
ASYMMETRIC THREATS AND STATE RESILIENCE: AZERBAIJAN'S COUNTERTERRORISM EXPERIENCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

*Asimetrik Tehditler ve Devletin Dayanıklılığı: Güney Kafkasya'da
Azerbaycan'ın Terörle Mücadele Deneyimi*

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Abstract

The primary objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the diverse manifestations of terrorism that have emerged in Azerbaijan. It argues that the country has been exposed to three distinct forms of terrorist activity: two religiously motivated variants linked to Iran and certain Arab states, and a third form associated with Armenian terrorism. To examine these dynamics, the study addresses two central research questions. First, what are the underlying motivations driving terrorist organizations operating within or targeting Azerbaijan? Second, what strategies and mechanisms do these groups, as well as the state actors that support them, employ to advance their political, ideological, and strategic objectives?

Keywords: Terrorist Threats, Armenian Terrorism, Hybrid Warfare, Religiously Motivated Terrorism, State Sponsored Terrorism.

Özet

Bu makalenin amacı, Azerbaycan'da ortaya çıkan çeşitli terör tehditlerinin kapsamlı bir analizini sunmaktır. Yazar, Azerbaycan'ın üç farklı türde terörizme maruz kaldığını savunmaktadır: İran ve bazı Arap devletleriyle bağlantılı iki tür dini motivasyonlu terörizm ve Ermeni terörizmiyle ilişkili üçüncü bir tür. Bu makale iki temel araştırma sorusunu ele almaktadır: Azerbaycan içinde veya Azerbaycan'a karşı faaliyet gösteren terör örgütlerinin temel motivasyonları nelerdir? Ve bu gruplar veya onları destekleyen devlet aktörleri, siyasi ve ideolojik hedeflerini ilerletmek için hangi stratejileri kullanmaktadır?

Anahtar Kelimeler: Terörist Tehditler, Ermeni Terörizmi, Karma Savaş, Dini Motifli Terörizm, Devlet Destekli Terörizm.

Introduction

Within the contemporary international system, terrorism has emerged as a pervasive global phenomenon that poses profound challenges to both state and non-state actors. It inflicts harm not only upon individuals but also upon communities and sovereign states, thereby undermining the foundations of international peace, security, and governance. In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, no region can be regarded as entirely immune to the threat of terrorism. Distinct from conventional military operations or ordinary criminal activities, terrorism represents a complex form of asymmetric violence. It is predominantly perpetrated by individuals or organized non-state entities and is driven by political, ideological, or ethnonationalist motivations intended to influence state behavior, reshape power structures, or destabilize established political orders.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has confronted a complex and evolving security environment characterized by multifaceted terrorist threats. Positioned at the crossroads of the South Caucasus, the Caspian region, and the broader Middle East, the country has faced persistent challenges from both non-state and state-supported actors seeking to advance political, ideological, and ethnonationalist agendas. This article argues that the country has been exposed to three distinct forms of terrorist activity: two religiously motivated variants linked to Iran and certain Arab states, and a third form associated with Armenian state-supported terrorism. The analysis is guided by two central research questions. First, what are the underlying motivations of terrorist organizations operating within or against Azerbaijan? Second, what strategies do these groups or the state actors that support them, employ to achieve their political and ideological objectives? By addressing these questions, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of the interplay between transnational and regional terrorist threats,

and the ways in which a post-Soviet state with limited resources navigates asymmetric security challenges over three decades.

Case Selection and Methodological Approach

This article adopts a qualitative case study design to examine Azerbaijan's counterterrorism experience within the broader context of asymmetric threats and state resilience in the South Caucasus. The case study approach is particularly suitable for analysing complex security environments in which multiple layers of domestic, regional, and transnational dynamics interact. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study aims to generate analytical depth and theoretical insight into how a mid-sized post-Soviet state constructs and sustains resilience in response to diverse forms of asymmetric violence.

Azerbaijan is selected as a critical case due to its unique geopolitical position and its exposure to a multidimensional spectrum of security threats. Unlike several other post-Soviet states, Azerbaijan simultaneously faces religiously motivated extremism, ethnonationalist violence linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the strategic pressures associated with regional great power competition. This convergence of threat types provides a particularly rich empirical setting for examining how state institutions adapt to hybrid and evolving security challenges. Moreover, Azerbaijan's relatively strong centralized governance and significant energy resources further distinguish it from many regional counterparts, enabling a more sustained and institutionally coordinated counterterrorism response.

This study situates the Azerbaijani case within broader theoretical debates in terrorism studies, regional security studies, and international relations. By engaging with key concepts such as asymmetric warfare, hybrid threats, and state resilience, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how post-Soviet states confront and adapt to transnational and ethnonationalist forms of terrorism in an increasingly complex geopolitical

environment. Furthermore, the article underscores the strategic significance of Azerbaijan, demonstrating how regional conflicts, ideological diffusion, and the activities of state-sponsored actors intersect to shape contemporary security challenges. In doing so, it offers valuable insights into the interplay between domestic security dynamics and broader regional geopolitical processes.

Comparatively, Azerbaijan differs from other post-Soviet states such as Georgia, Armenia, or Central Asian republics in terms of both threat configuration and state capacity. While some states primarily confront transnational jihadist networks or internal separatist movements, Azerbaijan's security environment is characterised by the intersection of territorial conflict, ideological infiltration, and external state-linked influence. This combination allows the study to explore resilience not merely as institutional capacity, but as a broader strategic adaptation to overlapping asymmetric threats. The case therefore offers analytical leverage for refining existing theoretical discussions on state resilience, hybrid threats, and counterterrorism in post-conflict and geopolitically contested regions.

This study employs a qualitative document-based research design supported by deductive thematic content analysis. The analytical framework was developed on the basis of the literature on terrorism, asymmetric threats, and state resilience, and subsequently applied to the empirical material. Rather than generating themes inductively from the data, the analysis was guided by a set of predefined thematic categories, including religiously motivated terrorism, ethnonationalist terrorism, state-sponsored terrorism, transnational terrorist networks, counterterrorism policies, institutional adaptation, and state resilience.

The empirical dataset consists of both primary and secondary sources covering the period from 1990 to 2025. Primary sources include official government documents, legislative acts, national

security and counterterrorism strategies, reports published by Azerbaijani state institutions, judicial records, official statements, and reports issued by international organizations. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, think tank publications, and historical analyses addressing terrorism, regional security, and the South Caucasus. Documents were selected on the basis of their relevance to terrorism and counterterrorism in Azerbaijan, their scholarly or institutional credibility, and their contribution to understanding the evolution of asymmetric threats. Sources lacking clear authorship, methodological transparency, or direct relevance to the research questions were excluded from the analysis.

The document collection process was conducted through systematic searches of academic databases and institutional repositories using a combination of keywords including *Azerbaijan, terrorism, counterterrorism, asymmetric threats, state resilience, religious extremism, ethnonationalist terrorism, state-sponsored terrorism, hybrid threats, and South Caucasus security*. Following data collection, documents were coded according to the predefined thematic framework. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, threat perceptions, institutional responses, and resilience mechanisms across different historical periods. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a systematic and theoretically informed assessment of Azerbaijan's counterterrorism experience between 1990 and 2025.

Literature Review

Terrorism in the South Caucasus, and Azerbaijan in particular, has received increasing scholarly attention since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The region's geopolitical position, ethno-political conflicts, and proximity to volatile areas such as Iran, the North Caucasus, and the Middle East have created fertile ground for diverse forms of terrorism (Cornell, 2011; De Waal, 2010; Ismayilov, 2015: 96). Scholars have emphasized that post-Soviet states, including

Azerbaijan, have faced both internal and external security challenges that are multidimensional in nature, ranging from religious extremism to ethnonationalist violence (Cornell, 2004: 11).

Religiously motivated terrorism in Azerbaijan has been primarily associated with ideological influences emanating from Iran and certain Arab states. Existing scholarship suggests that, despite Azerbaijan's secular political system and comparatively robust state institutions, limited pockets of radicalization have emerged, particularly in border regions and among socioeconomically marginalized communities (Hunter, 2010; Cornell, 2011). These extremist networks are often characterized by transnational orientations, seeking not only to disseminate ideological narratives but also to establish connections with broader Islamist movements operating across the region and beyond. Consequently, the threat posed by such groups extends beyond domestic security concerns, reflecting the wider dynamics of transnational extremism and ideological mobilization.

A second significant dimension of the terrorist threat in Azerbaijan is associated with ethnonationalist violence and allegations of state-supported terrorist activities in the context of the protracted Karabakh conflict. The existing literature highlights that acts of violence directed against Azerbaijani civilians, critical infrastructure, and strategic energy corridors have been closely intertwined with the broader geopolitical dynamics of the conflict (Croissant, 1998; Statement, 2022). This perspective underscores that terrorism in the South Caucasus cannot be examined solely through the lens of non-state actors. Rather, the involvement of state sponsors, proxy networks, and hybrid forms of warfare has significantly shaped the region's security environment and influenced the evolution of contemporary threat landscapes. By situating terrorism within the broader context of interstate rivalry and territorial disputes, this approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted security challenges facing Azerbaijan.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Few studies systematically integrate the multiple dimensions of terrorism in Azerbaijan - religious, political, and ethnonationalist - over a prolonged temporal frame (1991-2025). Moreover, while regional security studies have increasingly emphasized asymmetric and hybrid threats (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Lake and Morgan, 1997), Azerbaijan is often treated as a peripheral case rather than a focal point in comparative analyses of post-Soviet counterterrorism strategies. By synthesizing historical data, regional analyses, and theoretical frameworks, this study addresses this gap, providing a comprehensive assessment of Azerbaijan's security environment in the post-Soviet era.

By situating Azerbaijan's experience within broader theoretical discourses on terrorism, asymmetric warfare, and regional security complexes (Buzan and Wæver, 2003), this study seeks to provide insights into the strategies and resilience mechanisms of post-Soviet states confronting multifaceted security threats. The research contributes to both empirical understanding and theoretical development in the fields of security studies and international relations.

Theoretical Framework

The study of terrorism within the discipline of International Relations (IR) and Security Studies has evolved significantly since the late twentieth century, shifting from state-centric models of conflict toward broader analyses of asymmetric and transnational threats. Classical definitions emphasize terrorism as the deliberate use of violence or threat of violence by non-state actors against civilians or symbolic targets to achieve political objectives (Hoffman, 2017: 40). However, scholars increasingly recognize that terrorism may also involve state sponsorship, proxy warfare, and hybrid strategies that blur the line between conventional conflict and irregular violence (Byman, 2005: 98; Crenshaw, 2011: 33). Within this framework, Azerbaijan's experience since its independence

illustrates how a small post-Soviet state must simultaneously manage both religiously motivated non-state terrorism and state-supported ethnonationalist terrorism within a contested regional order.

The concept of asymmetric warfare provides a critical analytical lens for understanding terrorism as a strategic choice adopted by weaker actors against more powerful adversaries. As Hoffman (2017: 43) argues, terrorism operates *as the weapon of the weak*, leveraging psychological and symbolic effects to compensate for material inferiority. Similarly, Arreguín-Toft (2001: 97) conceptualizes asymmetric conflict as an interaction of strategic mismatches, where weaker actors adopt unconventional tactics to offset their disadvantages. This framework is particularly relevant to Azerbaijan, where terrorist groups - both religiously inspired and ethnonationalist - have sought to exploit societal divisions, state vulnerabilities, and symbolic targets to destabilize the political order and undermine sovereignty.

In the context of the South Caucasus, asymmetric warfare extends beyond non-state violence to encompass state-sponsored terrorism and proxy conflict. Collins (2014) identifies state sponsorship of terrorism as a cost-effective means of pursuing foreign policy objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. Cline and Alexander (1986: 46) outline a maximalist definition of state sponsored terrorism as: *"The direct or indirect instigation by a government of official and non-official groups to exercise psychological or physical violence against political opponents, another government, or other entity for purposes of coercion and widespread intimidation to bring about a desired political or strategic objective."* The persistent use of terrorist tactics by Armenian militant actors, as well as the alleged involvement of their state sponsors, during and after the Karabakh conflict exemplifies this dynamic. It reflects the convergence of ethnonationalist narratives and claims of national liberation with the methods and characteristics of asymmetric warfare. This case illustrates how terrorism can function as an

instrument within broader geopolitical and territorial disputes, blurring the boundaries between irregular violence, proxy engagement, and conventional political objectives.

The concept of state terrorism remains contested in the literature, largely due to the difficulty of distinguishing between legitimate state coercion and illegitimate violence against civilians. Nevertheless, scholars such as Blakeley (2009: 29) argue that state terrorism involves the deliberate use of violence or threat of violence by governments to induce fear and compliance among target populations, whether domestic or foreign. In the South Caucasus, Armenian state-supported terrorism and the use of diaspora-based militant networks in the 1990s and 2000s align with this broader conceptualization, as such actions aimed to influence political outcomes through fear and coercion beyond conventional military engagement (Croissant, 1998: 56).

For Azerbaijan, state-sponsored terrorism presents a dual challenge: while combating religious extremism associated with transnational non-state actors, it must also confront state-supported operations designed to destabilize its sovereignty. This duality situates Azerbaijan within a broader theoretical debate about the interaction between weak and strong states in hybrid security environments.

To situate Azerbaijan's experience within a systemic context, this paper draws on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003). According to RSCT, security dynamics are often regionally clustered, with interdependent security concerns linking neighboring states through patterns of amity and enmity. The South Caucasus constitutes a classic example of a regional security complex, where internal conflicts, such as Karabakh, and external influences from Iran have intertwined to create persistent insecurity. Applying RSCT helps explain why Azerbaijan's terrorism-related threats cannot be analyzed in isolation. Instead, they must be understood as products of regional

interdependence, transnational networks, and external manipulation. Religiously motivated terrorism, for instance, is influenced by ideological flows from Iran and the Arab world (Hunter, 2010), while ethnonationalist terrorism was shaped by state competition and unresolved territorial disputes. This interlocking pattern situates Azerbaijan at the nexus of local, regional, and global security dynamics.

In addition to explaining the sources of terrorist threats, the concept of state resilience provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing Azerbaijan's responses. Chandler (2014: 48) defines resilience as a state's ability to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to threats while maintaining core governance functions. This perspective moves beyond traditional deterrence models, emphasizing adaptability and institutional robustness in the face of asymmetric challenges. Azerbaijan's approach to counterterrorism since its independence demonstrates key elements of resilience: the creation of a centralized counterterrorism framework, the strengthening of inter-agency cooperation, and the integration of external partnerships with states such as Türkiye, Israel, and the United States. These strategies align with the comprehensive security model, which emphasizes multidimensional responses to both domestic and transnational threats (Buzan, 1991: 19).

Integrating these theoretical perspectives - terrorism as asymmetric warfare, state and proxy terrorism, RSCT, and resilience - provides a robust framework for analyzing Azerbaijan's security challenges. The combination of internal vulnerabilities, external sponsorship, and regional interdependence positions Azerbaijan as a critical case for understanding how small states navigate hybrid threat environments in the post-Soviet space. This article, therefore, contributes not only to regional security literature but also to broader debates in IR concerning state adaptation, asymmetric conflict, and the evolution of terrorism in a multipolar world.

1. Historical Overview of Terrorism in Azerbaijan (1991-2025)

The evolution of terrorism in Azerbaijan reflects the broader political and security transformations of the South Caucasus following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the last three decades, Azerbaijan faced a spectrum of terrorist threats that mirrored the region's shifting geopolitical alignments, ideological currents, and unresolved conflicts. These threats can be broadly divided into three chronological phases: the post-independence instability of the 1990s, the consolidation and internationalization of terrorism in the 2000s and 2010s, and the hybrid and transnational threat environment of the 2020s.

The early 1990s marked a period of acute instability for Azerbaijan. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent state confronted multiple crises - ethnic conflict, economic dislocation, and weak institutional capacity. The outbreak of the First Karabakh War (1991-1994) between Armenia and Azerbaijan not only resulted in massive displacement and territorial loss but also catalyzed Armenian state-supported terrorism, targeting Azerbaijani civilians, infrastructure, and diplomatic personnel abroad.

Several attacks in the early 1990s illustrate the use of terrorism as an asymmetric tool within this conflict. For instance, Azerbaijani authorities attributed the downing of the passenger helicopter (1992), the bombings of passenger trains (1993 and 1994), Baku subway train bombings (1994), which killed civilians and injured hundreds, to a coordinated network involving both domestic extremists and Armenian-linked operatives (MFA.az, 2017). The incident underscored the porous security environment of the time, where state weakness allowed multiple actors - including foreign intelligence services - to operate freely.

Parallel to ethnonationalist violence, religiously motivated terrorism began to emerge, influenced by ideological flows from Iran

and parts of the Arab world. The early post-Soviet years witnessed the infiltration of Iranian clerical networks and transnational Islamist charities into Azerbaijan (Ismayilov, 2015: 106; Valiyev, 2005: 6). These groups sought to capitalize on socio-economic discontent and religious revivalism to spread Shia fundamentalist narratives challenging Azerbaijan's secular statehood. Though relatively limited in operational capacity, their activities laid the groundwork for future radicalization networks.

The turn of the millennium brought a new phase in Azerbaijan's counterterrorism landscape. The government consolidated state institutions, reformed the security sector, and aligned with international counterterrorism frameworks following the September 11, 2001 attacks (Ismailzade, 2004: 4). During this period, Azerbaijan actively cooperated with Western and regional partners, joining coalitions such as the Global War on Terrorism, and enhancing intelligence sharing with Türkiye, Israel, and the United States.

However, the 2000s also witnessed the transnationalization of terrorist networks. Islamist groups with connections to global jihadist movements, including cells inspired by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) - began recruiting Azerbaijani citizens for operations abroad, particularly in Syria and Iraq. Domestically, several cells were dismantled by Azerbaijani law enforcement, such as the 2009 plot against the Israeli embassy in Baku (Melman, 2009).

Religiously motivated terrorism during this period assumed a hybrid character, combining local grievances with transnational jihadist ideologies. Azerbaijan's secular and authoritarian model of governance functioned both as a deterrent to radicalization and as a catalyst for clandestine activities, restricting overt extremist mobilization while driving certain actors underground. In response, the government introduced legal reforms, strengthened the regulation of religious institutions, and established the State

Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) to oversee and monitor religious affairs (Ismayilov, 2015: 100).

Simultaneously, Armenian terrorism persisted in more covert forms. Diaspora-based organizations such as ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and smaller militant cells maintained propaganda campaigns and occasional sabotage operations targeting Azerbaijani interests abroad. The enduring conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh ensured that the specter of ethnonationalist terrorism remained deeply embedded in Azerbaijan's security calculus.

The Second Karabakh War (2020) marked a watershed moment in Azerbaijan's modern security history. The rapid restoration of territorial integrity through military victory significantly altered the regional balance of power but also introduced new forms of hybrid and asymmetric threats. In the aftermath, Azerbaijan faced retaliatory actions from extremist Armenian groups and information warfare campaigns aimed at delegitimizing its victory. By the mid-2020s, Azerbaijan's counterterrorism posture evolved into a multi-layered resilience framework, combining legal, institutional, and military components. The government enhanced cooperation with regional security alliances, particularly with Türkiye and Israel, emphasizing intelligence fusion, border control, and drone-based surveillance.

2. Types and Motivations of Terrorism in Azerbaijan

The evolution of terrorism in Azerbaijan from the 1990s to 2025 reveals a complex interplay between ideological, geopolitical, and ethno-political factors. As argued in the preceding sections, Azerbaijan has faced three distinct but interrelated forms of terrorism: (1) religiously motivated terrorism with Iranian influence, (2) religiously motivated terrorism linked to Arab-based transnational jihadist movements, and (3) Armenian state-sponsored ethnonationalist terrorism. Each form emerged from

distinct contexts and pursued different strategic and ideological objectives. Collectively, they illustrate how terrorism in the South Caucasus reflects both local grievances and the regional projection of power by external actors.

2.1 Religiously Motivated Terrorism with Iranian Influence

Religious extremism linked to Iranian ideological networks represents the earliest and most enduring form of non-state terrorism in Azerbaijan. Following independence, Azerbaijan's secular political system, founded on a clear separation between state and religion, came into conflict with Tehran's revolutionary vision of Shi'a political Islam (Ismayilov, 2015: 102). Iran sought to expand its influence in Azerbaijan through a combination of soft-power instruments, including religious education, media outreach, and clerical exchanges, as well as through covert support for radical clerical networks operating in Baku and, in particular, the southern border regions.

During the 1990s, several underground Shi'a organizations emerged, including *Hizbullah Azerbaijan* and *the Islamic Unity Movement*, which drew ideological inspiration from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah. These groups sought to challenge Azerbaijan's secular political order, advocating for increased clerical involvement in governance and, at times, engaging in violent activities, including the assassination of officials and attempted attacks on state institutions. Although their operational capacity remained limited, their ideological influence was significant.

At the end of the 1990s, Azerbaijani intelligence services arrested fourteen individuals identified as members of a terrorist organization known as Jeyshullah (Army of God). While the group was publicly described as a Salafi organization of Arab origin, several reports and unofficial accounts suggested possible links between Jeyshullah and Iranian intelligence structures (Crisis Group, 2008: 3). The arrested individuals were charged with a range of serious

criminal offenses, including murder, armed robbery, and an attempted bombing of the headquarters of the non-Muslim Krishna religious community in Baku.

By the early 2000s, the Azerbaijani state intensified its counterterrorism measures, dismantling several Iranian-backed networks. In February 2007, Azerbaijani authorities arrested a group of 15 Azerbaijanis in Baku who called themselves the Northern Mahdi Army (Azertac, 2008). The group was charged with having ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). According to the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security (MNS), the group was organized to establish a state ruled by Sharia law.

A new wave of deterioration in relations between Iran and Azerbaijan began following the assassination of several Iranian nuclear scientists in the early 2010s. In response to these assassination incidents, Iranian authorities accused not only the Israeli intelligence agency *Mossad*, as well as the CIA and MI6, of orchestrating the attacks, but also implied that certain neighboring states had provided logistical or intelligence support, an allegation widely interpreted as a veiled reference to Azerbaijan (Reuters, 2012). In the aftermath, it was widely assumed that, as an act of retaliation, Iran facilitated or tolerated the activities of terrorist networks targeting Israeli and other Western citizens within Azerbaijani territory.

In January 2012, the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan arrested a terrorist cell allegedly linked to the Iranian intelligence services (Shvidler, 2012). According to official reports, three members of the group were accused of plotting attacks against two Israeli citizens employed by the Jewish educational institution Chabad Ohr Avner in Baku.

The following month, in February 2012, Azerbaijani intelligence authorities announced the arrest of several additional suspects connected to Iran's intelligence apparatus and the Lebanese organization Hezbollah (Trend, 2012). These individuals were

charged with planning coordinated attacks targeting foreign nationals, particularly Israeli and U.S. citizens on Azerbaijani territory. In October 2012, the Serious Crimes Court of Azerbaijan sentenced twenty-two defendants who, according to government sources, had been involved in organizing terrorist operations on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The individuals were accused of assisting Iranian operatives in planning strikes against Israeli and American diplomatic missions, as well as Western-affiliated companies operating in Baku. Azerbaijani authorities claimed that the network's organizer, an Azerbaijani national allegedly recruited during a visit to Iran, had been tasked with assembling a local group to gather intelligence and facilitate espionage activities in preparation for the attacks.

In November 2013, another security incident further strained relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani authorities arrested an Iranian national accused of planning an attack on the Israeli Embassy in Baku. According to reports circulated in Israeli media, the suspect was allegedly a member of the Quds Force - the elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responsible for orchestrating and supporting covert operations and terrorist activities targeting Israeli interests abroad (Sterman, 2013). The incident reinforced regional perceptions of Iran's willingness to employ proxy tactics and extraterritorial operations as instruments of strategic influence.

In February 2023, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Internal Affairs announced the arrest of a group members in connection with an Iranian espionage network. The network was working in three directions: collecting information on security installations and VIPs, spreading disinformation through social media, and inciting anti-governmental protests based on claims of the "non-Muslim policy" of the government. The group was connected not only with Iranian intelligence, but also with the Hüseyniyyun group, which was created by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

In April 2023, a joint statement announced by the Azerbaijani interior ministry, state security service and prosecutor-general's office, informed the arrest of six people recruited by Iranian secret services to destabilize the situation and to set up a resistance squad aimed at establishing a Sharia state in Azerbaijan through armed unrest and violent overthrow of Azerbaijan's constitutional order (MIA.gov.az, 2023).

These successive counterterrorism operations may also be interpreted as an opportunity for Azerbaijani intelligence and security institutions to project an image of effectiveness and reliability on the international stage. By publicizing their role in thwarting Iranian linked plots, Azerbaijani authorities sought to demonstrate their capacity to combat transnational terrorism and to position the country as a credible partner in global counterterrorism efforts, particularly in cooperation with Western and Israeli intelligence agencies.

From a motivational perspective, Iran-backed extremist activity in Azerbaijan is primarily politico-ideological in nature. It seeks to advance the concept of theocratic governance while counterbalancing Azerbaijan's pro-Western orientation and secular state trajectory. Ideologically driven terrorism in this context is often rooted in perceptions of existential threat to identity, values, or belief systems. Accordingly, Iran-aligned actors and affiliated networks frame Azerbaijan's secular nationalism as a deviation from perceived Islamic authenticity, employing religious discourse to legitimize political subversion.

Nevertheless, Iran's capacity to exert sustained influence in this domain remains constrained. Azerbaijan's relatively robust intelligence infrastructure, combined with the systematic suppression of foreign clerical networks, has significantly limited the operational effectiveness of Iran-linked groups since the mid-2010s. However, ideological influence persists, particularly through digital

propaganda channels and Shi'a clerical education networks that promote anti-secular narratives.

The series of thwarted terrorist plots between 2012 and 2013 not only intensified Azerbaijan's security concerns regarding Iran's regional activities but also accelerated its strategic realignment toward closer intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation with Israel and the United States. In the aftermath of these incidents, Azerbaijan expanded bilateral security consultations, enhanced intelligence sharing mechanisms, and deepened defense collaboration, particularly in areas related to counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and protection of critical infrastructure. This alignment served both pragmatic and symbolic purposes: pragmatically, it strengthened Azerbaijan's operational capacity against transnational threats; symbolically, it positioned Baku as a proactive and trustworthy partner within the Western-led security architecture in the broader Middle East and Eurasian context.

2.2 Religiously Motivated Terrorism Linked to Arab States and Transnational Jihadism

A distinct but related dimension of religious terrorism in Azerbaijan has originated from Sunni extremist movements with ideological and logistical roots in the Arab world. Unlike the Iranian linked Shi'a networks, these groups align with Salafi-jihadist ideologies propagated by organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). Their rise in Azerbaijan during the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with the global diffusion of jihadist discourse and the radicalization of foreign fighters from the post-Soviet space.

These groups operated mainly in the northern regions of Azerbaijan where conservative Sunni traditions provided a social base for recruitment. Early manifestations included *the Jamaat al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad* and smaller cells that established links with Chechen militants during the First and Second Chechen Wars. The motivations of Arab-linked jihadist terrorism in Azerbaijan are primarily transnational rather than local. Global jihadist

organizations seek to expand ideological influence by establishing nodes within peripheral Muslim majority states, which serve as logistical or recruitment hubs. In Azerbaijan's case, the country's strategic geography, bordering Iran, Russia's North Caucasus, and the Caspian Sea made it an attractive corridor for extremist networks connecting the Middle East and Eurasia.

The first international terrorist organization to operate in Azerbaijan was the religious militant group known as *al-Jihad* or Islamic Jihad. Founded in Egypt in the late 1970s, al-Jihad later became closely associated with al-Qaida following their formal merger in June 2001. An Azerbaijani cell of al-Jihad was reportedly established by the Egyptian national Ibrahim Eidarous, who served as the organization's leader for a two-year period from 1995 to 1997. The presence of this cell in Azerbaijan marked the country's early exposure to transnational religiously motivated terrorism, highlighting the region's vulnerability to networks extending beyond the South Caucasus and reflecting the broader patterns of Islamist militancy that were spreading across Eurasia in the 1990s (Hegghammer, 2010: 52).

The North Caucasus has historically served as a region from which terrorist networks and extremist ideologies have spread to neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan. Among these transnational organizations was *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which is reported to have established a presence in Azerbaijan in 2000. The Azerbaijani cell of the organization was founded in August 2001 by Uzbek national Abduresul Abdukerimov (Crisis Group, 2008: 3). According to Azerbaijani authorities, the group sought to undermine the country's secular political framework and promote the establishment of a caliphate. Members of the organization were alleged to have planned large-scale terrorist attacks targeting foreign diplomatic missions in Baku, reflecting both the transnational character of Islamist extremism in the region and the persistent threat posed by ideologically motivated groups operating across post-Soviet states.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Azerbaijan emerged as a strategically significant partner in the global campaign against terrorism, despite its relatively small size and limited resources. Having faced various terrorist threats since its independence, the country demonstrated immediate solidarity with the United States by granting access to its airspace for Western military operations against al-Qaeda and contributing personnel to Afghanistan as part of the international coalition. However, this alignment exposed Azerbaijan to potential retaliatory threats. A deputy of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri explicitly warned that the country would face consequences for aligning with “infidels.” From late 2001 onward, Azerbaijan became the target of multiple al-Qaeda-related terrorist activities.

In 2004, then-National Security Minister Namiq Abbasov reported that intelligence indicated al-Qaeda was planning sabotage aimed at disrupting the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, underscoring the tangible risks associated with Azerbaijan’s strategic cooperation. In October 2004, the Azerbaijani Security Service arrested a group of foreign nationals from Afghanistan, Great Britain, Jordan, and Russia who were accused of planning terrorist acts in Azerbaijan. The group reportedly received instructions from Abu Hafs, the regional coordinator of al-Qaeda in the Caucasus (Statement of MNS, July 5, 2005).

In March 2005, the National Security Ministry disclosed the existence of a domestic group of six citizens whose objective was to undermine the secular and democratic character of the state and its anti-terrorism policies. This group was also linked to al-Qaeda, and its leader, Emiraslan Isgenderov, reportedly received military training and participated in combat operations alongside al-Qaeda in Afghanistan between 1999 and 2003.

By the end of the first quarter of 2005, Azerbaijani intelligence reported that the country’s counterterrorism efforts against several international terrorist organizations, including al-Jihad, Hizb ut-

Tahrir, the Caucasus Islamic Army, and Jeyshullah, had been largely successful. These organizations were effectively neutralized: 43 individuals accused of membership were extradited, and several were handed over to foreign authorities. Simultaneously, the existence of seven humanitarian organizations suspected of links to terrorist groups was officially prohibited (Azerbaijan, March 29, 2005).

In 2006, Azerbaijani society and media learned of a new terrorist group, *Jamaat al-Muwahiddun*, founded in 2005 by Ilkin Ismayilov, who designated himself as the group's Amir. The organization was accused of illegal border crossings, arms acquisition, armed robbery, and document forgery. Members sought military training in camps of foreign terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iraq. After failing to cross the border from Iran, they planned to carry out operations in Azerbaijan, targeting the United States, Israeli, and Russian embassies and consulates in Baku, as well as strategic government buildings, including the National Bank of Azerbaijan and SOCAR (Statement of MNS, April 17, 2006). In the same month, sixteen militants from Yemen, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye were sentenced to prison for illegal arms acquisition and the assassination of an officer of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. All were accused of being al-Qaeda members and of receiving military training in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge to fight in Chechnya against the Russian army (RFE/RL, April 19, 2006).

In April 2012, several members of a suspected terrorist group with links to al-Qaeda were arrested in Baku. Some had received training in Iran, while others had trained in Syria, preparing for jihad in Azerbaijan. In May 2012, the MNS arrested forty individuals belonging to another terrorist group. Officials reported that the group's primary targets included the concert hall hosting the Eurovision Song Contest and hotels in Baku frequented by foreigners, particularly those housing the Israeli music band during the event. During the first week of March 2015, the MNS arrested six members of an unidentified terrorist group suspected of organizing

operations aimed at establishing an Islamic state governed by Sharia law in Azerbaijan.

The Syrian civil war further intensified this trend. By 2015, Azerbaijani security authorities estimated that over 300 citizens had joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, many of whom were radicalized through online propaganda in Arabic and Azeri languages. The Ministry of National Security (MNS) conducted multiple operations to dismantle returnee cells and prevent cross-border infiltration.

While transnational jihadist terrorism in Azerbaijan remains limited compared to regional hotspots, its motivations reveal a broader ideological struggle. Salafi groups of Arab origins frame their activities as part of a global conflict between Islam and secular modernity, casting Azerbaijan's state institutions as complicit with Western infidel powers. This doctrinal polarization, between global jihadist universalism and Azerbaijani secular nationalism, illustrates what Buzan and Wæver (2003: 80) describe as societal security threats, where identity-based narratives challenge state legitimacy.

2.3 Armenian State-Sponsored and Ethnonationalist Terrorism

The third and most politically consequential form of terrorism targeting Azerbaijan has been Armenian state-sponsored and ethnonationalist terrorism. Rooted in the historical and territorial dispute over Nagorno Karabakh, this form of violence has combined elements of state directed coercion, diaspora mobilisation, and symbolic violence aimed at influencing international perceptions of the conflict. Historical records indicate that Azerbaijan had already experienced episodes of Armenian-related violence during the first decades of the twentieth century. During the Soviet period, such activities were largely suppressed; however, by the late 1980s, violence against Azerbaijan re-emerged in the context of escalating tensions. In pursuit of its political and territorial objectives, Armenian actors focused their activities on Azerbaijani targets, which became central to the broader pattern of violence. The period

between 1989 and 1994 is often characterised as one of the most severe phases of insecurity in contemporary Azerbaijani history. During this time, large-scale violence affected civilian populations, including women and children, amid the broader dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

During the first Karabakh War (1991–1994), Armenian forces and affiliated militant groups targeted Azerbaijani civilians and infrastructure through tactics that extended beyond conventional warfare. The Khojaly massacre (1992) in which over 600 Azerbaijani civilians were killed, has been described by Azerbaijani sources as an act of state terrorism intended to instill fear and compel mass displacement (MFA.gov.az, 2023). Although Armenian narratives frame the event as a wartime tragedy, its scale and intentional targeting of noncombatants underscore the use of terror as a strategic instrument.

Outside the immediate war zone, Armenian diaspora organizations, notably ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and JCAG (Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide), extended the reach of ethnonationalist terrorism by attacking Azerbaijani and Turkish diplomatic missions abroad throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Even after their decline as operational entities, these groups maintained ideological continuity through cultural and lobbying organizations that glorified past attacks. The motivations behind Armenian terrorism are fundamentally political and territorial. Such acts sought to alter the political status quo by forcing international recognition of Armenian claims over Karabakh and undermining Azerbaijan’s international legitimacy. These objectives align with Byman’s (2005: 105) framework of state-sponsored terrorism, where states employ proxy groups to achieve coercive outcomes while denying direct responsibility.

Following Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War (2020), the risk of Armenian state-supported terrorism reemerged

in hybrid forms, including sabotage operations, cross border drone attacks, and disinformation campaigns. These tactics exemplify the adaptation of ethnonationalist terrorism to a new geopolitical context, where information warfare and covert operations substitute for direct violence.

While these three types of terrorism differ in origin and motivation, they exhibit several converging features relevant to Azerbaijan's security environment.

- *Instrumental Use of Violence*: All three forms employ violence as a strategic tool to achieve political ends, whether to impose ideological dominance (Iran-linked), advance transnational jihad (Arab-linked), or secure territorial claims (Armenian).

- *External Sponsorship and Ideological Projection*: Each form reflects the penetration of Azerbaijan's domestic security space by external actors seeking influence through proxy channels. This supports Buzan and Wæver's (2003) argument that smaller states in regional security complexes experience externalized insecurity.

- *Asymmetric and Psychological Objectives*: The targeting of civilians, symbols, and infrastructure illustrates terrorism's asymmetric nature, aimed at instilling fear and eroding public confidence (Hoffman, 2017).

- *State Adaptation and Resilience*: Azerbaijan's evolving counterterrorism framework, ranging from early institutional reforms to post-2020 hybrid warfare responses, demonstrates the capacity of small states to adapt to multidimensional threats through resilience-based governance (Chandler, 2014: 51).

In conclusion, terrorism in Azerbaijan is not a monolithic phenomenon but a continuum of asymmetric strategies reflecting regional rivalries, ideological diffusion, and the strategic vulnerabilities of a post-Soviet state at the crossroads of Eurasia and the Middle East. Understanding these motivations is essential for situating Azerbaijan's counterterrorism policies within broader

theoretical debates about state sovereignty, hybrid warfare, and regional security resilience.

3. State Strategies and Counterterrorism Measures

Azerbaijan's approach to counterterrorism has evolved in parallel with its broader state-building process, reflecting a gradual transition from reactive security responses in the early 1990s to a proactive, institutionalized, and internationally integrated framework by the mid-2020s. This evolution has been driven by the need to address diverse terrorist threats- religious, transnational, and ethnonationalist- within a volatile regional context shaped by the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the proximity to Iran and Russia, and the diffusion of global jihadist ideologies.

The Azerbaijani state's counterterrorism trajectory can be analytically divided into three major phases: (1) Institutional Formation and Reactive Security (1991-2001); (2) Institutional Consolidation and International Integration (2001-2015); and (3) Comprehensive and Hybrid Security Governance (2015-2025). Each phase demonstrates increasing sophistication in Azerbaijan's strategic, legal, and operational capacities, culminating in a multi-layered security regime that integrates national resilience with transnational cooperation.

3.1 Institutional Formation and Reactive Security (1991-2001)

In the immediate post-independence decade, Azerbaijan's counterterrorism capacity was constrained by weak state institutions, limited intelligence capabilities, and ongoing armed conflict with Armenia. The dissolution of Soviet security structures left the new state vulnerable to both Armenian terrorism and emerging religious extremism.

The Ministry of National Security (MNS), established in 1991 as a successor to the Soviet KGB, assumed the primary responsibility for combating terrorism. However, during the 1990s, counterterrorism operations were largely reactive, responding to specific attacks such

as the subway train bombings and bombings of passenger trains and several assassination attempts on government officials. The absence of a coherent legislative framework further limited the government's ability to prosecute terrorism-related crimes effectively.

Azerbaijan adopted its first comprehensive counterterrorism legislation in 1999, marking a significant step in the institutionalization of its national security framework. According to the legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan, terrorism is defined as *"the commitment of actions or the threat of committing similar actions, which cause mass extermination of people, corporal injuries, or any other damage to their health or the destruction of their property or other heavy injuries with the aim of violation of the public security, spreading panic among the population or achievement of the adoption by the state bodies of decisions that meet the interests of terrorists"* (Mia.gov.az, 1999).

Combating terrorism in Azerbaijan falls primarily under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Security, which is the principal agency responsible for counterterrorism operations, intelligence gathering, and prevention. However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs also plays a significant role in the detection, deterrence, and investigation of terrorist activities and related offenses, particularly within the realm of domestic law enforcement and public security.

During this formative phase, Azerbaijan's counterterrorism strategy relied heavily on emergency decrees and ad hoc coordination between the MNS, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and the State Border Service (SBS). Religious organizations were loosely monitored, and the lack of a clear separation between national security and political opposition occasionally led to politicized interpretations of extremism. Nevertheless, by the late 1990s, Baku had begun to recognize the strategic necessity of a structured approach to counterterrorism. Early cooperation with Türkiye and Israel facilitated intelligence sharing and training

initiatives, laying the groundwork for later institutionalization. This period also marked the first attempts to monitor foreign-funded religious institutions, which were suspected of disseminating Iranian or Salafi propaganda.

3.2 Institutional Consolidation and International Integration (2001-2015)

The 11 September 2001 attacks constituted a significant turning point in global and regional counterterrorism dynamics, including those affecting Azerbaijan. In the aftermath of 9/11, the presence and activities of international terrorist networks in Azerbaijan reportedly increased, reflecting broader shifts in the global security environment. In response to these developments, Baku repositioned itself as a reliable partner in the international counterterrorism framework, gradually aligning its national legislation and operational practices with emerging international norms and standards.

In 2002, Azerbaijan adopted a comprehensive Law on Combating Terrorism, which defined terrorism in accordance with UN conventions and established a clear legal framework for counterterrorism operations. The law empowered the MNS and MIA to conduct preventive operations, freeze terrorist assets, and prosecute individuals involved in financing or facilitating terrorist activity.

At the institutional level, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) was established in 2001 to regulate religious institutions, prevent extremist infiltration, and promote state-approved interpretations of Islam. This mechanism reflected what Hoffman (2017: 278) calls the preventive governance model, where counterterrorism extends beyond coercive measures to encompass ideological and societal dimensions.

Azerbaijan also deepened its international cooperation during this period. The country joined the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee (UNCTC) and became a participant in the

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) initiatives on counterterrorism. Furthermore, it signed bilateral agreements with the United States, Türkiye, Russia, and Israel to facilitate intelligence exchange and border control (Kucera, 2019: 364).

Operationally, Azerbaijan conducted multiple successful counterterrorism raids between 2006 and 2013, neutralizing both Iran-linked Shi'a extremist cells and Sunni jihadist networks associated with the North Caucasus insurgency (Cornell, 2017: 180). The 2008 thwarted attack against the Israeli embassy in Baku underscored the effectiveness of interagency cooperation (De Waal, 2010: 174).

This era also marked the professionalization of Azerbaijan's intelligence community, including the introduction of specialized counterterrorism training, the use of digital surveillance technologies, and enhanced coordination with Interpol and CIS Anti-Terrorism Center structures (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, 88). Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL). In 2009, the country adopted comprehensive anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) legislation, thereby aligning its domestic legal framework with international standards established by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and relevant United Nations conventions.

Despite these advancements, challenges persisted. Human rights organizations criticized the government for conflating religious dissent with extremism, leading to occasional tensions between counterterrorism imperatives and civil liberties (Hunter, 2014: 122). Nevertheless, these measures successfully prevented large-scale terrorist attacks on Azerbaijani soil during this period.

3.3. Comprehensive and Hybrid Security Governance

The period from 2015 to 2025 represents the maturation of Azerbaijan's counterterrorism strategy, characterized by integrated governance, technological modernization, and hybrid warfare preparedness. As terrorism diversified into cyber, informational, and cross-border forms, Azerbaijan adapted by constructing a multi-dimensional security architecture.

Following the reorganization of the MNS in 2015, counterterrorism efforts were centralized under a unified command structure emphasizing intelligence-led policing and preventive disruption. The MNS developed specialized units for cybersecurity, anti-radicalization, and strategic communications, reflecting a shift from tactical counterterrorism to strategic resilience.

Azerbaijan's National Counterterrorism Strategy, implemented through interagency coordination, articulated three main objectives:

- Preventing radicalization through education, media literacy, and engagement with religious communities.

- Strengthening border security and surveillance technologies, including biometric systems and drone reconnaissance.

- Expanding international and regional partnerships, particularly with Türkiye, Israel, and NATO-affiliated networks.

The Second Karabakh War (2020) reinforced the importance of hybrid security thinking. In its aftermath, Azerbaijan faced renewed terrorist threats, including Armenian sabotage operations, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns (Kucera, 2019: 366). The state responded by integrating counterterrorism with information security and defense modernization, guided by what Chandler (2014: 51) terms resilience governance - the capacity of a state to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to multi-domain threats.

The legislative domain also advanced significantly. At the international level, Azerbaijan deepened participation in regional

counterterrorism mechanisms, including the Non-Aligned Movement Working Group on Counterterrorism and CIS Anti-Terrorism Center. In 2024, Azerbaijan ratified the Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism.

Cooperation with Türkiye intensified, particularly after the 2020 military alliance under the Shusha Declaration, which institutionalized joint counterterrorism exercises and intelligence-sharing protocols. By the mid-2020s, Azerbaijan had also established partnerships with Israel focusing on counter-drone technologies and intelligence fusion, critical to detecting terrorist infiltration and monitoring militant logistics across borders. These partnerships enhanced Azerbaijan's deterrence and operational capabilities, reinforcing its status as a regional security hub in the South Caucasus.

4. Assessment: Effectiveness, Challenges, and Future Trajectories

Azerbaijan's counterterrorism strategy demonstrates substantial progress from state fragility to strategic resilience. Through legislative reforms, institutional consolidation, and transnational cooperation, Azerbaijan effectively curtailed the operational presence of both religiously motivated and ethnonationalist terrorist groups within its borders. The country's ability to prevent large-scale terrorist incidents since the early 2010s attests to the effectiveness of its evolving security apparatus.

However, several challenges remain. The ideological dimension of radicalization within cyberspace continues to pose risks. Moreover, the intersection between counterterrorism and human rights remains a delicate issue, as the state's strong securitization approach occasionally invites criticism from international observers.

Azerbaijan's counterterrorism trajectory reflects a hybrid paradigm that blends preventive resilience, technological surveillance, and international alignment. This model exemplifies what Buzan and Wæver (2003: 95) identify as a "regional security complex", wherein national security cannot be separated from transnational cooperation and geopolitical alignment. As Azerbaijan continues to consolidate its sovereignty and project stability, its counterterrorism strategy is likely to remain an essential pillar of its foreign and domestic policy architecture.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's counterterrorism experience in the last decades provides a compelling case study for understanding how small and mid-sized post-Soviet states adapt to multidimensional security threats in a fluid regional order. The interplay between religious extremism, state-sponsored ethnonationalist terrorism, and transnational jihadist networks reveals that terrorism in Azerbaijan is both a domestic governance challenge and an instrument of external geopolitical influence. The Azerbaijani government supports the efforts of the international communities in combating all forms of terrorism. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, this section interprets Azerbaijan's experience through the lenses of asymmetric threat theory, state resilience, and regional security complex theory. It argues that Azerbaijan's evolving counterterrorism posture exemplifies how a small state situated in a contested geopolitical space can transform external vulnerability into strategic adaptability through institutional innovation, securitization, and regional alignment.

From the early 1990s onward, terrorism in Azerbaijan functioned as an asymmetric mechanism of power projection, used by both non-state actors and rival states to exploit Azerbaijan's transitional fragility. Hoffman defines terrorism as a deliberate use of violence by non-state actors to influence political outcomes through psychological coercion. In Azerbaijan's case, both Iranian-linked

religious extremists and Armenian state-sponsored groups utilized violence not simply to cause physical destruction, but to challenge the state's legitimacy and sense of sovereignty.

The asymmetry of these threats lies in their strategic economy of violence - where limited acts produce disproportionate political effects. For example, the 1994 Baku Metro bombings had outsized influence on public perceptions of security during a fragile phase of state-building. Similarly, Armenian terrorist acts and hybrid operations aimed at delegitimizing Azerbaijan's governance in international discourse reflect what Byman characterizes as the shadow politics of terrorism, where violence serves as an extension of interstate rivalry by other means.

This pattern underscores the dual character of terrorism in Azerbaijan: it operates both as a domestic manifestation of ideological contestation and as a transnational tool of geopolitical competition. By the 2000s, as Azerbaijan consolidated its statehood, terrorism evolved into new wars - a hybrid domain where political, criminal, and informational dimensions overlap. The rise of cyber-radicalization, proxy networks, and cross-border ideological flows during the 2010s and 2020s confirms that Azerbaijan's terrorism problem is embedded within broader patterns of asymmetric and hybrid warfare.

Azerbaijan's counterterrorism evolution aligns closely with theoretical models of state resilience. As Chandler (2014: 52) argues, resilience-oriented governance is characterized by flexibility, adaptability, and anticipation rather than reactive control. From this perspective, Azerbaijan's security policy trajectory - transitioning from fragmented responses in the 1990s to institutionalized, multi-sectoral frameworks by the 2020s, reflects the gradual internalization of resilience logic.

The creation of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (2001), the modernization of the State Security Service (2015), and the launch of the National Counterterrorism

Strategy illustrate how Azerbaijan institutionalized long-term mechanisms to mitigate radicalization and enhance intelligence capacity. These initiatives correspond to Hoffman's (2017: 276) notion of *strategic adaptation*, where states shift from suppressive tactics to anticipatory governance.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's response demonstrates what Buzan and Wæver (2003: 72) term *societal securitization* - the process by which identity-based threats are framed as existential dangers to collective cohesion. Given Azerbaijan's secular identity juxtaposed with its Muslim majority population, religious extremism was securitized not only as a threat to political stability but also to the secular national identity that underpins state legitimacy. Similarly, Armenian terrorism and diaspora-driven propaganda were securitized as existential challenges to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and international image.

This process of securitization has, however, generated tensions between security imperatives and civil liberties. Critics argue that Azerbaijan's broad legal definitions of extremism risk conflating dissent with terrorism, thereby reinforcing state control over civil society. Yet, from a resilience standpoint, the Azerbaijani model reflects a pragmatic balance between preventive control and adaptive flexibility, a necessary compromise for states operating in volatile regional environments.

Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a particularly useful lens for situating Azerbaijan's counterterrorism dynamics within the South Caucasus. RSCT posits that regional security is shaped by the interdependence of threats, where the insecurity of one state becomes intertwined with that of others. In this context, Azerbaijan's terrorism problem cannot be understood in isolation from the policies of Iran, Armenia, Russia, and Türkiye, all of which shape the regional security architecture through both direct and proxy involvement. Iran's use of ideological influence and proxy networks exemplifies how regional powers

project soft and hard power simultaneously. For Tehran, Azerbaijan's secular, pro-Western orientation represents both a religious and geopolitical challenge. The resulting use of religiously motivated proxies aligns with Byman's typology of state-sponsored terrorism, in which support for extremist actors functions as a low-cost, deniable instrument of strategic leverage.

Similarly, Armenian state terrorism - manifesting in ethnonationalist violence, sabotage, and disinformation - illustrates how terrorism serves as a mechanism of continued conflict beyond traditional warfare. Armenia's efforts to internationalize the Nagorno-Karabakh issue through propaganda and symbolic acts of violence were intended to erode Azerbaijan's moral authority and strategic narrative.

Conversely, Azerbaijan's alignment with Türkiye and Israel in counterterrorism and intelligence sharing frameworks demonstrates the emergence of countervailing regional security linkages. These alliances enhance deterrence and balance the influence of adversarial actors, consistent with Buzan and Wæver's observation that regional complexes often produce both conflictual and cooperative security patterns. The post-2020 cooperation under the Shusha Declaration institutionalized such cooperation, embedding counterterrorism within broader defense and technological integration.

At the global level, Azerbaijan's participation in the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee, OSCE, and CIS Anti-Terrorism Center demonstrates the integration of national counterterrorism into the multilevel governance structure of international security. This vertical alignment strengthens Azerbaijan's capacity to resist cross-border infiltration, cyberattacks, and the diffusion of extremist ideologies, situating the state within a networked architecture of global resilience.

Azerbaijan's case contributes to broader theoretical debates in terrorism studies and international security. First, it challenges the

assumption that small states are merely passive recipients of security externalities. Instead, as demonstrated, Azerbaijan has developed agency through institutional innovation and regional diplomacy, effectively transforming vulnerability into strategic leverage. This supports the argument of Katzenstein (1996: 33), who observed that small states can exhibit “adaptive sovereignty” by aligning domestic policy with external security structures.

Second, Azerbaijan’s experience underscores the need to expand traditional definitions of terrorism to include hybrid and information-based forms. The state’s recognition of cyberterrorism and information warfare in its 2024 legislation highlights how contemporary security governance increasingly merges kinetic and cognitive domains. This reflects the ongoing transformation of terrorism into a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing psychological, digital, and ideological instruments of coercion.

Third, the Azerbaijani case demonstrates the enduring relevance of resilience-based counterterrorism as a governance paradigm. Rather than relying solely on militarized or punitive responses, Azerbaijan’s shift toward preventive education, digital literacy, and community engagement embodies what Chandler calls the “*governance of complexity*”. By embedding counterterrorism within social policy, education, and technological innovation, Azerbaijan offers a model of adaptive governance suitable for small states confronting asymmetric threats.

Finally, Azerbaijan’s counterterrorism trajectory contributes to policy debates on balancing security and liberty in semi-authoritarian contexts. While its securitization approach has strengthened stability, it has also drawn criticism from human rights advocates. Thus, Azerbaijan illustrates both the efficacy and the ethical dilemmas of state-centric counterterrorism in hybrid regimes, a tension that remains central to contemporary security studies.

Azerbaijan's struggle against terrorism exemplifies a complex interplay between domestic resilience, regional rivalry, and global security integration. The state's ability to contain diverse forms of terrorism - ranging from Iranian-backed religious extremism to Armenian state-sponsored violence - demonstrates both adaptive learning and strategic alignment. Viewed through theoretical frameworks of asymmetric conflict, resilience, and regional security complexes, Azerbaijan's experience enriches scholarly understanding of how small states navigate the pressures of transnational insecurity. Ultimately, Azerbaijan's counterterrorism evolution reflects a broader transformation of post-Soviet security: from fragmentation and vulnerability toward structured resilience and multilateral engagement. In doing so, it offers valuable insights into the ways small states in contested geopolitical spaces can survive and even thrive amid persistent asymmetry and external coercion.

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