

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

# Unraveling the Rationality of Genocide: A Comparative Analysis of Khojaly and Srebrenica\*

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## Abstract

Within the scholarly debates in political science and genocide studies, an increasingly prevailing view posits that the most adequate explanation for the occurrence of genocide is the strategic approach. According to this view, the main impetus behind the decision to use violence against civilians is not irrational barbarism but rational choices to realize strategic interests. However, how and under what circumstances genocide becomes a rational choice for aggressors in pursuing their strategic objectives has remained largely unexplored. Through a comparative analysis of the cases of Srebrenica and Khojaly, this study seeks to uncover the strategic, political, and ideological factors that underpin the rationale for genocide. The findings show that the viability of genocide as a low-risk option is underpinned by three interrelated factors. These are the recognition of the limited capacity of the victims to mount armed resistance, resulting in a reduced or negligible risk of counterattack; the awareness of the international community's

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reluctance to intervene; and the expectation that demographic transformation through ethnic cleansing and genocide could be preserved as a beneficial post-conflict resource.

**Keywords**

Genocide, Karabakh, Khojaly, massacre, Srebrenica.

# Soykırımın Rasyonalitesini Çözümlemek: Hocalı ve Srebrenitsa'nın Karşılaştırmalı Analizi\*

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## Öz

Siyaset bilimi ve soykırım çalışmaları alanındaki tartışmalarda soykırımın meydana gelmesine ilişkin en uygun açıklamaları stratejik yaklaşımın sunduğu görüşü yaygınlık kazanmıştır. Bu yaklaşıma göre, sivillere karşı şiddet kullanma kararının ardındaki temel itici güç irrasyonel bir saldırganlıktan ziyade stratejik çıkarları gerçekleştirilmeye yönelik rasyonel seçimlerdir. Fakat soykırımın nasıl ve hangi koşullar altında saldırgan taraf için stratejik amaçlarına ulaşmada rasyonel bir seçenek olarak görüldüğü yeterince ele alınmamıştır. Srebrenitsa ve Hocalı örneklerinin karşılaştırmalı analizini sunan bu çalışma, soykırımın gerekçesini oluşturan stratejik, siyasi ve ideolojik faktörleri keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Her iki örneğin derinlemesine incelenmesiyle elde edilen bulgular, soykırımın failer için düşük riskli bir seçenek hâline gelmesinde birbiriyle ilişkili üç temel faktörün rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Bunlar, mağdur tarafın silahlı direniş gösterme kapasitelerinin sınırlı olması sonucunda karşı saldırı riskinin azalması, uluslararası toplumun müdahale etme konusundaki isteksizliğinin farkına varılması ile etnik temizlik ve soykırım yoluyla elde edilen demografik dönüşümün çatışma sonrasında bir kazanım olarak korunabileceği beklentisidir.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Soykırım, Karabağ, Hocalı, katliam, Srebrenitsa.

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## Introduction

One of the most significant problems facing humanity in the 21st century is the increased number of civilian victims of armed conflicts. While there is a long history of atrocities, there has been an increasing research interest in comprehending the mass killings and genocide that have taken place in recent decades. These events have left profound and enduring marks on societies around the globe, such as East Timor, Sudan, Guatemala, Burundi, Rwanda, Palestine, Azerbaijan, and the former Yugoslavia. Understanding the complex causes and manifestations of genocide and mass killings is crucial for preventing such heinous acts in the future.

Article 2 of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

This phenomenon has led researchers to investigate the intricate interplay of factors that contribute to such horrifying acts. Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide, viewed it as a departure from modernity, representing a regression towards past barbaric practices. Nevertheless, contemporary perspectives widely perceive genocide as a modern phenomenon characterized by rational considerations, encompassing meticulous planning, efficient organization, coordination, and the utilization of technological resources (see Bauman; Fearon and Laitin; Gagnon; Schwartz and Straus; Valentino, “Why We Kill”; Goldsmith et al.; Magula; Chalk and Jonassohn 26).

Within the scholarly debates in political science and genocide studies, an increasingly prevailing view posits that strategic interests are the primary driving force behind the use of large-scale violence against civilian populations as aggressors perceive benefits such as territorial expansion, consolidation of power, or the establishment of ethnically homogeneous nation-states

(Schwartz and Straus; Valentino, “Final Solutions”; Valentino, “Why We Kill”; Straus 546-548; Goldsmith et al.; Mueller; Scherrer 15; Wood). Thus, it has been widely recognized that in analyzing the phenomenon of genocide, it is necessary to examine the strategic planning to target specific groups and territories, the systematic implementation involving displacement and murder, and the complex interplay with prevailing territorial and ultra-nationalist aspirations (Levene 326; see also Mann; Wood; Valentino et al.; Ulfelder and Valentino; Fjelde and Hultman; Straus; Midlarsky).

While there is a growing body of literature that highlights genocide as a rational strategic choice, extending beyond mere expressions of hatred, the essential question of how and under what circumstances genocide becomes a rational choice for aggressors in pursuing their strategic objectives remains an aspect that has not been comprehensively explored. The central aim of this study is to shed light on the conditions that made genocide a rational option for the perpetrators in the cases of Srebrenica and Khojaly. The study further attempts to bridge the gap often seen (Scherrer 21-22) between theoretical and empirical research in genocide studies by offering an analytical framework that combines practical considerations drawn from the cases of Srebrenica and Khojaly with theoretical insights.

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the cases of Khojaly and Srebrenica. Using a qualitative approach, it examines the overlapping characteristics and distinct features of these two cases to understand the complex interplay of factors that led to genocide. It seeks to shed light on the underlying preconditions of genocide while raising pertinent questions about the possible recurrence of these conditions for prevention and enhancing international responses. Secondary data sources were employed as the primary means of data collection. These sources encompass a diverse range of scholarly articles, historical documents, reports, and analyses that pertain to the Khojaly and Srebrenica cases. The abundant availability of secondary data related to each of these cases facilitated a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the events, thus allowing researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted dimensions underlying both incidents. Process tracing, a reliable method for uncovering causal mechanisms and pathways, and identifying the critical junctures and decision points inherent in complex phenomena such as genocide and mass killings (Schwartz and

Straus 225-226; George and Bennett; Gerring 349), was used to analyze the data. It ensures a fine-grained understanding of the complex interplay between strategic calculations, ideological motivations, and contextual factors that contributed to the devastating outcomes.

The inherent uniqueness of each genocide case highlights the necessity of closely analyzing the complex interactions between local and regional factors. This demands a comprehensive investigation that considers the diverse historical, cultural, social, and political contexts shaping these tragic events. Nonetheless, delving into the shared traits and nuanced diversities of different cases has the potential to yield analytical generalizations and thus enrich scholarly efforts to comprehend the origins and motivations of genocide. Although each case has distinct attributes, a side-by-side examination enables the identification of both common and unique elements, offering a comprehensive conceptual framework. This approach may generate insightful propositions that could be applicable to other situations.

The discussion surrounding the distinction between genocide and mass murder may distract attention from a more discerning focus on understanding the causes, consequences, and global responses to organized atrocities (see Kuper). In this sense, the focus of the study is not to engage in a definitional debate<sup>1</sup> regarding the categorization of acts as genocide, but rather to delve into the exploration of the underlying causes of genocide and the factors that contribute to making genocide a viable option for aggressors.<sup>2</sup>

### **Srebrenica Case**

After Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) declared independence following a referendum held on February 29-March 1, 1992, its independence was recognized a month later by both the United States and the European Community (shortly thereafter succeeded by the European Union). In retaliation, the Bosnian Serb administration, led by Radovan Karadžić and vehemently opposed to the separation from Yugoslavia, launched a military offensive to carve out an ethnically homogeneous Serb state within the territory of BiH (Tatum 72-75; Ali and Lifschultz 371; Ramet 10). Following the outbreak of conflict in April 1992, nationalist paramilitary groups from Serbia took control of Srebrenica with the primary objective

of forcibly displacing the town's Muslim population, as they had in other parts of BiH (Holbrooke 34). But only three weeks later, Srebrenica was retaken by Muslim forces under the leadership of Naser Orić. Although this marked a significant blow to the heavily armed Serb forces who had experienced one of their first substantial setbacks in the ongoing, and imbalanced conflict, they still encircled the town and maintained their siege. In the following months, Bosnian Muslim forces achieved a series of remarkable victories, significantly doubling the size of Muslim territory. By January 1993, the enclave of Srebrenica was merely five miles away from establishing a link with the central regions held by Bosnian Muslims. But this promising advancement triggered a swift and forceful counteroffensive by Bosnian Serb forces, bolstered by troops, tanks, and artillery support from neighboring Serbia. Consequently, Muslim-held towns and villages continued to succumb to Serb forces, and by mid-March 1993, a staggering population of over 60,000 Muslim civilians had sought refuge within the confines of the town of Srebrenica (see Rohde).

Amid the worsening security situation and Bosnian Serb attacks that weakened the town's defenses, the UN Security Council acted on April 16 by passing Resolution 819, declaring Srebrenica and its thirty-square-mile surrounding area the first United Nations-designated "safe area." As part of this resolution, approximately 750 UN peacekeepers were deployed to the area to provide a sanctuary for the Bosniak civilians, disarm the town's Muslim defenders, and take a position to prevent any attacks by the Bosnian Serbs. However, the safe area designation did not translate into effective protection for the civilians. The UN peacekeeping forces were severely under-equipped and faced immense challenges in maintaining security against the Serbs (see Rohde).

The Srebrenica genocide's origins lie in "Directive 7," issued by the *Republika Srpska* (RS) leadership in March 1995, with the purpose of wiping out the Eastern Bosnian enclaves, pockets of Bosnian Army-controlled territory in the Drina Valley. The directive instructed the Army of Republika Srpska to conduct combat operations to render the Bosnian Muslim inhabitants of Srebrenica in an unbearable situation of total insecurity, with no hope of survival or life (Nettelfield and Wagner 10). The Serb forces, led by General Ratko Mladić, subjected Srebrenica to a relentless siege, cutting off

vital supply routes and isolating the town from the outside world. As the situation deteriorated, it became evident that the international community was unable, or unwilling to provide meaningful protection for the Bosnian Muslims, setting the stage for the tragic events. Finally, two years after the safe area was declared, a Serbian flag flew where the UN once stood, and more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men were taken away to be executed (Tatum 83; Taras and Ganguly 267).

In one of the worst mass atrocities in Europe since World War II, the Bosnian Serb army, under the command of General Ratko Mladić, captured and killed more than 6,000 men and boys between July 11 and July 19 as they tried to flee the war zone through the mountains. In addition, some 1,200 people taken from the UN-protected 'safe area' with little or no resistance from the Dutch peacekeepers in Potočari met the same unfortunate fate (Nettelfield and Wagner 12; Subotić 74; see also Honig and Both). Once the enclave was effectively "cleansed" of its Bosniak inhabitants through genocidal acts, the RS leadership gained the opportunity to repopulate the vacated territory with Serbs under its strategic political objectives (Nettelfield and Wagner 12; Hoare 117-122; Mulaj 35). This repopulation process involved significant demographic engineering, facilitating the establishment of an ethnically homogeneous territory in line with their desired vision of territorial control and dominance (see Björkdahl; Stjepanović).

The aggressors' aspiration to uphold or regain a position of power following the dissolution of Yugoslavia was justified by extreme Serbian nationalism, centered on the unification of Serbia with Serb-populated territories in neighboring states of Croatia and BiH (Tatum 76; Glenny 151; Biserko 79-83; Biondich 199; Carmichael 17-18; Cigar 23; Preljević 218; Jelavich 109-110). While the ideological goal was to create an ethnically homogeneous Serb homeland, genocide was posited as the most adequate *rational* method to achieve it (see Weitz). Bosnian Serb officers tactically and systematically employed horrific practices as a method of warfare, in which acts of rape, mass executions, and mutilation were not rare but rather unavoidable side effects of their combat. These methods were purposefully selected as essential elements of their strategy to cause people to flee and to deter them from ever thinking of returning to the same area (Allen; Valentino, "Final Solutions" 38; Tatum 76-77).



## Khojaly Case

Even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Baku's declaration of independence, Armenian forces had already commenced their territorial aspirations in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region in 1988, which is officially a part of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary* xv). Taking advantage of the political turmoil resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and internal dissension within Azerbaijan, Armenia began military operations inside Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992. The conflict continued until 1994 when a ceasefire agreement was brokered between the two nations. As a result, the Armenians seized approximately twenty percent of Azerbaijan's territory. Despite numerous calls from the UN Security Council for the rapid withdrawal of Armenian forces such as S/RES/822 (1993), S/RES/853 (1993), S/RES/874 (1993), S/RES/884 (1993), there was no removal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijani territories. The invasion of the Armenian armed forces into Karabakh was a gross violation of Azerbaijan's sovereignty, as Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts are internationally recognized as de jure integral parts of Azerbaijan (Muradov 148-149; Ertuğrul 58-59; Tokluoğlu 322).

The Khojaly genocide is a tragic and horrific episode of the Karabakh war that broke out in the early 1990s. It occurred on the nights of February 25-26, 1992, in the town of Khojaly, Azerbaijan, after the town was occupied by Armenian forces led by Major Oganyan Seyran Mushegovich and Yevgeniy Nabokhin and supported by the 366<sup>th</sup> Motorized Infantry Brigade of the Russian Army. Following the occupation, Armenian forces and associated paramilitary groups committed one of the deadliest atrocities of the conflict, killing hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians (Abilov and Isayev 295-296; Heydarov; Yunusov 43; Cornell, "Undeclared War" 1; Pope; Reuters; Goltz, "Nagorno-Karabakh Victims").

The city was under siege by Armenian forces since October 1991, and its road access was completely cut off on 30 October 1991. The blockade escalated in the second half of the following February, subjecting the city to daily artillery and heavy weapons bombardments. Unable to get aid from Baku, Khojaly succumbed to a siege that deprived it of essential resources such as food and fuel. On the morning of 26 February, in a desperate attempt to save their lives, people flocked to the only escape route from the besieged

city to safety in the neighboring Azerbaijani town of Agdam, some six miles away, only to be caught and slaughtered by Armenian soldiers (Abilov and Isayev 299; Muradov 149-150; Heydarov).

The attack of Armenian forces on Khojaly, one of the most strategic regions of Karabakh, and the subsequent genocide, were to sow terror among the Azerbaijani population, undermine their resolve to resist, and forcibly uproot the Azerbaijani Turks from their homeland were parts of a deliberate strategic plan (Muradov 150; Aziz 21; Abilov and Isayev). From the very beginning of the conflict, the Armenian forces had the occupation of Khojaly as a key objective. Having the only airport in the region and playing a critical role as a conduit for vital infrastructure such as the power line from Khankendi, the center of Karabakh, the Baku-Khankendi railway, and the Baku-Shusha highway, the strategic importance of this city compelled the Armenians to seek occupation and the complete expulsion of the Turks from this area. Since Khojaly provided convenient access to Agdam, Shusha, Khankendi, Askeran, and the other Armenian-majority regions, its capture was essential for the Armenians (Abilov and Isayev 301).

A notable parallel between the cases of Srebrenica and Khojaly is the aggressor's embrace of secessionist movements and the subsequent forcible displacement campaign of civilians of the enemy group residing in the desired territory (Nagorno-Karabakh for Armenians, Drina Valley for Serbs) to secede from the country (Abilov and Isayev 294; Tchilingirian 445; Milanova 2-3; Matveeva 446). In this respect, genocide was committed in both cases as a military tactic to consolidate and complete the ethnic cleansing intended by expulsing the undesired ethnic civilian population to ensure the lasting political and social consequences of the territorial occupation for the post-war period (Abilov and Isayev 295; Vaserman and Ginat 355). In both cases, however, it would be a misleading oversimplification to characterize the aggression solely as a secessionist insurgency or internal conflict. In the case of BiH (Mujanović; Oliver 10-11; Güven), with the participation of Serbia, and in the case of Azerbaijan (Waal 60-61; Cornell, "Undeclared War"; Kurkchian 153), with the direct involvement of Armenia and the indirect support of Russia (Waal 66), the intervention of foreign states played a significant role in the war and the subsequent genocidal consequences.

In both cases, a common facet is that local secessionist forces within the targeted regions played an organized and participatory role in establishing an independent state, carrying out plans of occupation and offensive campaigns that ultimately culminated in genocide. (Cornell, “Turkey” 55-56; Güven 35-37). In 1991, two newly declared units, the ‘Republic of Artsakh’ within Azerbaijan, and the ‘Republika Srpska’ within BiH, emerged as instruments serving the ambitions of Greater Armenia (İsmayilov; Cornell, “Undeclared War”; Dudwick 427; Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary* xxii; Waal 56–61; Yunusov 31; Laitin and Suny 146-47) and Greater Serbia (Lukic; Güven 31-34; Mujanović). These secessionist entities promptly launched military occupations, resulting in rapid territorial conquests. Armenian forces seized nearly one-fifth of Azerbaijan’s land in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions, while Serb separatists quickly took control of nearly seventy percent of Bosnia-Herzegovina’s territory (Ali and Lifschultz 371; Mann 389). The perpetration of genocide in both cases was a deliberate effort to secure territorial gains by altering population dynamics in pursuit of achieving larger mono-ethnic states.

A common feature of Srebrenica and Khojaly was not only their strategic location but also their transformation into hubs where the population of war-ravaged victims gathered before the genocide took place. While Srebrenica had become a sanctuary for thousands of Bosnian Muslims because of forced displacement by the Serb forces since the beginning of the war (Nettelfield and Wagner 8-10), Khojaly was similarly home to thousands of Azerbaijani Turks expelled from Armenia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with hundreds of Meskhetian Turks who had fled from Uzbekistan (Waal 110). As a result, both areas became significant population centers where victims sought refuge. Since this concentrated population was an obstacle to the achievement of ethnically cleansed territories, the aggressors were forced to launch violent attacks in these regions, reshaping the demographic landscape through genocidal actions.

### **Discussion: How Does the Genocide Turn into a Reasonable Option?**

Having explored the events in Srebrenica and Khojaly, it is essential to delve into why the perpetrators in both cases perceived the benefits of genocidal actions as outweighing the associated risks. In other words, what factors made genocide a relatively low-risk choice for Armenians at Khojaly and

Serbs at Srebrenica? We argue that the viability of genocide as a low-risk option is underpinned by three interrelated factors: (1) recognition of the limited capacity of victims to mount armed resistance, resulting in a reduced or negligible risk of counterattack; (2) awareness of the international community's reluctance to intervene; and (3) the expectation that demographic transformation through ethnic cleansing and genocide could be preserved as a beneficial post-conflict resource.

For aggressors who anticipate the absence of counterattacks and the unimpeded achievement of their objectives without deterrence or serious threat of military casualties, genocide emerges as a potent, low-risk tactic capable of achieving the desired results quickly. Genocide tends to manifest through a rational cost-benefit analysis in which the aggressors perceive the victimized party as too weak to pose a significant resistance, as seen in many cases of targeting civilians who lack the means to stop the onslaught effectively (Mann 503; Fein). Since genocide differs from a war in that it targets unarmed civilians (Scherrer 14), it may be considered redundant to say that the aggressors view genocide as rational due to their immunity from any armed counterattack. Nevertheless, this absence of counterattack-risk encompasses more than the victims' inability to mount a defense. A crucial factor for mitigating risk in this context is not only the victims' inability to resist genocide with a military action, but also the absence of any military intervention from regional, and global powers, and also the indifference of the wider international community for this horrific event. Consequently, actors who discern an opportunity to target civilians and gain benefits from this act without any significant consequences can adopt such a strategy without any major penalty.

Genocide becomes a conceivable option when regional or global actors adopt a passive stance and show reluctance to intervene or when one or more actors actively support the aggressor. A closer look at the case of Srebrenica underscores a significant failure of the international community to deter this mass killing. The international community's firm and unyielding stance could have made committing genocide an irrational ideological choice for the Serb forces (see McAllister). Despite the awareness of all the local and international actors that Srebrenica would fall without NATO air strikes, and despite desperate pleas from the UN headquarters in Srebrenica, the NATO

air force waiting on standby on at the Adriatic coast was not mobilized to prevent the Serb forces from taking over the town and committing the genocide. Not only were the effective forces under the command of the international community reluctant to act, but the Bosnian army's ability to act in self-defense was largely impeded by resolutions of the UN, such as the arms embargo and the establishment of the safe zones. As a result, the international community's reluctance to intervene made genocide a reasonable tactical choice for Bosnian Serb political and military elites to achieve their strategic goals (see Rohde; Tatum 59-60).

In the case of Khojaly, the potential for international intervention was limited because of its location in newly independent territories of the Soviet Union. The Moscow administration's early alignment with the Armenian side at the outset of the Karabakh conflict further emboldened Armenian forces to continue their occupation and ethnic cleansing campaign (Abilov and Isayev 299). As the realization dawned that international intervention was unlikely, and with Russia refraining from any effort to halt the violence (Cornell, *Azerbaijan* 12; İşyar 193-94), the attacks on Karabakh, culminating in the Khojaly genocide, proved to be a calculated and strategic choice for the Armenian troops.

Another rationale for genocide, in conjunction with other factors, is the expectation that population transformations brought about by mass killings, rape, torture, and forced displacement will persist as permanent changes in the post-war period. The tendency of international mediators and peacebuilders to offer negotiations based on demographic realities on the ground, and to discuss post-war arrangements along these lines, encouraged aggressors to come to the table with extensive territorial holdings and strategically advantageous population distributions in disputed regions. Genocide, while extremely inhumane, proves to be one of the quickest ways to achieve such a strategically advantageous position. Indeed, in both cases that we examined, the recognition of the genocide-induced territorial and demographic structure as a post-war reality and the drafting of peace provisions through accepting these new realities illustrate how the gains secured by genocidal actions are safeguarded in the post-war period (Verémis 6-7).

The changing population composition of BiH, particularly in the eastern parts of the country, where Srebrenica is located, serves as a prime indicator of how the effects of the conflict have crystallized into the prevailing post-war reality. Today, within the RS entity, which encompasses Srebrenica, the demographic landscape has shifted, with Bosniaks now constituting a minority population, in stark contrast to the pre-war period. This demographic transformation has emboldened the RS authorities to pursue policies reminiscent of an independent, mono-ethnic Serb state characterized by secessionist tendencies against the state of BiH and implementing discriminatory measures that marginalize non-Serb ethnic communities. Furthermore, the post-war political framework as stipulated by the Dayton Accords served to legitimize the wartime atrocities by granting the RS a legitimate status. This, in effect, translated the acts of violence and human rights violations committed during the war into territorial and political advantages for the Serb forces, which even persist to this day.

In the Karabakh context, the situation developed in a distinct way due to the Armenian side's recent decline in demographic achievements that were previously maintained despite all the efforts, such as diplomatic talks and the Minsk Group initiative (Milanova 13-20; Kurkchiyan 157-158; Matveeva 445). Despite the diplomatic endeavors undertaken to address the aftermath of the First Karabakh war, Armenia has actively pursued the establishment of a legal foundation for the existing *de facto* situation in the disputed regions (Ertuğrul 59-60; Gasparyan 235-38; Ataman and Pirinççi 25-26). Furthermore, prominent global and regional actors such as the United States, Russia, and France which had the opportunity to help resolve the conflict as permanent co-chairs of the Minsk Group formed under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), chose to leave the issue under control but unresolved, allowing Armenian forces to hold on to the captured territories (Laitin and Suny; Sarıkaya and Aslanlı; Cornell, "Undeclared War" 10-12; Cornell, "Turkey" 51; Kurkchiyan 158; Waal 3; Ataman and Pirinççi 21-25).

The enduring demographic ramifications of the war, impervious to amendment by international law mechanisms and diplomatic negotiations, ultimately prompted the Azerbaijani government to launch a military campaign in Karabakh aimed at reclaiming the occupied territories in 2020.

Consequently, Azerbaijan successfully liberated seven districts within and surrounding Karabakh from occupation, marking a significant step towards a partial resolution of the Karabakh conflict (Ataman and Pirinççi 17-18). Hence, although violent demographic engineering was initially implemented as a rational option (Laitin and Suny 159), unforeseen factors beyond the purview of Armenian foresight acted as a barrier to preserving the war gains in the postwar period. This event included a significant change in the military power balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Türkiye's substantial political and military support for Baku, and Russia's temporary departure from its traditional pro-Armenian stance (Ataman and Pirinççi 27-29).

Last, but not least, it is crucial not to overlook the significant role of emotions such as hatred, rage, and revenge as a contributing factors to mass killings in conflicts where identity issues and historical claims play a critical role (see Chirot and McCauley; Taras and Ganguly 19; Petersen 1). Both Khojaly and Srebrenica reveal a complex interplay between ideological, emotional and strategic impulses for genocide, each influencing and reinforcing the other (see Milanova). In the Bosnian war, the central strategic goal of secessionism and the construction of a mono-ethnic Greater Serbia was underpinned by an ideological basis that legitimized the cleansing of the territories of their historical enemies, Bosniaks, whom they also called as "Turks". Thus, beyond the strategic objective, an ideological dimension of intending to eradicate all elements related to Bosniak's existence and identity existed, ultimately transforming the region into an exclusively Serb territory (Nettelfield and Wagner 8-12; Valentino, "Final Solutions" 38; Biserko 41). Likewise, in the Karabakh war, the underlying motives driving the Armenian separatists to commit atrocities stem from strategic objectives aimed at establishing an exclusive Armenian state and achieving unification with Armenia. However, the sheer ferocity of the violence (Cornell, *Azerbaijan* 62; Atun; Goltz, "Nagorno-Karabakh Victims Buried in Azerbaijani Town"; Reuters; Pope; Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary* 117-30), coupled with the adoption of rhetoric promoting revenge against Turks and Muslims (Melkonian 213-14; Laitin and Suny 153), underscores a more complex reality.

It becomes clear that explaining the violence solely in terms of political and military strategies falls short, given the nuanced mix of strategic pursuits justified by ideological, cultural, and economic motivations. This complex

dynamic paints a multifaceted portrait in which strategic goals are nourished by ideological beliefs, cultural and economic aspects, while at the same time seeking rational justifications for realizing goals rooted in historical and ideological premises. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize that in both instances, using socio-political elements such as dehumanization, fear-mongering, and ethnic animosity serves to secure bottom-up validation (Waal 7), while top-down policymaking is driven primarily by cost-benefit analysis. These observations align with Scott Straus's perspective, which asserts that the two primary theoretical paradigms regarding the origins of genocide, namely strategic and ideological approaches, are not conflicting but rather complementary.

### **Conclusion**

Whether witnessed in Srebrenica, or Khojaly, the commission of genocide involves actions such as forced displacement, terrorizing, and aggression against civilians, cannot be attributed solely to a manifestation of identity-based hatred or a state of insanity. Instead, it constitutes a deliberate, carefully planned, and strategic method for achieving long-envisioned objectives. This explanation is the key to understanding why certain post-Cold War conflicts have been marked by genocide and comparable acts while others have not. Genocide becomes a choice for aggressors to accomplish their objectives when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs. The key factors that make genocide a cost-effective option are the perception that the targets and the international community either lack the capacity or will to prevent the aggression. Another noteworthy factor is the prevailing international practice of accepting territorial gains as a given reality during negotiations, even when such gains were acquired through wartime actions that violated international law and human rights.

The observed cases have demonstrated that the motivation behind perpetrators' desire to commit atrocities is the result of a complex interplay between political and strategic agendas and the ideological motives that often justify those aspirations. Those desires alone are not sufficient to render genocide a rational option. The other rationale behind genocide hinges on the perpetrators' assumption that they won't encounter adequate deterrent actions from the international community and that they can secure long-



term gains, such as territorial or demographic reshaping as a new reality created by violence.

Given the insights provided by these findings, it may be argued that establishing effective deterrence mechanisms against potential acts of mass violence must be the primary duties of the international community. Since the political goals and ideologies of aggressors are unlikely to change through the efforts of international actors, deterrence would be sole necessary means to render such actions irrational. When targeted groups lack the capacity to defend themselves, it becomes incumbent upon the international community to deter genocidal activities (see McAllister). This can be understood within the framework of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle, which asserts the responsibility of the international community to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Furthermore, to eradicate forced displacement and mass murder as strategic choices for aggressors, peace agreements and post-war arrangements must avoid legitimizing and prioritizing the political, demographic, and territorial outcomes of conflict as imperative realities on the ground. Accepting the status quo of territorial and demographic realities on the ground as a pre-established framework for peace negotiations, as seen in BiH, encourages aggressors to maximize their territorial gains before entering peace talks. This frequently leads to additional rigging of the demographic composition of the interested area in their favor, often by violent means. This observation underscores the vital importance of repatriating the displaced populations in substantial numbers to counteract ethnic cleansing and convey a resolute message to the perpetrators that their wartime gains cannot be preserved once the conflict ends.

As a recommendation for future scholarly inquiries, it is imperative that the analysis of cases of genocide and mass killings must go beyond the confines of domestic dynamics. A comprehensive approach is warranted in these kinds of research, which requires a thorough consideration of a myriad of factors. These factors include the policies and actions of neighboring nations, the intricate web of regional power dynamics at play within the geographic locus of mass violence, and a prudent assessment of the global context during the period that is under consideration. Adopting this holistic approach allows for moving beyond the confines of limited analyses that

tend to view genocide primarily as a domestic issue, a concern emphasized by Martin Shaw, who contends that a historical and sociological approach to the international relations of genocide is essential for a comprehensive understanding of genocide phenomena. This multidimensional approach will not only enrich our understanding of the complexities surrounding acts of mass violence, but it will also shed light on the interplay of various geopolitical and socio-cultural forces that invariably influence the genesis and perpetuation of such catastrophic events. By broadening our investigative lens to encompass these broader dimensions, we can foster a more nuanced understanding of the underlying factors and motivations behind genocide and mass killings, thereby facilitating more effective preventive measures and informed policy interventions.

### **Contribution Rate Statement**

The authors' contribution rates in this study are equal.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study. There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

### **Notes**

- 1 On various perspectives on this definitional debate, including advocates of a narrower conceptualization of genocide and arguments in favor of a broader approach, see: (Naimark; Suny; Graziosi; Weiss-Wendt, *The Soviet Union*; Weiss-Wendt, *A Rhetorical Crime*).
- 2 For some remarkable studies that discuss the case of Khojaly within the framework of international law and the definition of genocide, see: (Özarlan; Muradov).

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