

Information on the protection and restoration of religious sites by the Republic of Azerbaijan and damage to Azerbaijani cultural heritage resulting from Armenia's aggression

As a multicultural and multi-religious country, Azerbaijan has always been home for the representatives of various nations and religions, who have co-existed together peacefully for centuries. Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other religions and beliefs managed to spread over the country in different periods of time, interacted with one another and established the specific religious and cultural life in the country. Through this experience, Azerbaijan has built a culture of tolerance, trust and confidence where people of different faith enjoy peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

Azerbaijan has one of the earliest Christian communities in the world, as the population of Caucasian Albania existed in the territory of Azerbaijan from 4th century BC to the 8th century AD professed Christianity along with Zoroastrianism. The Christian community that helped to shape Azerbaijan's history through the ages remains an important and vibrant part of Azerbaijani culture and society, and Christian religious sites and places of worship are fully protected by the state and regularly restored. It is no coincidence that during his visit to Azerbaijan in October 2016, Pope Francis praised Azerbaijan as a model country in the world for religious tolerance. Alongside the Christian and Muslim communities in Azerbaijan lives a thriving Jewish community with longtime history in Azerbaijan dating back over two thousand years. When, over the centuries, Jews in the surrounding regions were persecuted, in Azerbaijan they found a haven.

The restoration and reconstruction of historical and religious monuments, mosques, churches, synagogues and temples, is an integral part of the policy pursued by Azerbaijan in its territory. Over the last 20 years, the Russian Orthodox Church (The Church of the Jen-Mironosits Cathedral), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baku or Baku Church of the Savior, and the Alexander Nevsky Russian Orthodox Church in Ganja have been renovated by the state, and the Orthodox Religious and Cultural Centre of Baku and Azerbaijan Eparchy has been built. Moreover, the restoration of the Chotari Albanian-Udi Church in Gabala and the Orthodox Church in Baku, and the construction of the Church of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception in Baku were carried out as part of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation's project "Azerbaijan – the land of tolerance". In 2020, within the framework of this project, the Albanian Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Nij settlement of Gabala was thoroughly restored.

The Armenian Church in the center of Baku is preserved and repaired by the state and is open for the free use of people. There are many old books in the church which have also been protected with care.

Along with dozens of mosques and churches, other religious sites, synagogues and temples are also under the state protection. Ancient Zoroastrian temple - Baku Ateshgah (Baku Fire Temple) was renovated and declared a state historical-architectural reserve in 2007. The Synagogue of Mountainous Jews was built in Baku in 2010 under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Ashkenazi Synagogue was built in 2002 with the financial input of Caucasian Muslims' Board and Baku and Azerbaijan Eparchy.

Azerbaijan has also contributed to the protection of the Christian heritage worldwide: the restoration of the St. Sebastian catacombs at the initiative of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, including the restoration of the catacombs of Saints Marcellino and Pietro in Vatican, Rome, which was carried out as part of a bilateral agreement between the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Holy See (Vatican) on the restoration of Roman

catacombs, as well as the erection of a monument to Prince Vladimir in the square in front of the St. Vladimir's Church dedicated to the 1025th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity in Russia and the 455th anniversary of the founding of Astrakhan, are among these projects.

The Government of Azerbaijan also financed reconstruction of Saint Petka Church in Novi-Sad, Serbia. Heydar Aliyev Foundation reconstructed "Trapezitsa" Reserve in Bulgaria, including 3 churches dated XIII-XIV centuries within the territory of the historical site. In addition, assistance was provided in the restoration of seven churches of the 10th-12th centuries in the settlements of Saint-Hilaire, Fresnaye-au-Sauvage, Saint-Hilaire-la-Gérard, Tanville, Courgeoût, Réveillon and Mâle in the Orne department of France, as well as XIV century stained-glass windows of Notre Dame Cathedral of Strasburg portraying Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.

Azerbaijan is one of the areas of earliest human settlement with rich historical past and diverse cultural legacy. Different rock drawings, architectural monuments, samples of arts and crafts, as well as a great number of artifacts unearthed as a result of archaeological excavations testify to the country's distant past and its vast cultural heritage. Unfortunately, nearly 30 years-occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan by Armenia has catastrophic consequences for the country's cultural heritage. Purposeful destruction and deliberate negligence of 1,891 cultural resources, comprising 738 monuments, 28 museums with more than 83,500 exhibits, 4 picture galleries, 14 memorial complexes and 1,107 cultural establishments, led to a great cultural loss for Azerbaijan. The Museum of History in the Kalbajar district with its unique collection of ancient coins, gold and silverware, rare and precious stones, carpets and other handicraft wares, museums in Shusha, the Lachyn Museum of History, the Aghdam Museum of History and the Bread Museum and others have been destroyed, plundered, and their exhibits put on sale in different countries. For example, the bronze statues of Natavan, Uzeyir Hajibayov and Bulbul would have been sold as bronze scrap metal in Georgia if the Azerbaijani Government had not bought them for \$500,000. Similarly, a silver handbag from the Lachyn Museum of History was sold at a Sotheby's auction in London for \$80,000.

Apart from its wealth of architectural and archaeological monuments and its spectacularly beautiful nature, Karabakh region of Azerbaijan with its center in Shusha has been home to many talents, including great poets Vagif, Natavan and Navvab, as well as world-known composer Uzeyir Hajibayov and famous singer Bulbul, whose legacy, for their great contribution to the world's cultural heritage, has widely been recognized by the international community. For its prominent descendants and its exceptional role in the cultural life of Azerbaijan the city of Shusha has been considered the cradle of Azerbaijani music and its cultural sanctuary for many centuries.

The policy of deliberate destruction of this legacy is an irreparable blow both to Azerbaijani culture and world civilization. Acts of barbarism are accompanied by different methods of defacing the Azerbaijani cultural image of the occupied territories. Among them are large-scale construction works therein, such as, the building of an Armenian church in Lachyn town and the extension of the flight line of the Khojaly airport by destroying the children's music school, library, social club and infrastructure facilities. Another widespread practice employed is the change of the architectural details of different monuments, such as the Saatly mosque and Khanlyg Mukhtar caravanserai in Shusha, as well as replacement of the Azerbaijani-Muslim elements of the monuments with alien ones, such as the Armenian cross and writings, which have been engraved on the Arabic character of the nineteenth century Mamayi spring in Shusha town. Systematic destruction and altering the character and origins of cultural

monuments intended to erase or falsify the evidences of the historical presence of the Azerbaijani people in these lands. Armenia purposefully conducted the policy of changing the interior, ethnic and religious patterns and structure of the Albanian temples with the purpose of Gregorianization and appropriation of ancient Azerbaijani heritage.

There were 67 mosques, 48 tombs, 139 temples and churches in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan before the Armenian aggression. All Islamic monuments under the control of Armenia were brutally destroyed during 1992-2020. It was known that, pigs and cows were kept in Juma Mosque in Aghdam, Mamarkan Mosque in Gubadli and a mosque in Zangilan. Abusive expressions and hand-painted pictures were found on the walls of the mosques, whose ceilings, doors, windows and minarets were destroyed. In addition, more than 900 Muslim graveyards, and tombs and shrines in the vicinity were ruined. Even the bones were removed from the graves in the cemetery in the city of Agdam, and insulting acts were committed on them. In total, overall 192 shrines were completely destroyed during the occupation.

Analysis of the period since the declaration of a ceasefire in 1994 reveals the fact that the Armenian military actions have not destroyed Azerbaijani monuments to the extent to which this was subsequently done by the Armenian authorities later. In the years immediately following the military operations, in Shusha the architectural monuments, such as the Yukhary and Ashaghy Govharagha mosques with their madrasahs, the mausoleum of Vagif, and the house of Natavan and caravanserais, have been destroyed, burnt, plundered and rendered unusable. The later period proves the intensification of the barbarism, which has left almost no Azerbaijani monument without destruction or damage.

With the aim of alienation of the roots of Azerbaijani cultural and historical heritage the Government of Armenia made some renovations in the Yukhary Govhar Agha Mosque in Shusha in 2017-2019, presenting this sacred site of Azerbaijanis in media as a Persian mosque. Yukhary Govhar Agha Mosque was built by the ruler of Karabakh khanate Ibrahim Khalil khan and his daughter Govhar Agha in XVIII-XIX centuries.

As for the fate of the Azerbaijani historical and cultural heritage in Armenia, those monuments which survived until the beginning of the conflict have since been destroyed, such as the Damirbulag and Goy mosques of Yerevan. The former was razed to the ground, while the latter has been "restored" and presented as a Persian mosque. The mosques and other Azerbaijani monuments in other places of Armenia have also shared the same fate as the above-mentioned two, together with ancient or modern Azerbaijani cemeteries and toponyms of Azerbaijani origin, which have been erased from present-day Armenia.

Armenia's aggressive and deliberate policy of destruction of religious and cultural monuments continued during the military operations from 27 September to 10 November 2020. As a result of the shelling of Azerbaijani settlements with heavy artillery, on September 27, 2020, the tomb of Sheikh Babi in the cemetery in Fuzuli region was severely damaged. A shell also landed near the "George Prophet" shrine in Beylagan district. During the artillery shelling of Ganja city situated far from the conflict zone historical building of 1881 Ganja Gymnasium was damaged. While forced to withdraw from the territories of Azerbaijan Armenia's armed forces hastily removed and pillaged cultural property, including archeological artifacts.

The war launched by Armenia against Azerbaijan's cultural heritage was against the rules of war, especially, 1907 Hague Convention on Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land; 1949 Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilians in Time of War

and 1977 Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts ("Additional Protocol I"). Armenia also blatantly violated 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property of 1970.

Azerbaijan's rich cultural heritage represents the diverse nature of its ethnic and religious roots. All cultural and religious sites in its territory constitute valuable part of its multifarious inheritance. In this regard, ungrounded "concerns" about the "possible danger" towards the cultural heritage of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan after its liberation from occupation are incomprehensible to Azerbaijani society. Historical monuments in the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh region were built several centuries ago and preserved for many years by its rightful owners before its occupation by Armenia. Except the period of 1992-2020, Armenia has never had control over the region and the diverse historical-cultural ambiance of the region is a sheer evidence and vestige of Azerbaijani population's multicultural legacy. Unlike previous periods, the period covering Armenia's illegal seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions marked with deliberate pillage, destruction and alternation of the cultural legacy, including Christian heritage of the region which was well documented and proved with dozens of photo and video materials. Along with destruction of dozens of Islamic sites, Armenia is responsible for severe demolition of Orthodox Church of 1894 in Khojavend district, as well as reconstruction of several Orthodox and Albanian churches in the region in Grigorian style after their deliberate destruction.

The Government of Azerbaijan organized trips for the diplomatic corps in the country to several territories liberated from Armenia's occupation and the representatives of international organizations and foreign states witnessed the level of devastation and vandalism in the area. Azerbaijan cooperates with all impartial and non-politicized organizations to estimate the level of damage in its territories liberated from the occupation, including the harm to its cultural heritage and will inform the international community about the results of the assessments conducted in due time. The delegation headed by the Director-General of ICESCO visited the liberated territories of Azerbaijan in January 2021 and witnessed the magnitude of destruction in the area. ICESCO's technical mission will participate in the assessment process of cultural sites in the liberated lands. It should be taken into account that the large part of the territories concerned were heavily contaminated with mines and other unexploded ordnances which prolongs the assessment process. Nevertheless, the Government of Azerbaijan will spare no effort to restore the past cultural grandeur and real historical façade of all its territories liberated from the occupation. With participation of specialist and architects, all historical and cultural sites in the territory of Azerbaijan, irrespective of their religious affiliation, as well as Gazanchi Cathedral (Holy Savior Cathedral) in Shusha that suffered minor damage in October 2020 will be repaired. Currently, the State Service for Protection, Development and Restoration of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan conducts monitoring and inventory count of the historical, archeological and architectural sites in the territories liberated from the occupation.