvious. Firstly, Armenian forces were often described or illustrated as heroes who were fighting for the world. Here are a couple of quotes from the Facebook posts observed. “Heroes of Artsakh and Armenia are fighting for not only our lives, but also for the region to stop the international terrorism, to stop the aggression” (Vardanian, 2020, para. 2). “Armenia fights for everyone, Armenia fights for YOU” (Digital Factory, 2020, para. 2). Similarly, in another post (Lemur.ooo, 2020), Armenian soldiers at the frontline had their uniforms photoshopped. They were portrayed as the heroic figures from the Hollywood movies produced by Marvel. It is well known that Marvel heroes have always been associated with the image of saving the world. Such portrayal of images illustrated the point that Armenians considered their soldiers not only saving their own people and homeland, but also the world. By illustrating the Armenian forces as world heroes, it was consistent with the narrative that Armenia was fighting not only for themselves, but for the democratic values overall. Secondly, there were Facebook posts portraying the indifferent attitude of the international community towards this war. For example, Apozyan (2020) posted a picture on Facebook showing “how the World is going to stop terroristic [*sic*] attack on Armenia and Artsakh by Turkey and Azerbaijan” (Apozyan,

2020, para.1). Yet, the picture of this post illustrated the international community, including the UN, the OSCE Minsk Group and the anti-terrorist organizations remained silently watching when Armenia was the only one fighting against Pan-Turkism. In other words, Apozyan (2020) illustrated the contrast of how the world was supposed to act and the actions they actually took during this war. Besides, Another post was warning the world how Armenians were dying because of the ignorance of the international community. “And while the world continues just to condemn, my people are being killed” (Armenia, para. 1, 2020).

The portrayal of an internal split of the ‘self’ was also noticeable among the Facebook posts describing the Armenian side as a protector of the Christian values. It was also illustrated that they were angry at the indifferent attitude of the world in protecting the Christian values from the hands of the Muslim ‘other’. According to them, this ‘self’ was defending for all the Christians in the world, yet the world remained silent to the threats against the entire Christianity. “While the Christians all over the World call on sides and express deep concern, this small Christian Nation is fighting to save the Christian World from Pan-Turkism” (Karapetyan, 2020, para. 1). “They know about the war against Christian Armenia by 100 million Muslim Turks, but they pretend to be deaf and blind. What a shame” (Hajian, 2020, para. 2). From this, a belief that the world should stand with the Christian Armenians against the Muslim Turks was observable. It again illustrated the Christian ‘self’ included the international community. When they failed to act according to the responsibility of this ‘self’, it was a shame.

### **Conclusion of the Narrative**

In this narrative, this war signified a fight against international terrorism, which was a threat to the values the ‘self’ embraced. This ‘self’ included the international community who supported the same values with the Armenian ‘self’. International security was under threat when Western and Christian values were being attacked. To them, democracy and Christianity signified universal human rights and justice. While dictatorship and authoritarianism signified illegitimate and dangerous values that were threatening human rights. In this narrative, the brutal ‘other’ was also Turkey and Azerbaijan since they were

perceived by Armenians as authoritarian and radical, who were dangerous to the values Armenians embraced.

There was also an internal split of the 'self' observed. The internal split was due to the indifference of the world when Armenians were the only one protecting the values. By including the international community as the 'self' yet indicating the problem of this internal split, Armenians presented to the world that they were on the side of justice in the war, who should be backed by the world.

From this narrative, we could see how the signifiers such as 'human rights' were defined according to how 'democracy' and 'Christianity' signified in the war from the Armenian perspective. According to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theoretical framework, 'democracy' and 'Christianity' would be the central signifiers in this narrative. These notions provided definitions to Armenians' definition of 'human rights'. As such, we observe that 'human rights' were an embracement of Western democratic values and what the Bible would suggest, from the Armenian perspective.

## **5. Azerbaijani Narratives**

### **5.1 Armenian Terrorism**

The narrative of Armenian terrorism involves the storylines of Armenia launching strategic attacks, insulting the Azerbaijani culture, murdering civilians, committing ethnic cleansing and conducting disinformation strategy against Azerbaijanis. In this narrative, Armenia violated the 1949 Geneva Convention and was portrayed as the brutal ‘other’. While the ‘self’ - Azerbaijanis were the victims suffering from the Armenian terrorism and the ignorance of the world, which was believed to be the result of Armenian disinformation strategy.

This narrative will be explained by firstly addressing the storylines that support the claim of Armenia being the terrorist. Last but not least, this narrative will be concluded by illustrating Azerbaijanis’ belief on the rationale of Armenia conducting terrorist acts, i.e. their expansionist policy.

#### **Strategic offensive attacks**

According to AzerNews (2020i), the missile attacks in October were targeting the South Caucasus Pipeline and the Western Export Pipeline. The news article also suggested the bomb from the Armenia side on the 6th October landed 10 meters away from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. According to the same news article, these attacks “were underlined as terror attacks to the regional and international energy security, as well as the interest of the countries represented in such projects” (AzerNews, 2020i, para. 4). In other words, these strategic attacks illustrated the intention of Armenia to threaten regional security in general.

At the level of think tanks, they also suggested that by launching attacks against Azerbaijan, Armenian had the intention to destroy the strategic projects of energy infrastructure such as the pipeline projects of Azerbaijan and its partners (AIR Center,

2020e). According to them, damages to these projects could cause economic frustrations in the short term and political impacts in the long term.

Among the social communities, there were also a number of posts accusing Armenia of targeting the important energy infrastructures. For example, Yusif (2020) also suggested Armenians attacked the city of Mingachevir because of the energy resources from the reservoir and the power plants in the Khitai and Absheron region of the city. Hasanov (2020) suggested Armenia launched strategic attacks with the attempt to destroy the oil pipeline connecting Baku, Tbilisi and Ceyhan. Hasanov (2020) illustrated the attacks with an infographic. Many of the Facebook posts suggested such action did not only threaten Azerbaijan but also Europe. For instance, Sabir (2020) stated that this pipeline is currently an important energy provider to Europe that was heavily invested by the Western countries.

In fact, all levels of participants were consistent in illustrating the storyline about Armenia launching these strategic attacks.

### **Cultural and Religious Insults**

At the level of think tanks, it was believed that the escalation of Armenian aggression in 2020 was not solely expressed through military means, but it was also a political and cultural aggression. It was suggested that the war in 2020 did not start in September but in the middle of July that year when Armenia targeted the Tovuz district, with a 76-year-old civilian killed (AIR Center, 2020a). According to Aliyev and echoed by AIR Center (2020a), the actions taken by Pashinyan in Nagorno-Karabakh were insulting the Azerbaijani culture. This included the establishment of the presidential and parliamentary system and the attempt to move the parliament to the city of Shusha (AIR Center, 2020a). Besides, according to the AIR Center (2020f), Shusha is a historical and sacred city of Azerbaijan. Yet, Pashinyan illegally settled Armenian families, who came from Lebanon, in the occupied territories including the city of Shusha (AIR Center, 2020f).

### **Civilians being killed, ethnic cleansing**

This part of the narrative told the world how brutal Armenia was when it came to civilians. The evidence provided included the attacks launched against the city of Ganja and Mingachevir during the war in 2020 and the ethnic cleansing committed against Azerbaijani people in the territory illegally occupied by Armenia. The narrative also portrayed how Azerbaijani refugees and the displaced failed to return to their homeland because of Armenia.

At the level of officials, on multiple occasions, Aliyev called Armenia a fascist, considering Armenia ethnically cleansed the Azerbaijanis from the occupied region. Besides, it was suggested by Aliyev that “Armenia's fascist leadership has perpetrated next war crime, fired on the cities of Gandja and Mingechevir using tactical operational missile system. They will be held accountable for this crime. Our revenge happens on the battlefield” (Aliyev, 2020k, para. 1). By calling it war crime, Aliyev clearly affirmed the brutality of Armenia in this war.

AzerNews (2020h) published a piece of article written by Andrew Korybko, an American analyst based in Moscow. “It's Armenia, not Azerbaijan, that's waging a genocidal war, and it must be stopped before it can cause any more suffering” (para 7). Here, it illustrated a clear indication of Armenia being the brutal ‘other’ but not Azerbaijan. Instead of directly saying the Azerbaijanis were ethnically cleansed by Armenia from Azerbaijan, he continued by saying, “This rogue state has already ruined over one million lives by ethnically cleansing its victims from their native lands, most infamously during the Khojaly massacre, and now it's threatening to expand the war even further” (para. 7). Without emphasising specifically that Azerbaijanis were the target of being ethnically cleansed, it illustrated an image of Armenians being brutal to humanity in general as they expel natives from their homeland.

At the level of think tanks, AIR Center (2020f) suggested that the order of bombarding Ganja was issued by Harutyunyan, whom they called “the head of the occupational regime” (para. 6). According to them, the attack was launched after the ceasefire agreement reached in Moscow earlier. Moreover, the board member of the AIR Center Pashayeva also said that the Armenian side used Tochka-U to conduct their first attack

against the city of Ganja (Pashayeva, 2020f). According to her post, it caused numerous deaths and injuries, including children.

At the level of social communities, There were two main phenomena among the Facebook posts regarding Armenian brutality against civilians. For the first one, many posts among the social communities emphasised that the illegal occupation had been 30 years long, covering about 20% of the Azerbaijani territories. A post (Endorphin, 2020) was trying to show the international community what it was like to have 20% of land being occupied by a foreign country. Azerbaijanis pointed out that civilians being killed by the Armenian attacks in this war was the result of indifference among the international community. For instance, “this is what happens when occupation of 20% of sovereign state’s territory remains unpunished by the world for 30 years” (XƏBƏR ALƏMİ, 2020, para. 2). These posts were posted with the purpose of telling the international community the pain of Azerbaijani people under Armenian brutality.

Another common phenomenon was describing the attacks Armenia launched against the cities in Azerbaijan in 2020. This included the attacks launched against the city of Ganja, the second largest city of Azerbaijan which is located far away from the conflict zone. There were also posts describing how the city of Mingachevir was attacked. All these Facebook posts were suggesting that Armenia was committing a war crime as they were attacking civilians. Videos, photos were illustrating how innocent homes were destroyed. They compared the number of injuries and casualties of civilians outside the conflict zone with that of Armenia (İctimai TV, 2020). Through such comparison, they illustrated that Azerbaijanis suffered more from the war and the Armenian side was the brutal “other”.

Besides the two main phenomena observed, there were Facebook posts criticising the Armenian Army and suggesting they were using forbidden ballistic missiles to conduct their attacks. “Have you ever wondered what is SCUD? SCUD is a tactical ballistic missile that was used by Saddam Hussein. Today, Armenians have used it against innocent civilians in Ganja” (Aghayev, 2020, para. 1) (Turcomaniaball, 2020, para. 1). While the original source of this quote is unknown, it has been reposted by many Facebook users. Besides, it is also worth noting that the massacre of Khojaly was a focused topic mainly among the social communities. When Azerbaijanis were talking about the massacre, they aimed at reminding the world of what happened in the past with



Armenian aggression. For instance, AzerGold QSC (2020) posted a video telling the audience it was Armenia who always broke the ceasefire agreements. The video suggested Armenia occupied the city of Shusha one day after the ceasefire agreed in Tehran in 1992. Similarly, it was suggested by the video that the massacre of Khojaly was committed by Armenia five days after a ceasefire agreement signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia in Moscow in 1992. Then the video talked about how it was the same in 2020 with the attacks Armenians launched against the city of Ganja after the ceasefire negotiation.

### **Disinformation Strategy**

The Armenian disinformation strategy is considered as a part of the narrative of Armenian terrorism. According to them, Armenians were spreading wrong information to the public. Azerbaijanis portrayed the ‘self’ as the victim of the mistrust from the world. They believe it was the disinformation strategy conducted by the Armenian side that promoted mistrust in the Western society against Azerbaijan. They suggested it was the Armenian propaganda undermining the public awareness of historical accuracy of the conflict. Thus, disinformation strategy was considered to be the means for the Armenian terror to be manifested.

At the level of officials, Aliyev clearly stated that the information from the Armenian government was wrong during several interviews with the media channels from the West, such as Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f). In contrast, Armenia was suspected to be spreading old videos and claiming them to be reflecting the current situation (AzerNews, 2020b).

At the level of think tanks, AIR Center (2020c) mentioned that the pro-Armenian trend has had a long history in the West, even in the early 20th century. According to them, the trend has been continued by the propaganda and lobby committed by the Armenian diaspora in the West, which include a network of professionals, scholars and politicians. AIR Center (2020c) stated that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been framed by Armenia as a struggle of liberation and this idea has been adopted by the Western media. According to the same article, the problem of Western media was the lack of academic freedom that could fight against the xenophobic rhetorics.

At the level of social communities, people were asking for the international community to do their research and learn about the accurate history before deciding which side to support. Some of the frequently shared posts, such as those written by Hasanova (2020) and RazzaOfficial (2020), suggested there were many people, including celebrities, supporting Armenia because they failed to recognize the truth and the accurate history of the conflict.

### **The Rationale behind Armenian Terrorism**

This part addresses the question of ‘why’ of this narrative. The terrorist acts conducted by Armenia were believed to be a part of their expansionist policy, according to Azerbaijanis.

In fact, it was the level of think tanks the most active in directly pointing out Armenia being an expansionist. It was suggested that Armenian expansionism has been disguised as a struggle of liberation. “For liberals, it was presented as a self-determination struggle, while the end goal of the ultranationalist campaign was Armenia’s territorial expansion and the establishment of ‘Great Armenia’” (AIR Center, 2020e, para. 3). AIR Center (2020c) also mentioned that Pashinyan made claims targeting not only the territory of Azerbaijan, but also that of Turkey. Another example to illustrate the Armenian expansionist agenda was the recent celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the non-implemented Treaty of Sevres, according to which Armenia would have gained the Eastern part of Turkey’s territory if implemented (AIR Center, 2020d). Moreover, AIR Center (2020a) stated that when Armenians were attacking the city of Ganja and the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan where projects of energy and infrastructure are hosted, Armenians’ ambition to conquer more territory became more evident. In other words, AIR Center (2020a) explained the strategic attacks from the Armenian side came from their intention of expanding their territory.

There was a rumour that in order to conduct terrorism, Armenia allied with Russia. This storyline was also mainly produced by the level of think tanks. It was not an apparent

storyline on other levels. Armenia, although might have been dissatisfied with Russia's influence in the region, it has been economically dependent on Russia's support due to its small-sized population (AIR Center, 2020c). On the other hand, AIR Center (2020d) told the world it has long been reported that Russia was shipping a large number of arm supplies to Armenia through the more difficult routes instead of the shortest one that bypasses Georgia. Hence, it was suggested that Armenia and Russia could be forming an alliance. Although it was a storyline mainly produced at the level of think tanks, there were also voices regarding this among the social communities. For example, Babayev (2020) mentioned:

The Russian Federation stands behind of terror executed against Azerbaijan and its people by Armenia, which is much smaller territory and population wise in comparison with Azerbaijan, Russia does not want to give up the region and oppresses Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis by supporting Armenian terrorist. (Para. 5)

### **Conclusion of the Narrative**

In this narrative, the war signified Armenian terrorism. Armenia was the brutal 'other' while the Azerbaijani 'self' was the victim. This 'self' also suffered from the ignorance of the world. To Azerbaijanis, they believed this ignorance was a result of Armenian propaganda. It was also noticeable that among social communities, Azerbaijanis emphasised how their side suffered from such ignorance and how they wished the world to learn the accurate facts about this conflict.

In fact, the storylines provided by Azerbaijanis on Armenian terrorism has reflected what 'terrorism' signified from their perspective. In general, 'terrorism' here was referred to brutality against humanity. Such brutality was defined by committing harmful policies against innocent civilians and cultural and religious insults. Since Armenians were conducting these brutal activities, Armenians were considered to be terrorists. In this narrative, Azerbaijanis also explained the means through which Armenia achieved its brutality, i.e. launching offensive attacks, committing ethnic cleansing and disinformation strategy. While for the rationale behind such brutality, Azerbaijanis told the world about the expansionist agenda of Armenia.

## **5.2 The Liberation of ‘Self’**

It is a narrative in which Azerbaijanis called this war a war of liberation. According to Azerbaijanis, they were suffering from a liberation struggle. It was about liberating the ‘self’ from oppression. In order to achieve the liberation of ‘self’, it required the liberation of the occupied lands from the control of Armenia. To Azerbaijanis, the ‘self’ was patriotic. Thus, the ‘self’ could only be liberated when the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan was protected.

Since Azerbaijanis considered the Nagano-Karabakh region and the other surrounding districts as a part of their territory with international recognition, they suggested their liberation operations were reasonable and legal under the international law. It is also a narrative portraying how the international community has failed to assist Azerbaijan on the issue of illegal occupation throughout the years. Thus, in order to regain the lost territory in this war, Azerbaijanis had no other alternatives but to fight against Armenia on the battlefield.

### **The Liberation of ‘Self’ was Patriotic**

In this narrative, the ‘self’ was patriotic and the liberation operations demonstrated the patriotic spirit. In fact, the war in 2020 has been called a ‘Patriotic War’ by the Azerbaijani side. It was mainly driven by the statement of Aliyev. In the interview with Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f), for example, Aliyev stated that this war was a ‘Patriotic War’ to Azerbaijanis. At the level of think tanks, the liberation of lands being a part of the Azerbaijani patriotic spirit was also noticeable. When talking about the Azerbaijani soldiers, Pashayeva (2020b) mentioned that, “There's no longer any doubt that they will gain the victory in a spirit of sincere patriotism” (para. 1). This war being a patriotic war was often echoed by the social communities. Here are some examples from Facebook regarding liberation and patriotism. “Armed forces of Azerbaijan are waging military

activities on 7 occupied territories of Azerbaijan which have been recognized as such by UN's resolutions. It's a patriotic and liberation war" (Mardanova, 2020, para. 1). "Azerbaijan is waging a patriotic war of liberation for the return of its territories. The Azerbaijani army does not attack Armenia, it returns the territories illegally occupied and held by the Armenian army for 30 years" (Asgarova, 2020, para. 1). These statements connected the Azerbaijani military operations to both the idea of liberation and patriotism. It illustrated how they believed the war of liberation was patriotic.

In fact, descriptions of what happened on the battlefield also showed their patriotic spirit. Besides, the patriotic implication was apparent when Aliyev emphasised how strong the Azerbaijani forces were on the battlefield. Examples are, such as "Azerbaijan repelled the enemy befittingly and they failed to move an inch forward" (Aliyev, 2020a, para.1). "Our State has a strong will and a powerful army" (Aliyev, 2020i, para.1). Moreover, the language of Aliyev's statements is worth noting. Besides how he termed the war as the liberation of Azerbaijani people, words such as "glorious" and "victory" appeared multiple times in his posts on Twitter during the period observed. This was the same with how he repeatedly emphasised that Nagorno-Karabakh belonged to Azerbaijan during the period. Such language is often considered to be emotionally triggering. By applying emotionally triggering language in his speeches and statements about a national matter, a patriotic message and spirit was expressed.

On the other hand, there were multiple occasions where Aliyev and the Azerbaijani news agencies were stressing the strength of the Azerbaijani forces. It was illustrated by news agencies that the Azerbaijani diaspora were one with the country. For example, according to AzerNews (2020d), the embassy of Azerbaijan in Russia received many requests from Azerbaijanis living in Russia, nominating themselves to be sent to the frontline of the battlefield. It was also stated in this news article that Azerbaijan was not in need of more soldiers as the Azerbaijani Army was well-equipped with advanced weapons. In comparison, they often reported how the Armenian forces were losing in the battlefield. It was often illustrated by Aliyev and the news agencies. At the same time, AIR Center (2020f) interpreted the Armenian forces as acting out of their weakness and their fear. It was stated by AIR Center (2020f) that:

The tactics of the Azerbaijani army were so effective on the battlefield that Armenian army suffered heavy losses in personnel and military equipment. After defeat and the loss of positions, Armenian forces started to bomb the Azerbaijani cities far from the frontlines. (para. 4)

### **Religious Liberation**

Another worth noting phenomenon in this narrative was the application of religious otherness. The liberation of ‘self’ also involved the liberation of the Muslim ‘self’. This phenomenon was especially apparent among the social communities. “No one remembers the mosques that were insulted and destroyed by Armenian separatists. Muslim dignity matters” (Əmiraslanova, 2020, para. 1). As such, we could observe that preserving religious dignity was a part of the liberation of the ‘self’.

In fact, this Muslim ‘self’ did not only include Azerbaijanis or Turks. It included the entire Muslim world. There was a video uploaded by Alizade (2020) showing people hanging up the national flag of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan. While the location of the video being filmed is unknown, it illustrated the liberation of the Muslim ‘self’ by demonstrating the flags of Muslim countries being hung up. Voices about Muslim countries not being fairly treated were also apparent on Facebook. For instance, the post of Mirzəzadə (2020) stated, “This is what happens if you're a Muslim country the [*sic*] whole world goes silent” (para. 1). These statements were telling the world that Muslims were always oppressed, not just by Armenia, but also by the world in general.

Nonetheless, the storyline of religious liberation was not consistent. It is still a controversial matter to discuss to what extent Azerbaijani people applied religious otherness in their storylines. It is noticeable that framing of this war being a religious one was explicitly condemned by some Azerbaijani people. For instance, there was a post, written by Ismayilov (2020), emphasising this war was not a religious one, or else countries such as Ukraine, Israel and Georgia would not have been demonstrating support to Azerbaijani people. During the same post, Ismayilov (2020) stated, “Armenia is weaponizing religion, radicalizing their youth with racism and ethnic hatred sentiment” (para. 1). In fact, this post indicated it was Armenians who were putting religious matters

into this war but not Azerbaijanis. Rebuttal against Armenians' arguments regarding religious matters was not uncommon among the social communities. For instance, Məmmədova (2020) was trying to emphasise this was a war against occupation instead of religious matters, unlike what Armenians and the Western media suggested. Məmmədova (2020) stated, "Muslim Azerbaijan is attacking Christian Armenia. Complete lie. Azerbaijan has excellent relations with all Christian nations, from [the] Vatican to our neighbor Georgia. It is not a religious war. It is a war against occupation!" (para. 1). Here is another example (Zahidoglu, 2020):

This is why it is inadmissible to portray the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia as an interfaith war. This war is about liberating Armenian-occupied territories, restoring justice and the return of approximately 800.000 internally displaced people to their home. (para. 5)

Such discourse also illustrated the self-identification of Azerbaijani Muslims as friendly to other religions, unlike what Armenia described. These statements featured the contradicting opinion among Azerbaijanis on what liberation of the 'self' signified within their society. Yet, the 'self' suffering from long-term occupation was an indisputable reason behind their attempt of liberation. This internal split of opinion did not undermine their belief that Azerbaijanis must be liberated and such liberation could only be achieved through regaining the lost territory.

Interestingly, the statements regarding how the Muslim 'self' have been oppressed by the world resonated with a more general storyline of the Azerbaijani 'self' being oppressed by other forces. For instance, Babayev (2020) talked about how Azerbaijan has suffered from oppression not only under the Armenian influence, but also under imperialism for more than 300 years. This is an example illustrating that on top of the long history of being oppressed, Armenian oppression against the Azerbaijanis have become more unbearable for the Azerbaijani people. In other words, Azerbaijanis believed it was not only the Muslim 'self' being oppressed by the world, but the entire 'self' of Azerbaijanis in general.

### **Regaining Territorial Integrity to Liberate the 'Self'**

In this part, we explain how Azerbaijani people considered regaining the territory as the means to achieve their liberation of ‘self’. As mentioned in previous parts, the main emphasis of this storyline suggested the occupation of lands by Armenia was a political oppression the ‘self’ suffered from. It was because the territorial integrity of ‘self’ was undermined and many displaced Azerbaijanis and refugees failed to return to their homeland because of the Armenian illegal occupation.

It was expressed that allowing the displaced Azerbaijanis to return to their home would be a liberation of the ‘self’. On the Twitter account of Aliyev, he regularly listed the names of villages that were liberated by the Azerbaijani Army. According to him, the expelled Azerbaijani population from the occupied lands would be returned to their homeland. “We will build cities across the liberated lands and turn those areas into paradise. Those lands will reinvigorate, life and children’s laughter will return there. Citizens of Azerbaijan will live on those lands in dignity” (Aliyev, 2020h, para. 1). Again, this Twitter post illustrated it was a matter of dignity for the Azerbaijani people to return to their homeland after liberation.

At the same time, the social communities also demonstrated how the successful return of lands and villages achieved the spirit of liberating the ‘self’. There were posts spreading the glory of liberation with photos showing the Azerbaijani national flags on the lands. Many of the posts also echoed the official announcement regarding the success of liberation. They were welcoming such returns. All the posts were written with an uplifted and positive tone describing how they were proud of the liberation and the success of protecting Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. For instance, “Brave army of Azerbaijan liberated Fuzuli from 27 year-long occupation. Almost 130000 people have a home now to return to” (Azərbaycan Avtomobil Yolları Dövlət Agentliyi, 2020, para. 1). Another example could be Bee Travel Azerbaijan (2020) stating that, “New tourism destination of Azerbaijan - Suqovushan” (para. 1). The post was then continued, “Suqovushan was occupied by the Republic of Armenia in 1994. On October 3, 2020, it was liberated by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces” (para. 2).

### **Liberation through Military Means**



A part of this narrative suggested such liberation of 'self' could only be achieved through military means. According to them, the international community has not been actively providing support to Azerbaijan regarding the issues of illegal occupation. Thus, regaining the control of lands by fighting on the battlefield became the only key to relieve the 'self' from oppression. Pashayeva (2020e) suggested that Azerbaijan was acting as a "catalytic role" (para. 1) when it came to the issue of occupied territory, as Armenians refused to return the lands without strong external pressure, nor has the international community given efficient pressure in these 3 decades (Pashayeva, 2020c). In other words, She pointed out that in order to liberate the 'self', Azerbaijan must take its actions as it did on the battlefield during this war.

Furthermore, the liberation of lands was called a "peace enforcement operation" (para. 2) in a Facebook post written by The Wire.Pk (2020). Under a formal definition, peace enforcement is usually operated when military means to the conflict is the only solution to achieve peace. Thus, peace enforcement operations are often conducted by third parties such as the UN. When Azerbaijanis did not only call the war a liberation war but also a 'peace enforcement operation', it illustrated a storyline that the Azerbaijani forces came for peace as its ultimate goal and this goal could only be achieved through the necessary military means.

### **Conclusion of the Narrative**

In other words, the war in this narrative signified the liberation of 'self' from the oppression of 'other'. Armenians were the mainly emphasised 'other' who oppressed the 'self' by illegally occupying the territory of Azerbaijan. While the 'self' here signified the Azerbaijani people and the Muslim world, there was an ambiguity on the extent of religious otherness applied in their discourses. As mentioned, the discourses were contradicting to each other when it came to religious otherness. As such, we could also hardly draw conclusion on the extent the non-Muslim world was considered as an 'other' in this narrative. Nonetheless, the storyline about the oppressed Muslim 'self' emphasised the oppression Azerbaijanis have suffered throughout the years in general. In other words, the main feature of the 'self' in this narrative was being oppressed.

To them, 'liberation' signified the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan being achieved and that Azerbaijanis could live in their homeland. The liberation of 'self' could only be achieved by retaking the control of the occupied territory through military means.

### **5.3 International Justice**

This is a narrative in which Azerbaijanis emphasised they were fighting on the bases of international justice. International justice here was defined as abiding by international law and the legally binding UNSC resolutions. It was suggested by Azerbaijanis that Nagorno-Karabakh has been a part of the Azerbaijani territory with international recognition. Besides, the UNSC resolutions demanded Armenia to withdraw its forces from the occupied territories.

In this narrative, Azerbaijanis were portrayed as the cooperative ‘self’ in this narrative who conducted all the actions in compliance with international law and aimed for peaceful ceasefire resolutions. Armenians were portrayed as the main party of the uncooperative ‘other’ who constantly broke the ceasefire agreements by their offensive attacks. At the same time, the biased third parties were also considered to be a part of the uncooperative ‘other’ since they hindered the negotiation process. Moreover, separatism was considered to be a threat to global security in this narrative. Thus, Nagorno-Karabakh could not possibly be independent from Azerbaijan.

#### **Cooperative ‘Self’ and Lawful Actions during the War**

This storyline emphasised Azerbaijan as the cooperative ‘self’, compared with the uncooperative ‘other’, which will be explained in detail later. Azerbaijanis illustrated the “self” as cooperative by providing evidence that all the actions taken by them in the war were in compliance with international law. This included, firstly, the liberation they fought for. The operation was believed to be reasonable and lawful since Nagorno-Karabakh and other occupied districts were considered to be a part of Azerbaijan with international recognition. Secondly, this storyline included the argument that attacks launched by Azerbaijani forces during the period were justifiable as they were counteroffensive. This argument was mainly expressed at the level of officials.

At the level of officials, during the interview with Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f), President Aliyev stated that Armenia must return the illegally occupied territory to Azerbaijan, as demanded by the UNSC resolutions. These resolutions are UNSC resolutions 822, 853,

874 and 884, according to multiple sources such as AzerNews (2020i). Moreover, Aliyev stated in the interview with Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f) that Armenians have only settled in Nagorno-Karabakh since the early 19th century. Thus, the claim of Nagorno-Karabakh belonging to Azerbaijan was a justified claim. He believed the victory of the war should belong to the lawful side. Therefore, the Azerbaijani ‘self’ should be the victorious side. For example, he stated that “we are on the righteous path! Ours is the just cause! We will be victorious! Karabakh is ours! Karabakh is Azerbaijan!” (Aliyev, 2020b, para.1). Besides, Aliyev stated clearly about the different meanings this war implied to the Azerbaijanis and Armenians respectively. “For the Azerbaijani people, it is a liberation war. For Armenia, it is a war of occupation. Armenia’s occupation forces are on Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territory. There is no way to justify it” (Aliyev, 2020j, para. 1). This statement portrayed the two parties of this war fighting for completely different goals. Another Twitter post he wrote stating that, “Armenians’ position is rooted in historical lies and based on violation of norms and principles of international law, whereas our position is backed by historical justice and the norms and principles of the international law” (Aliyev, 2020e, para.1). Undoubtedly, there was an implication in these statements that while Azerbaijan’s goal was justifiable as they were fighting for international justice, Armenians were fighting for illegal objectives.

At the level of think tanks, the narrative illustrated was aligned with the official level by emphasising the significance of international law in this conflict. In fact, there was an article of AIR Center (2020d) released with the title suggesting Azerbaijan had international law at its back when fighting on the battlefield. At the same time, AIR Center (2020d) echoed Aliyev on Azerbaijanis’ right on fighting on its territory and the promise that Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh were invited to live in the Azerbaijani territory as a part of the ethnic diversity of the country.

It was the same with social communities. In fact, most of the Facebook posts were talking about how Nagorno-Karabakh has always belonged to Azerbaijan based on international law. In order to strengthen their argument, some of them also focused on the history of the region. An example illustrating Nagorno-Karabakh as an internationally recognised territory of Azerbaijan based on history would be the post of Karayeva (2020). The post suggested Armenia did not follow the UNSC resolutions and the region was not ethnically Armenian at the beginning. Instead, she suggested the ethnic Armenian demography

nowadays was a result of Armenian terrorism, which could be dated back to 1992 when Armenia committed genocide against Azerbaijani people in Khojaly (Karayeva, 2020).

On the other hand, the cooperative ‘self’ was also portrayed as one aiming for peace by news agencies. For instance, Andrew Korybko, an American analyst based in Moscow stated that “Azerbaijan has the right to defend itself per Article 51 of the UN Charter, but its leadership still prefers to resolve the conflict peacefully” (AzerNews, 2020h, para. 7). He also suggested that Aliyev was hoping for the four UNSC resolutions being realised with the ceasefire brokered by Russia (AzerNews, 2020h).

Moreover, Aliyev mentioned the civilian casualties caused by the Azerbaijani forces were never intentional. He told the media that during the war in 2020, all the attacks launched by the Azerbaijani forces against Armenia were in compliance with the international humanitarian law, unlike Armenia. For example, when being questioned about Armenian civilian structures being hit during the interview by Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f), Aliyev stated, “But we never on purpose, we never attack civilians. Yes, we have sophisticated weapons but not all of them are sophisticated. There could be some mistakes” (Azertag, 2020a, para. 6).

## **Uncooperative ‘Other’**

### Armenians

In this storyline, otherness was applied to illustrate it was the “other” who had been hindering the ceasefire negotiation process of the war, which had to be ended mutually on a bilateral ground. The ceasefire negotiation process was stagnated because the uncooperative ‘other’ failed to serve justice on the issue. Armenians were labelled as the main uncooperative ‘other’ in their storyline.

At the level of officials, Aliyev stated that “a ceasefire cannot be announced unilaterally. The decision has to be bilateral and implemented on the ground” (Aliyev, 2020d, para. 1). However, the actions taken by the Armenian side were considered to be not cooperative. As they violated the ceasefire compromises by launching attacks against the

city of Ganja that killed innocent civilians. “It is a disrespect to the negotiations under Russia’s mediation and another embodiment of Armenian fascism. These heinous actions can never break the will of the Azerbaijani people!” (Aliyev, 2020g, para. 1) During the interviews with Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f), Aliyev also stated that it was Armenia who chose to continue the status quo. In the same interview, he suggested Armenia was occupying the seven districts surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh region with the claim of these districts being the security zones. Nonetheless, Aliyev also emphasised security could only be achieved through political and diplomatic means in the interview. Since Armenia failed to settle the security matter through these means, the war was kept in the status quo.

The materials released by the Azerbaijani news agencies were portraying the same storylines as the level of officials. For instance, a piece of article written by another Azerbaijani-based media outlet Trend (2020) which was featured by AzerNews (2020c) stated the view of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Russia:

Unfortunately, many years of negotiations on the return of territories by peaceful means didn’t lead to success and, accordingly, Azerbaijan is forced to use its legal right for self-defense in accordance with the UN Charter and make the aggressor liberate the Azerbaijani lands. (para. 7)

It was also stated at the end of the same article that “the 1994 ceasefire agreement was followed by peace negotiations. Armenia has not yet implemented four UN Security Council resolutions on the withdrawal of its armed forces from Nagorno Karabakh and the surrounding districts” (para. 17). From this, the news article clearly pointed out it was Armenia being an uncooperative ‘other’.

At the level of think tanks, AIR Center (2020d) suggested while Western scholars have been analysing the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh on geopolitics, they failed to recognise how significant international law was playing in the conflict. According to the AIR Center (2020d), the only solution to the conflict would be Armenia’s willingness to abide by the UNSC resolutions and withdraw its forces from the occupied lands. In fact, Armenia was portrayed as an uncooperative ‘other’ also with the following evidence mentioned. Firstly, Armenia illegally settled Lebanese-Armenians in the occupied territories (AIR Center, 2020f). On the other hand, according to AIR Center (2020d), the rhetoric of Armenia has also undermined the process of the ceasefire negotiation. It suggested Armenia was

demonstrating a non-cooperative attitude by rejecting documents on the table of negotiation moderated by the OSCE Minsk Group. Besides, according to their another article (AIR Center, 2020f), it has been detrimental to the negotiation process when Pashinyan kept questioning the “Madrid Principles” and the frameworks of the on-going negotiations. According to that article, it revealed the unwillingness of Armenia in ending the war.

At the level of social communities, it was all consistent that Armenia was illustrated as an ‘other’ who undermined the ceasefire process. Echoing the level of officials and think tanks, the social communities also claimed the UNSC resolutions as the only guide to resolve the war and the conflict in general.

It is noticeable that the attacks against the city of Ganja was an important focus on Facebook within the time frame observed. They accused Armenia as the one who undermined the ceasefire process and wasted the effort of mediation conducted by Moscow. For instance, it was stated in a post written by Network of Azerbaijani Canadians (2020):

Armenian armed forces violated the truce, reached between the parties. The ceasefire announcement came overnight after the Russian sponsored 10 hours of talks in Moscow. The deal stipulated that the cease-fire should pave the way for talks on settling the conflict. However, Armenia broke the truce with new missile attacks on Azerbaijan’s civil settlements. (para. 3)

Another post written on Facebook illustrated the contrast between the cooperative ‘self’ and the uncooperative ‘other’. The original source of the post, however, is unknown. The same post was posted repeatedly by authors such as KoreaAz (2020), Bashirov (2020) and Aslan (2020):

Azerbaijan could liberate its territories 30 years ago. Could also do that during 30 recent years. Our country has a numerical superiority of the army, a numerical and qualitative superiority of equipment and military weapons. And if you ask why this has not been done before the answer is that as a result of the ceasefire in May 1994, the parties pledged to resolve the conflict peacefully and to do it with the help of mediators - the OSCE Minsk Group. Unfortunately, over all these years, official

Yerevan has not shown the political will for the peaceful liberation of at least 1 cm<sup>2</sup> of the occupied land. (para. 4).

On one hand, such a post illustrated how Azerbaijan had the ability to retake the control of land but did not take the actions as the ‘self’ has always been cooperative on the ceasefire matter. On the other hand, it made a contrast illustrating the uncooperative ‘other’, i.e. Armenian, as the main factor of the status quo.

Another example illustrating Azerbaijanis’ belief on the UNSC resolutions could be a post posted by Allahverdiyev (2020). A video of a BBC interview with Pashinyan was attached in the post. The post highlighted the statement from the interviewer that “what we can do is address the reality of today” (para. 1). This post implied that in order to solve the deadlocks, the on-going reality of the war should be prioritised. From Azerbaijanis’ perspective, following the UNSC resolutions would be the most practical solution to resolve the deadlocks. Since Azerbaijan has been the one abiding by the UNSC resolutions all the time, it would be Armenia who had to take the actions to address the problem.

### Biased third-parties

While Armenia was portrayed as the main party of the uncooperative ‘other’, biased third-party mediators from the West were also considered as a part of the uncooperative ‘other’. The othering was mainly applied by the level of officials and think tanks.

During an interview with CNN International (Aliyev, 2020g), Aliyev expressed the concern of the qualification of France being a mediator of the conflict when Macron publicly stated its support to Armenia in spite of being one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk group. Azerbaijan told the world that it would only allow countries who share the same value of justice with Azerbaijan to be the potential mediators of this war. As it was believed by Aliyev that “It is the countries with a resolution potential, the ones Azerbaijan respects for their dignity, justice and sincerity that will be the guarantors of lasting peace” (Aliyev, 2020f, para.1). On the other hand, by referring to the statements from the Turkish administration, AzerNews (2020g) expressed that double standards were applied by the international community. According to AzerNews (2020g), the international community



condemned the liberation of lands by Azerbaijanis but encouraged the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh and labelled it as a liberation struggle of ethnic Armenians. It reflected how Azerbaijanis considered the international community being biased on solving the issue.

At the level of think tanks, this storyline about the uncooperative ‘other’ was also briefly addressed. “However, at the end of the day, the Co-Chairs, probably with the exception of Russia, have shown no urgency for resolving the conflict simmering in their geopolitical backyard” (AIR Center, 2020c, para. 13).

### **Threat of Separatism**

Another storyline under this narrative is how Azerbaijanis rejected the idea of self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh. Besides the belief that Nagorno-Karabakh has always been a part of Azerbaijan according to international law, they suggested such self-determination would encourage separatism, which would be a security threat to the international community.

At the level of officials, When being interviewed by media channels such as Sky News (Aliyev, 2020f), Aliyev stated clearly that Azerbaijan will not recognise the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh as the result of their self-determination. The following is quoted from the transcript created by Azertag (2020a) of that interview:

Being national minority does not mean that you have a right for secession, have a right for separatism. Separatism is a big threat to international community and all the countries in the world condemn separatism. What has been done against us was separatism of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and military aggression of Armenia’s state against Azerbaijan which led to the situation which we are facing now. (para. 3)

From this quote, it apparently illustrated two main points. Firstly, Aliyev portrayed this brutal war as a result of separatism. Secondly, it illustrated how Aliyev believed the ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh did not have rights to self-determination.

Moreover, it was believed that the threat of separatism in Nagorno-Karabakh did not only lie in the independence of a new state per se. Aliyev suggested once the self-determination of people in Nagorno-Karabakh succeeded, it would become the establishment of another Armenian state (Aliyev, 2020c). This expressed the concern of Nagorno-Karabakh becoming a part of Armenia after the so-called self-determination. This concern from the Azerbaijani side was apparent when AzerNews (2020f) called Harutyunyan “the ‘leader’ of Pashinyan's ruling group in the separatist region” (para. 5). At the same time, according to AzerNews (2020f), because of the threat brought by separatism to the world, separatists should be warned and punished. “As a result of a precise strike of the Azerbaijani army, Harutyunyan was severely wounded. The same will be with other separatists” (para. 2).

Nonetheless, the storyline regarding the threat of separatism was not observed at the level of social communities. The Facebook posts mainly addressed how Nagorno-Karabakh has been a part of Azerbaijan with international recognition.

### **Conclusion of the Narrative**

In this narrative, this war signified a war on international justice, with the cooperative ‘self’ fighting for such justice and the uncooperative ‘other’ undermining it. Azerbaijan was the cooperative ‘self’ while Armenia and biased third parties were considered to be the uncooperative ‘other’. To Azerbaijanis, international justice signified the compliance with international law and UNSC resolutions. On the other hand, biased third parties signified those who supported the stance of Armenia instead of pursuing the international justice Azerbaijanis embraced.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary**

This research aimed at understanding the image of the Nagorno-Karabakh war from a constructivist perspective. In order to approach this research problem, a discourse analysis under the theory of Laclau and Mouffe was conducted. By introducing a discourse analysis, we firstly deconstructed the messages from the empirical resources we collected. Secondly, we reconstructed them into narratives and presented them in the empirical chapters of this research.

There were three narratives from each side presenting their views about this war. These were the narratives they attempted to assign as the signified content of this war. In other words, this war is a floating signifier, the meaning of which was being contested. From the Armenian side, the narratives were 1) Genocide 2.0, 2) Patriotic War and 3) War on Western and Christian Values. While from the Azerbaijani side, the narratives were 1) Armenian Terrorism, 2) Liberation of ‘Self’ and 3) International Justice. The titles of these narratives presented what the war signified to the participants respectively.

Since we conducted the research within Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework, we believed the meanings and signifiers defined in the discourses participants produced were based on how the signified content of the central signifiers were assigned. We assumed the central signifiers would be consistent among the narratives constructed for each side respectively. As expected, it was observed that both sides have consistent central signifiers with consistent signified content. For Armenians, the central signifiers were, such as, ‘democracy’ and ‘Christian values’. Other signifiers such as ‘human rights’ were defined according to these central signifiers. To Armenians, ‘human rights’ was equivalent to the embracement of democratic values and Christian values, which included the rights of people to self-determination. On the other hand, for Azerbaijanis, their central signifier was mainly ‘international justice’. Their definition of ‘international justice’ was the abidance of international law and UNSC resolutions. Thus, their concept of ‘human rights’ was also defined according to the definition of ‘international justice’. As such, the concept of ‘patriotism’ and ‘liberation’ were also defined and understood

differently between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. ‘Patriotism’ and ‘liberation’ to Armenians were defined as achieving national unity through the rights to self-determination<sup>3</sup>. While to Azerbaijanis, they were defined as protecting territorial integrity in compliance with international law.

According to how central signifiers were defined, we could also observe their self-identification regarding this war in the narratives. All the narratives had clear application of otherness.

Overall, Armenians told their part of the story portraying Azerbaijan and Turkey as the brutal ‘other’ in the war. It was consistent among the three narratives we presented in this paper. Particularly, in the narrative about genocide 2.0, they suggested Azerbaijan was politically under the control of the Turkish government. While for the Armenian ‘self’, they told the story of it being the victim of this war. To Armenians, their collective ‘self’ had a traumatised past which was repeated by the brutality of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Yet, they also emphasised this ‘self’ was strong in the war, united and being the protector of the world. For Azerbaijanis, Armenians were the main ‘other’ in their narratives. According to them, Armenians were brutal against Azerbaijanis and uncooperative on the ceasefire matter. The Azerbaijani ‘self’ was the victim of the brutality. The ‘self’ was being misunderstood by the world also because of the disinformation strategy conducted by the brutal Armenians. Besides, the ‘self’ was oppressed and should be liberated. The ‘self’ was cooperative on the ceasefire matter and was fighting for international justice.

It is especially noticeable among the social communities from both sides that they told the world they were the victims of brutality. At the same time, they suggested the indifference and ignorance of the international community intensified the situation.

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<sup>3</sup> While the name ‘Nagorno-Karabakh’ was used throughout the entire analysis for a consistent flow, it is important to note that ‘Artsakh’ was used most of the time by the Armenian side among all the levels of participants when they described the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Officials, think tanks and the social communities were often all consistently adopting the name ‘Artsakh’. On one hand, it illustrated Armenians’ affirmation of the rights to self-determination and the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other hand, it told the world that Nagorno-Karabakh had a different meaning to Armenians than what it meant to Azerbaijanis. It also showed the dispersed social realities Armenians and Azerbaijanis were portraying and consuming in their discourses.

However, the otherness of the international community and the world in general were different between the narratives of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Among Armenians, the world was a part of the 'self' when the 'self' signified the embracement of Western and Christian values. But this 'self' was also internally split when the international community failed to act upon the values they promised in their policies. Among Azerbaijanis, we observed their othering of the international community in the narrative about liberation of the 'self'. There was a storyline about the world being a part of the 'other' who oppressed the 'self'. Within the same storyline, the 'self' was also associated to Muslims. They told the world how the Muslim 'self' had been oppressed by the non-Muslim 'other' in general.

As such, among the narratives from both sides, we could observe similarities of the signified content of the 'international community'. For both sides, the 'international community' was indifferent to the conflict. Besides, from the religious othering they applied in their narratives, we could possibly tell that the 'international community' was associated with Christianity and democratic values. Thus, to Armenians, the 'international community' was considered as a part of the 'self' regardless of the internal split described in their storyline. While for Azerbaijanis, they considered the 'international community' as a part of the oppressing 'other' who oppressed the Muslim 'self'.

All these six narratives constitute the image of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The war itself, as a floating signifier, was defined and assigned the signified content by Armenians and Azerbaijanis respectively, according to their different beliefs and political interests. These six narratives clearly illustrate the rivalry between the two sides with the application of otherness observed from both sides. The narratives represent the image of the war in our meaningful world. In other words, these six narratives are what we understand about this Nagorno-Karabakh war, according to the constructivist perspective.

## **6.2 Limitation**

There are possibly a number of limitations in this research, which will be explained in the following.

Firstly, it is the problem of credibility. The author's understanding of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the war in 2020 could be biased. The biased understanding could affect the credibility of this research. Besides, even though social practices and political institutions were not a part of the consideration when studying the image of war that participants presented to the world, there could be a problem of credibility of empirical data collected. Such credibility could be in question when political freedom, such as freedom of speech of the countries were not taken into consideration during the research. To what extent political institutions played a role in influencing the discourses would be raised and addressed by Critical Discourse analysts. In other words, this research, without the critical analysis, could hardly tell us whether the discourses observed from different levels of participants were limited by their political institutions and their social practices.

Secondly, the reliability of this research could be lowered by the author's analysis of empirical data within the framework applied in this research. Due to the author's limited capability in conducting a discourse analysis through a systematic and organised structure, the method of interpreting empirical texts and images in this research might have left some significant messages and meanings omitted.

### **6.3 Further Research**

This research mainly focused on the image of war, i.e. what the war signified in our meaningful world. This research did not study the social practices, norms and political institutions which could possibly impact the discourses from both parties. Because of that, further research conducted within Fairclough's framework of CDA would be helpful as it allows researchers to delve deeper into both the historical and social context of the discourses produced.

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