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## **ATTACK ON CIVILIANS IN KARABAKH: WHAT DOES ARMENIA TRY TO ACHIEVE?**

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In the evening of July 4, two civilians of the Fizuli region of Azerbaijan were killed as a result of a mortar shelling by the Armenian military. The victims of the provocation at the front became a 50-year-old Sahiba Guliyeva and her two-year-old granddaughter Zakhra Guliyeva. Another member of the family, Sarvinaz Guliyeva, was seriously wounded.

Now we can forget about a relative standstill at the Karabakh frontline, which has been observed for the past few weeks. An experience of the April clashes of the previous year clearly showed that Azerbaijan is able to respond toughly to the killing of its civilians. Recall that during the second half of March - early April 2016 several civilians died as a result of the Armenian shelling, and the toughest conflict since the conclusion of the truce in 1994, occurred right after that. As a result of the escalation the Azerbaijani army inflicted heavy distraction on the Armenian side and occupied several strategically important heights. Considering the fact that a series of the major prestigious international events in Baku (the Islamic Games, Formula 1) has come to an end, you can no longer expect that the country is completely diverted to the large-scale events.

One way or another, we can expect that the armed forces of Azerbaijan will intensify their activity at the front-line zone after this bloody incident. The Azerbaijani side is unlikely to commit sabotage to revenge for the murder of a woman and a child - it is obvious that the Armenian servicemen are now in a state of maximum combat readiness, and therefore a risk of failure in the absence of the surprise effect will be extremely high.

If the events develop on a soft scenario, then the most likely response of Baku will be an active sniper shooting of the Armenian servicemen along the frontlines in the coming days and weeks. A tough scenario will presuppose, at least, the artillery strikes against the positions of the Armenian army, as well as the possible offensive actions. However, it bears the significant risks. First, the use of heavy artillery will inevitably cause opposition from the international community and the subsequent activation of the talks about a need to introduce the mechanisms for investigating the incidents at the front. This does not meet the interests of Baku at this stage. Azerbaijan does not reject such fundamentally mechanisms, but firmly links their introduction to the beginning of substantive negotiations on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to avoid the risk of cementing the status quo. It seems that this is the root of the provocation of the Armenian armed forces against the Azerbaijani civilian population. After all, during the recent visit to the region the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group called on Azerbaijan and Armenia to start the

substantive negotiations, and this, undoubtedly, implies real progress in changing the status quo and de-occupation of a part of the Azerbaijani territories.

Along with an attempt to renew a priority for the Armenian diplomacy issue of the mechanisms for investigating the front-line incidents, we can not ignore the fact that the Armenian military-political leadership by its latest actions at the front incites Azerbaijan to retaliatory shelling of the border Tavush region of Armenia. The Armenian civilians are vulnerable before the Azerbaijani army exactly in this zone, as far as the Armenian civilian population practically does not live along the Karabakh front. Since in this case the issue will concern the Armenian territory, a stake here is made on a subsequent intervention in the process by the CSTO countries and, first of all, Russia (Kazakhstan and Belarus openly support Azerbaijan in the conflict). Azerbaijan's hypothetical retaliatory strike against civilians in Armenia would be convenient for the Armenian side to wash off the shame of the killing of civilians on July 4, and would allow increasing pressure on Moscow to directly interfere in the conflict. Yerevan continues to work hard to turn Russia from a mediator of the conflict into its immediate side, linked by its allied commitments to Armenia.

For many years, a concept of Armenia's actions in the negotiations over Karabakh has been aiming at blocking a possibility of the de-occupation of the Azerbaijani regions. If Azerbaijan resorts to a tough response, such a response should, as in April of the previous year, include a local offensive operation, following which the Azerbaijani army will take control of the new positions. It is necessary, due to the fact that as a result of another possible escalation the negotiating positions of Baku would become so strong that the beginning of the substantive negotiations would be the only way for Armenia. Such a development of events, as a result of which Yerevan's negotiating positions will be weakened, largely converges with the Russian regional interests. Russia's peacekeeping mission in the region is at a deadlock because of Armenia's maximalist position, as it does not want to de-occupy a dozen of territories without Baku's prior consent for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is objectively an absolutely unrealistic scenario. As a result of this policy of Yerevan, the Russian integration projects can not yet be fully realized, since the unsettled conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is a natural limit to successful cooperation in the region.

In the near future we will see Bakus response. The risks are extremely high, but now one thing is clear: we can not hope that the killing of civilians in Fizuli will not directly affect a situation on the contact line between the Azerbaijani and Armenian troops.

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