

Decades of Uncertainty

Azerbaijani Missing Persons from the First Karabakh War

Könül Şahin

An emotional scene from the 2008 Iranian television series *Prophet Joseph*, where Joseph is reunited with his father Jacob after years of separation, evoked a deep sense of longing in Azerbaijani father Gameddin Mammadov. Overcome with emotion, he reflected on his own sorrow and voiced his hope, saying, “One day, I will reunite with my son like this.”

Gameddin Mammadov was the father of 18-year-old Ikhtiyar Mammadov, his only son, who went missing in 1993 during the First Karabakh War in the battles in the Aghdara district. Tragically, Gameddin passed away without ever fulfilling his dream of reuniting with his son.

During my research, Ikhtiyar Mammadov’s sister, Nahide Shukurova, told me that their father, desperate to find his son, traveled to the Murovdag and Aghdara district. Despite his efforts, he was unable to get any information about Ikhtiyar: “I am just a father who wants his son back. I am ready to give my house up to buy him back, or my life,” a 1994 article in *The Guardian* [quoted](#) him. Ikhtiyar’s mother, Roza Mammadova, continues to wait for any news of her son. The family holds little hope that he is still alive; they only wish for a grave where they can honor his memory.

The Mammadovs are just one of thousands of Azerbaijani families that have spent years awaiting word of their missing loved ones.

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The movement that started in the late 1980s to unite what was then called the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of the Azerbaijan SSR with the Armenian SSR turned into a full-scale war between them. As a result of what came to be called the First Karabakh War, which came to an end thanks to a Russian-brokered [ceasefire](#) in May 1994, not only the NKAO but also seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan were occupied by Armenia.

As a result of the First Karabakh War, more than one million people from both sides lost their homes and became refugees or IDPs, more than 25,000 lost their lives, and thousands went missing.

According to Azerbaijan's State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Missing Persons, 3,977 Azerbaijani citizens were [reported](#) to be missing since the First Karabakh War (among those registered as missing, 774 are civilians, including 75 children), whilst six Azerbaijani servicemen are listed as missing as a result of the Second Karabakh War. Experts [believe](#) the number of missing persons is actually higher, as many families have not informed the State Commission about their missing relatives, despite the passage of many years.

The Struggle of Families Whose Relatives Went Missing

The uncertainty surrounding the fate of their loved ones who went missing during wartime takes a significant psychological toll on Azerbaijani families over the years. Unlike those of those confirmed dead, these families are deprived of a grave where they can find some solace and the ability to perform the religious rituals that might bring them comfort.

The thought of their loved ones being captured and tortured while in captivity fills families with despair and pain. In addition to the psychological toll of uncertainty, the financial burden on these families has been considerable. Relatives of individuals who went missing during the First Karabakh War have often spent substantial sums of money in attempts to gather information about their loved ones through unreliable intermediaries, many of whom have exploited their desperation and defrauded them.

While working on this article, I spoke with Vusala Mirzayeva, the sister of Mahir Sadıgov, a 21-year-old man who went missing during the First Karabakh War in Aghdara in 1992. According to Vusala, after Mahir went missing, their family attempted to find him in Armenia through Armenians living in Russia. Despite paying large sums of money each time, they were unable to learn anything about Mahir's fate. Mahir's mother struggled with the psychological trauma of not knowing what had happened to her son. According to Vusala, the thought that her brother might have been held captive for so many years was even more painful for their mother.

Mahir Sadıgov's family was not the only one trying to find intermediaries in Armenia to find their son. In the 2000s, some [reports](#) indicated that Azerbaijani prisoners were being released in the village of Sadakhlo, on the Georgia-Armenia border, in exchange for money paid by their families in 1990s. During my interview with Arzu Abdullayeva, a well-known human rights activist who was the head of the Azerbaijan Helsinki Committee, Abdullayeva said that she was cautioning against such situations together with human rights defenders in Armenia. Abdullayeva says that when Fikret Mamedov, whom she now knows well, and his wife came to her door asking for help, she was faced with a difficult choice.

The Mamedovs' son was a hostage in Armenia, and they were given two days to collect more than \$6,000. Abdullayeva explained that she gave the family \$1,800 from the Olof Peace Prize she received in 1993 to help save the Mamedovs' son, fearing that he might be killed before official channels could intervene. According to Abdullayeva, the young man endured severe mistreatment in captivity and became addicted to morphine. Abdullayeva has said that after his release from captivity, the young man's life was difficult and that he spent many years undergoing treatment to overcome his morphine addiction.

Azerbaijan Seeks Information from Armenia

According to letters submitted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to the Azerbaijan State Commission between 1998 and 2001, the ICRC visited 54 Azerbaijani citizens [held captive](#) in Armenia and occupied Karabakh.

Later, the bodies of 17 of these individuals were returned to the Azerbaijani side. However, 33 others lost their lives in detention, but their bodies were not handed over by the Armenian government or the separatist Karabakh regime. The fate of the remaining four captives remains unknown.

In December 2021, Gagik Melkonyan, a deputy of Armenia's ruling Civil Contract party [stated](#) that the bodies of hundreds of Azerbaijani army soldiers who died in 1994 remained on the battlefield and that the Armenians buried them. Melkonyan said that he can show one by one with a map where they buried the hundreds of Azerbaijani servicemen. Although Azerbaijan [made](#) an official appeal to Armenia through the mediation of international organizations regarding the issue, there was no response from the Armenian side.

Under the [Geneva Conventions](#), parties commit themselves to keeping prisoners of war under their control. The Conventions stipulate that individuals are not permitted to keep prisoners of war in their homes or other private locations. Even though Armenia became a party to this agreement in 1992, there were high-ranking Armenian officials who violated its terms.

Former Deputy Defense Minister of Armenia Manvel Grigoryan, who was also a member of the ruling Republican Party's faction, [said](#) in an interview with RFE/RL's Armenian Service in 2014 that he returned to Armenia after the First Karabakh War with hundreds of Azerbaijani hostages. Grigoryan admitted that he had kept one of the hostages, a 15-16-year-old boy, in his own home for four years: "I kept a captive named Simon (the name given to the captive by Grigoryan) for four years, two years in Martakert [i.e., Aghdere, in Karabakh], and two years in Armenia."

Hikmat Hajiyev the Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan who served as Spokesman for Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry in 2018 then [told](#) media that the crimes committed by Grigoryan during the First Karabakh War, especially actions against hundreds of Azerbaijanis, whom Grigoryan captured and took hostage, must be investigated. Regretfully, neither then nor subsequently did Armenia take any action.

Collection and Identification Efforts for Missing Persons in Azerbaijan

In 2005, a framework agreement was established between the State Commission and relevant organizations to systematically collect information from the families of missing persons. Under this agreement, relatives seeking to provide information were required to apply in person. The collected data encompassed details such as physical characteristics, health status, and last known whereabouts of the missing individuals. This ongoing process also involved obtaining the families' consent to determine the most suitable family member to provide a biological reference sample.

In 2014, the collection of biological samples commenced as part of a collaborative project under the framework agreement. This initiative continued until 2022, during which approximately 11,000 biological samples were collected from 3,494 relatives of missing persons across 72 districts of Azerbaijan. These samples were subsequently stored in the State Commission's database. In 2022, Azerbaijan further strengthened its efforts by establishing a dedicated DNA laboratory specifically for the identification of missing persons and since 2023, the [collection](#) of biological samples has been carried out by the Genetic Research Center, established under the Main Military Medical Department of the State Security Service.

In September 2022, initial fieldwork efforts commenced through a collaborative initiative involving the Azerbaijan State Commission, relevant humanitarian organizations, and the Ministry of Emergency Situations. This multidisciplinary effort brought together archaeologists, anthropologists, and forensic experts to facilitate the identification process.

Over a period of 14 days, fieldwork led to the [discovery](#) of a mass grave containing 12 corpses, as well as several single graves, in Edilli village, Khojavend. A total of 26 graves were discovered in Edilli, with 14 of them identified.

Official [reports](#) indicate that, since the Second Karabakh War, the remains of 496 individuals were found in areas liberated from occupation, with 165 of them identified so far. To date, 23 mass graves have been uncovered during excavations in territories previously under Armenian occupation.

A critical challenge in the identification process is the presence of landmines in areas where mass graves are suspected. Before conducting field investigations, it is necessary to clear these regions to ensure safe access. The significance of this issue was formally recognized on 15 November 2024, when the UN General Assembly's Third Committee adopted Resolution A/C.3/79/L.35 on "Missing Persons" by consensus, with 56 member states as co-sponsors. Azerbaijan, as a principal co-sponsor, has supported this biannual resolution since 2002. Notably, the 2024 [resolution](#), for the first time, highlights the obstacles posed by landmines to locating missing persons and urges states to cooperate for the safe recovery of human remains.

The Importance of Cooperation

During the First Karabakh War, 1,480 Azerbaijanis were [released](#) from captivity, and 509 Armenians were handed back over to the Armenian side. And between 2020 and 2023, Azerbaijan [handed over](#) to the Armenian side the remains of 2,043 Armenian soldiers who lost their lives during the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent clashes. In August 2022, Armenia [handed over](#) the remains believed to belong to 138 Azerbaijanis who went missing during the First Karabakh War.

To expand cooperation in this area, [a meeting](#) was held at the Azerbaijan-Armenia state border between representatives of the State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Missing Persons of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Interdepartmental Commission on Issues of Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Missing (Whereabouts Unknown) Persons of the Republic of Armenia.

Following the Second Karabakh War, Armenia encountered no difficulties in recovering the remains of missing soldiers on Azerbaijani territory. Despite Azerbaijan's committed cooperation, reports indicate that Armenia has not made sufficient efforts to provide information about the missing Azerbaijanis from the First Karabakh War. As a result, the Azerbaijani side [has called](#) for the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) to act as a mediator in addressing this issue.

The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) could play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, helping to alleviate

the prolonged suffering of families on both sides. Additionally, it could serve as a confidence-building measure, fostering more effective cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Also, broad and continuous cooperation the Azerbaijani State Commission, with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) which has extensive experience, technical capacity, and a team of experts in the field of forensic medical examination, would provide Azerbaijan with new opportunities in the process of determining the fate of the missing persons.

This is not simply a humanitarian issue (although it is obviously that, too); it is ultimately, an issue of reconciliation between not just two states but also two nations, destined to live side by side as neighbors...hopefully in a state of lasting peace.