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CHAPTER 12

THE ROLE OF THE DIASPORA IN THE REPATRIATION OF AZERBAIJANIS DEPORTED FROM WESTERN AZERBAIJAN: A JOINT STRATEGY OF TÜRKİYE AND AZERBAIJAN

Ceyhun AGAYEV

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Ceyhun AGAYEV

Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences

Abstract

This article provides a detailed analysis of the historical and legal aspects concerning Azerbaijanis deported from Western Azerbaijan, as well as the issue of their repatriation-their right to return to their ancestral lands-within the context of international law and human rights. It examines the historical and cultural significance of Western Azerbaijan for Azerbaijanis, alongside the causes and consequences of the systematic deportation policies carried out in these territories, emphasizing that the process involved not only physical violence but also the deliberate destruction of Azerbaijanis' historical and cultural heritage, toponyms, and religious monuments. The legal dimension of these events is analyzed within the framework of international human rights standards and the prohibition of ethnic cleansing. The article also highlights the crucial role of the diaspora in addressing the Western Azerbaijan issue, evaluating the activities of diaspora organizations within international platforms-such as information campaigns, legal advocacy, and lobbying efforts-under the framework of Türkiye-Azerbaijan cooperation, presenting such collaboration as a key mechanism for securing international recognition of the rights of Western Azerbaijanis and ensuring their safe return to their homeland. In addition, the diaspora plays an irreplaceable role in drawing international attention to this issue and exposing human rights violations caused by the Armenian occupation. In conclusion, the article notes that the repatriation of Western Azerbaijanis is not merely a legal claim but also a matter of strategic importance for restoring national memory and ensuring lasting peace in the region, emphasizing that successful implementation requires active and coordinated diaspora engagement alongside strong political and diplomatic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, thereby illuminating the repatriation issue from legal, historical, and socio-political perspectives and underlining the necessity of enabling Western Azerbaijanis to return to their ancestral lands.

Keywords

Western Azerbaijan, Deportation, Repatriation, International Law, Türkiye-Azerbaijan Cooperation

Introduction

Preserving Azerbaijan's historical geography and accurately understanding its ancient toponyms is a national and moral duty for every Azerbaijani. These lands are not merely geographic spaces; they are an inseparable part of Azerbaijanis' ethnic identity, cultural heritage, and historical memory. The term "Western Azerbaijan" is more than a geographic designation-it collectively refers to the communities that had long inhabited this region but were forced to leave their homeland due to political and other pressures.

In the 19th century, with the expansion of the Russian Empire's influence in the South Caucasus and later due to political decisions by the Soviet Union, the presence of Azerbaijanis in this region was systematically reduced. Political relations between Russia and Armenia led to the marginalization of Azerbaijanis and the distortion of historical facts. As a result, the region was presented under the name "Armenia," obscuring the actual demographic realities of the area (Shopen, 1852).

Historically, the territories dominated by Azerbaijanis were home to a rich and unique culture. However, over time, deliberate assimilation policies gradually erased traces of this cultural heritage. Its remnants were either physically destroyed or falsely attributed to other peoples. Mosques, madrasahs, cemeteries, examples of folk art, and other cultural monuments were either completely demolished or repurposed in a way that erased their spiritual significance. Consequently, the centuries-old cultural and historical legacy created and preserved by the local Azerbaijani population faced the threat of complete annihilation. These actions were not only directed against a single nation's history and identity but also amounted to the erasure of universal cultural heritage, in violation of international law, particularly conventions on the protection of cultural heritage. These facts are confirmed by historical records and research (Report.az, 2024; Shopen, 1852).

Contemporary studies also demonstrate that the toponyms in the region have Turkish origins. For instance, Professor Suleyman Aliyarov highlighted that names like "Shirak" and "Darelaghaz" correspond to Turkish linguistic roots (Aliyarov, 1982). This issue has also been widely discussed on the 525.az portal (525.az, 2024).

The mass deportations that occurred between 1987 and 1991 marked a turning point for Azerbaijanis in Western Azerbaijan. During this period, thousands of our compatriots were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes, and Armenian populations were illegally settled in these areas (State Migration Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024). These acts violated international legal standards and were documented in human rights reports (Report.az, 2024). The current depopulation of many settlements is a direct consequence of these events.

The Second Karabakh War in 2020 strengthened Azerbaijan's regional position and brought the repatriation issue to the international agenda. The right of Western Azerbaijanis to return to their homeland is now recognized not only as a moral duty but also as a fundamental right protected under international law (UNHCR, 2021; ECHR, 2019).

The successful implementation of this process critically depends on the activities of diaspora organizations, especially Turkish and Azerbaijani diaspora institutions. Cooperation based on the "one nation, two states" principle goes beyond political support, playing a key role in international information campaigns. This collaboration is essential for conveying the truths of Western Azerbaijan to the global community, ensuring legal protection, and garnering support on international platforms (Mirbeshiroglu, 2022, p. 67).

The aim of this article is to analyze the strategies of diaspora organizations-particularly those in Türkiye and Azerbaijan-in the repatriation of Azerbaijanis deported from Western Azerbaijan. Within this framework, the study addresses how the right to return to one's homeland may face challenges under international legal mechanisms and how diaspora institutions should present this issue on the global stage.

The research demonstrates that repatriation is not merely a regional concern; it is a significant matter under international law and human rights. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach encompassing legal and political strategies.

1. Deportation of Western Azerbaijanis-Historical and Legal Context

Western Azerbaijan, the territory currently known as the Republic of Armenia, has historically been a land shaped and inhabited by Azerbaijanis for centuries. This region was not merely a place of residence; it was a vital component of the political, economic, and cultural life of the Azerbaijani people. However, from the early 19th century onwards, geopolitical shifts and competing imperial interests led to the systematic implementation of ethnic cleansing policies against Azerbaijanis. A key turning point in this process occurred after the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828. Under this treaty, the Qajar state ceded parts of Northern Azerbaijan to Russia, which then encouraged the mass resettlement of Armenians from Iran and Ottoman territories with the explicit aim of altering the region's demographic composition (Alekberli, 2019).

In his seminal work published in 1852, *“Исторический памятник состояния Армянской области...”*, Ivan Shopen clearly demonstrates that the relocation of Armenians into Northern Azerbaijan, particularly the territories of the Erivan Khanate, was a deliberate strategy by the imperial authorities. This policy aimed to reduce the numerical presence of Azerbaijanis and weaken their political and economic influence (Schopen, 1852, pp. 647-648).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Armenian armed groups committed atrocities and acts of genocide in Azerbaijani territories, resulting in the displacement and deaths of thousands of Azerbaijanis. Between 1905-1907 and 1918-1920, large-scale massacres occurred not only in Western Azerbaijan but also in regions such as Baku, Shamakhi, and Guba (Alekberli, 2019). The so-called Armenian state established in 1918 institutionalized systematic violence against Azerbaijanis as state policy.

During the Soviet period, this policy assumed new forms. Between 1948 and 1953, following decrees issued by the Council of Ministers of the USSR, over one hundred thousand Azerbaijanis living in the Armenian SSR were forcibly deported to Azerbaijan. This was not merely a migration event-it represented a continuation of a deliberate ethnic cleansing policy. The collection of documents compiled by the Institute of History of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, *“Deportation of Azerbaijanis (1948-1953)”*, details the legal bases, implementation mechanisms, and outcomes of this period (ANAS, 2000).

Deportation encompassed more than physical relocation. Azerbaijani cultural heritage was deliberately destroyed, including the renaming of villages and towns, demolition of mosques and cemeteries, and erasure of historical monuments. According to reports by the Western Azerbaijan Community, between 1950 and 1980, dozens of villages in Armenia had their names changed, and Muslim religious and cultural sites were desecrated or eliminated (Alekberli, 2019).

Between 1987 and 1991, on the eve of the USSR's dissolution, the last Azerbaijani communities in Armenia were forced to leave their ancestral homes due to ethnic violence and psychological pressure. Official statistics indicate that during this period, approximately 250,000 Azerbaijanis in Armenia experienced various forms of violence, torture, and deportation (Fataliyev, 2021). This effectively ended the centuries-long physical presence of local Azerbaijanis in Western Azerbaijan.

These events are not merely the outcome of a regional conflict; they also represent gross violations of international law. Acts such as ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, and destruction of cultural heritage are recognized as international crimes under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The deportations and violence against Western Azerbaijanis clearly violated these legal norms (UNHCR, 2021; ECHR, 2019).

Under international law, the right of repatriation-the right of forcibly displaced people to return to their homeland is considered a fundamental and inalienable human right. This right ensures individuals can live in their homeland, maintain family life, and remain connected to their cultural identity. Forced displacement is regarded as a severe violation of human rights, and the right to return is one of the most fundamental entitlements for displaced persons.

The 2019 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in *Chiragov and Others v. Armenia* clearly affirms this principle. The Court emphasized that if a person is forcibly removed from their land and denied the right to return, it constitutes a serious violation of their property rights and the respect for family life (ECHR, 2019). This decision establishes binding legal standards for states responsible for forcibly displaced individuals under international law.

The deportation of Western Azerbaijanis is a significant human rights violation contrary to these legal standards. Beyond the humanitarian dimension, this act constitutes part of an ethnic cleansing policy under international law, depriving thousands of people of their ancestral lands and harming their lives, culture, and spiritual values (Alekberli, 2019).

Restoring justice under international law requires that forcibly displaced individuals are guaranteed the right to return safely and peacefully to their homeland. Recognizing and implementing this right is not only essential for protecting human rights but also crucial for establishing long-term peace, stability, and ethnic harmony in the region. Ensuring this right, along with recognizing the facts of deportation on international platforms, serves the supremacy of international law and restores justice in the eyes of humanity.

Thus, the right of Western Azerbaijanis to return to their ancestral lands must be upheld not only at personal and national levels but also within the framework of international law and humanitarian norms. Violations of this right demand serious legal and political scrutiny. Active participation from international organizations, human rights institutions, and civil society is essential to protect the rights of forcibly displaced persons and prevent the recurrence of such violations in the future.

2. The Right of Repatriation and Its Assessment Within International Legal Frameworks

The forced displacement of Western Azerbaijanis from their ancestral lands represents not only a tragic chapter in Azerbaijani history but also an act of ethnic cleansing accompanied by clear violations of fundamental norms and principles of international law. This event involved the destruction of human rights and national identity, as well as the systematic erasure of cultural and historical heritage. From an international law perspective, such situations are considered serious human rights violations in exceptional cases, and addressing them requires legal, political, and humanitarian measures. Within this context, the right of repatriation—that is, the right of forcibly displaced people to return to their homeland—is an integral component of both human rights protection and post-conflict justice (Mirbeshiroglu, 2022, p. 67).

Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, explicitly states that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (UN, 1948, Art. 13). This provision provides a crucial legal basis for protecting the rights of forcibly displaced individuals and ensuring their ability to return to their original places of residence. Western Azerbaijanis, as subjects of this provision, therefore have the right under international law to return safely, peacefully, and freely to their ancestral lands.

Furthermore, Article 12 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights reinforces this right, affirming that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country” (ICCPR, 1966, Art. 12). This right forms a cornerstone of the international legal system for protecting displaced populations against forced removal for ethnic, political, or other reasons. The right of Western Azerbaijanis to return to their ancestral lands is legitimate and well-founded under these international legal norms.

The role of international human rights organizations and judicial bodies is particularly important in legally assessing cases of forced displacement. For instance, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has consistently recognized violations of displaced persons’ rights to return to their homeland as serious infringements. In this regard, the deportation of Western Azerbaijanis constitutes not merely a regional conflict but a violation of the supremacy of international law.

From both historical and legal perspectives, ensuring this right is essential for restoring justice and establishing peace and stability in the region. Recognition of the right of repatriation not only addresses the moral and legal losses of displaced populations but also acts as a preventive measure to avoid similar violations in the future. Accordingly, the joint efforts of international organizations, human rights institutions, and relevant states are necessary to secure the return of Western Azerbaijanis to their ancestral lands. Legal mechanisms must be developed, international support must be mobilized, and political will directed toward peaceful resolution must exist for the effective realization of this right (Mirbeshiroglu, 2022, p. 67).

Thus, the safe and legally grounded return of Western Azerbaijanis to their ancestral homes is of indispensable importance for compliance with international law, the protection of human rights, and the establishment of lasting peace in the region.

According to Elshad Mirbeshiroglu, the right of repatriation is not only a legal concept but also a crucial mechanism within the framework of international peace and security. He notes: “In international law, the right of repatriation is one of the fundamental legal mechanisms for recognizing the rights of forcibly displaced ethnic groups and remedying violations” (Mirbeshiroglu, 2022, p. 67).

Supporting this view, another prominent legal scholar, Aziz Alekberli, emphasizes that the right of return for Western Azerbaijanis is tied not only to the restoration of historical lands but also to the restoration of human rights, particularly cultural rights. He writes: “These people have lost not only their physical territories but also their identity, cultural heritage, and rights. Redressing this injustice is essential for regional peace” (Alekberli, 2019, p. 205).

International practice further confirms the right of repatriation through several precedent-setting rulings. In the landmark ECHR case *Chiragov and Others v. Armenia*, the Court determined that forcibly displaced individuals have the right to return to their properties, territories, and lives in their homeland. The ruling emphasized that “when property rights and private life are violated, states must take appropriate measures to restore these rights” (ECHR, 2015).

In this context, the situation of Western Azerbaijanis clearly requires international legal intervention. Cases of deportation and the forcible seizure of property must be addressed not only through compensation but also through repatriation.

UNHCR guidelines also recognize the right of repatriation as a fundamental human right. The UNHCR 2021 report underscores that “refugees and forcibly displaced persons can only be justly resolved when they are allowed to return voluntarily, safely, and with dignity” (UNHCR, 2021).

This principle imposes responsibility on the international community. Protecting the rights of forcibly displaced populations requires not only diplomatic support but also the application of legal mechanisms.

In summary, the right of Western Azerbaijanis to repatriation is not only a claim based on historical justice but also a legitimate demand for the restoration of internationally recognized principles. Recognition of this right contributes to regional stability and serves as a tangible measure in the global fight against ethnic cleansing. The repatriation process should be treated not merely as a political issue but also as a legal obligation for international actors. The Azerbaijani state must not only demonstrate political will to realize this right but also strengthen legal and diplomatic cooperation with international organizations (Alekberli, 2023; Huseynova, 2021).

3. The Role of the Diaspora and the Significance of Türkiye–Azerbaijan Cooperation in the Repatriation Strategy

The process of returning Western Azerbaijanis to their ancestral lands is not only the restoration of a right guaranteed under international law but also an integral part of a multifaceted socio-political struggle aimed at reviving national memory, protecting moral rights, and ensuring historical justice. In this context, the

activities of the global Azerbaijani diaspora play a particularly crucial role. Diaspora organizations act as key instruments for raising international awareness of the realities of Western Azerbaijan, engaging not only in information campaigns but also in diplomatic efforts. Their work helps focus international attention on the issue, facilitating legal and political support.

In recent years, the Azerbaijani diaspora has prioritized the Western Azerbaijan issue in various countries, including Europe, Russia, the United States, and especially Türkiye. These diaspora organizations organize large-scale international events, such as academic conferences, the production of documentaries, publication of journalistic works, and social media campaigns. The support provided by the State Committee on Work with Diaspora and the State Support Agency for Non-Governmental Organizations under the President of Azerbaijan has been particularly instrumental in strengthening these initiatives (State Committee on Work with Diaspora, 2022; NGO Support Agency, 2023). This support enables the diaspora to operate more effectively both legally and politically.

The role of Azerbaijani diaspora organizations in Türkiye is of particular importance. These organizations rely on the historical, cultural, and religious ties between Azerbaijan and Türkiye as their foundational platform and serve as key partners in formulating and implementing repatriation strategies. Leading Turkish NGOs and international research centers, such as SETA (Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research), AVİM (Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies), and TASAM (Turkish Center for Strategic Studies), comprehensively document Armenia's ethnic cleansing policies against Azerbaijanis and prepare reports based on international legal standards. These reports are presented to the UN, European Union, OSCE, and other international organizations, facilitating the activation of international legal and political pressure mechanisms. This approach not only demonstrates the role of diaspora in the information struggle but also establishes a systematic framework for the legal recognition of crimes such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and deportation (Alekberli, 2023; Huseynova, 2021).

Moreover, joint activities of Turkish and Azerbaijani diaspora organizations, including the coordination of Azerbaijanis living abroad, help maintain the repatriation issue as a priority on the international agenda. This coordinated approach enhances the effectiveness of information campaigns, strengthens legal protections, and expands lobbying efforts in parliaments and international organizations. The diaspora thus actively participates not only in spreading awareness but also in creating legal and political support mechanisms. (see: *Aspects of Diaspora Cooperation in Azerbaijan-Türkiye Relations*, Baku, 2023; *The Strategic Importance of the "Brother Country" Model in Modern International Relations*, Baku, 2020).

Overall, the multifaceted activities undertaken in the return of Western Azerbaijanis to their ancestral lands play a crucial role in restoring national identity and historical justice. This process ensures the protection of individual rights while reinforcing collective national identity and preserving cultural and historical heritage. Simultaneously, it reflects the defense of universal human rights principles, including respect for international law and recognition of the right of forcibly displaced populations to return to their homelands. Repatriation, therefore, represents a complex process of justice across legal, political, and moral dimensions.

Active diaspora participation is one of the main factors ensuring the effectiveness and continuity of the repatriation process. Coordinated action under a unified information strategy, including Azerbaijanis living in different countries, significantly contributes to defending the just position internationally. International conferences, seminars, scientific research, and legal documentation exposing the ethnic cleansing policies against displaced Azerbaijanis are key instruments in this effort. Research highlights the contributions of such activities to Azerbaijan's international image and foreign policy agenda (see: *Diaspora Policy in the Context of Azerbaijan's Geopolitical Interests*, Baku, 2022; *Work with Compatriots in Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy*, Baku, 2021).

Furthermore, the strong strategic partnership between Türkiye and Azerbaijan adds additional momentum to the repatriation process. Built on shared historical and cultural values, this relationship enhances joint

efforts in international diplomatic arenas. Regular bilateral meetings, jointly signed documents, and political declarations allow Türkiye to openly support Azerbaijan's legitimate position before international organizations. Active participation of relevant diaspora organizations and the implementation of joint projects facilitate the effective execution of a comprehensive strategy for the return of displaced populations (see: *Aspects of Diaspora Cooperation in Azerbaijan-Türkiye Relations*, Baku, 2023; *The Strategic Importance of the "Brother Country" Model in Modern International Relations*, Baku, 2020).

Consequently, achieving the goal of repatriation of Western Azerbaijanis is impossible without coordinated national and international efforts, legal support, and strategic partnership. Sustained and systematic initiatives contribute not only to the restoration of justice but also to the creation of a fair, peaceful, and stable regional environment. Strengthening the diaspora and Azerbaijan-Türkiye cooperation thus remains one of the most critical factors in restoring this major historical justice.

To further elevate this collaboration, joint diaspora forums, legal networks, and information platforms have been established within the framework of the Azerbaijan-Türkiye strategic partnership. The experience and broad network of the Turkish diaspora support the Azerbaijani diaspora in effectively addressing the Western Azerbaijan issue (Mirbeshiroglu, 2022, pp. 108-110).

Aziz Alekberli has emphasized this matter on international platforms, particularly through parliamentary diplomacy and diaspora networks, arguing that the right of Azerbaijanis to return to their historical lands should be recognized not only at the official state level but also through diaspora and international organization efforts (Alekberli, 2023).

This approach highlights that repatriation must be recognized not only legally but also in public consciousness and international opinion. Established in 2022, the Western Azerbaijan Community functions as a dedicated institutional platform in this field. Its "Repatriation Concept" outlines a strategic approach to systematically resolve this issue, based on international legal norms, national interests, and regional stability principles. The document identifies key objectives, including:

- Presenting the rights of Western Azerbaijanis to international institutions through legal documentation;
- Establishing archives and databases on deportation and ethnic cleansing;
- Coordinating diaspora organizations;
- Expanding collaboration with allied countries and civil society (Western Azerbaijan Community, 2023).

Thus, the role of the diaspora in repatriation manifests in three main directions:

1. **International legal advocacy**-conveying facts, documents, and legal precedents to international organizations;
2. **Information and media diplomacy**-presenting cases of ethnic cleansing and deportation through visual and digital means;
3. **Strengthening national solidarity**-coordinating Azerbaijanis worldwide from a unified platform.

At the same time, cooperation with Türkiye enhances both the sustainability and impact of this process. Joint efforts of Azerbaijan-Türkiye diaspora organizations generate international pressure and systematically maintain the issue of Western Azerbaijan on the global agenda (Aliyev, 2022).

The return of Western Azerbaijanis to their homelands thus depends not only on legal procedures but also on a coordinated national information strategy. Diaspora organizations, especially those connected to Türkiye, serve as the main driving force behind this strategy. Raising the issue to the international level, effectively organizing information and legal advocacy, and leveraging diaspora-state-ally synergies will strengthen the legal foundations of repatriation and ensure meaningful progress toward correcting this historical injustice (Aliyev, 2022).

Conclusion

The deportation of Western Azerbaijanis represents the tragic outcome of a systematic ethnic cleansing policy that persisted throughout the 20th century, leaving deep scars in the national memory of the Azerbaijani people and resulting in severe violations of human rights. This event should be assessed not only as a humanitarian disaster but also as a clear breach of the fundamental principles of international law. Documents adopted by the United Nations and other international organizations recognize the right of displaced persons and refugees to return to their ancestral lands as a fundamental human right. Accordingly, the repatriation of Western Azerbaijanis must be regarded not merely as a legal obligation but also as a restoration of historical justice.

Research indicates that the successful implementation of repatriation depends on several interrelated factors. These include the establishment of internal legal and political mechanisms, effective diplomacy and information policies at the international level, and the active and strategic engagement of diaspora organizations. Diaspora institutions play a critical role not only in preserving national identity and cultural heritage but also in drawing international attention to the injustices faced by Azerbaijanis. Their activities are instrumental in exposing both past and ongoing ethnic cleansing policies by Armenia and in conveying fact-based truths to the global community.

The joint efforts of the Azerbaijani and Turkish diasporas constitute a strong alliance grounded in historical, cultural, and strategic ties. This cooperation plays a key role in keeping the issue of Western Azerbaijan on the international agenda, holding Armenia accountable within a legal framework, and ensuring the application of international law standards. Furthermore, this coordinated process involves concrete measures such as establishing relationships with international organizations, expanding inter-parliamentary dialogue, and raising awareness through human rights defenders and media campaigns (ECHR, 2015).

At the state level, the “Repatriation Concept” prepared and adopted by the Western Azerbaijan Community under the Republic of Azerbaijan serves as a pivotal document. It defines the priority directions of diaspora activities and provides the legal and political foundations for effective action. This document not only strengthens national unity but also creates a basis for effective lobbying in the international arena.

Ultimately, the return of Western Azerbaijanis to their ancestral lands is imperative for the restoration of national identity, the rectification of historical injustices, and the safeguarding of international law. Achieving this process requires not only the political will and legal stance of the state but also the unified, coordinated, and sustained efforts of the diaspora abroad. While this path is undoubtedly challenging, the strengthening of national and international solidarity ensures that the repatriation of Western Azerbaijanis will transform from a theoretical objective into a tangible, achievable future goal.

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About the Author

Ceyhun Agayev

Institute of Oriental Studies named after Z. Bunyadov, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences | ceyhun.sakiroglu[at]mail.ru | ORCID: 0009-0004-8831-9442

Ceyhun Shakir oğlu Agayev serves as a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of East-West Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Academician Ziya Bunyadov, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. He earned his PhD in Philosophy and has been contributing to the Institute's research initiatives since 2014. His scholarly interests encompass religious and philosophical thought, Islamic heritage, interfaith dialogue, East-West relations, and the historical development of the Azerbaijani diaspora. Dr. Agayev has authored over thirty-one articles and conference papers published in prominent academic journals and international proceedings in Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Russia, and beyond. He is particularly noted for his in-depth analyses of Muhammad Fuzuli's *Hadigat-us-Suada*, focusing on its moral, philosophical, and religious aspects. His recent research further addresses the significance of interfaith dialogue, intercultural engagement, and Azerbaijan's experiences in fostering these practices. Additionally, Dr. Agayev has produced scholarly works exploring the contributions and activities of the Azerbaijani diaspora on both regional and international platforms.