

2 November 2020



## *Government Policies Contributing to Growing Incidence of Using Syrians as Mercenary Fighters*

## **Government Policies Contributing to Growing Incidence of Using Syrians as Mercenary Fighters**

*More than 2000 Syrian fighters sent to Azerbaijan by Turkey last  
September, 150 Caucasian jihadists arriving in advance in July*

## Executive summary

This detailed report provides information corroborated by statements, photos and videos on the transfer of Syrians and Caucasians to Azerbaijan to engage in its ongoing military conflict with Armenia in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh). Reportedly, in the second half of September 2020, hundreds of Syrians (civilians and military personnel) were transferred across Turkish territory to Azerbaijan to fight as mercenaries alongside government forces.

Previously, three batches of Caucasian jihadists numbering 150 in total had arrived in Azerbaijan on three different dates in July. Those Caucasians were affiliated with Afnad al-Kavkaz/ Soldiers of the Caucasus; this is a jihadi Islamic fundamentalist rebel group active in northern Syria, primarily in the mountainous, forested areas of northern Latakia province (Turkmen Mountain and the Kurd Mountains) and the parts of Idlib province controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

As for the Syrians enlisted, STJ has confirmed that their number reached at least 2000 as of 13 October 2020 (the date on which this report was finished), and that they were taken to Azerbaijan in three transfers (250 fighters in each batch). We have also verified that most of them are affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA) of the Istanbul-based National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces – the political umbrella of the Syrian opposition forces – while others are civilians who were driven by the woeful economic situation in Syria to accept the ‘Turkish offer,’ though they have never carried a weapon before. Recruitment took place mainly in areas held by Turkey and allies, including the area of Afrin (Olive Branch areas).

Statements provided by STJ field researchers and officers of the SNA confirmed that Turkish security forces began compiling lists of the names of those wanting to fight in Azerbaijan in early September 2020, however the official registration process started on the 13<sup>th</sup> of that month. This process was led by armed groups known to have close ties with the Turkish government, including: the Sultan Murad Division, whose fighters are mostly Turkoman; the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat); the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd; and the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham.

Subsequently, the registered fighters were transported from an assembly point at the Hawar Kilis military border crossing to another assembly point in Turkish territory, to then be taken to airports and flown to Azerbaijan by military aircraft (mainly A400s). According to information obtained by STJ, the first flight was on 22 September 2020 – five days before the start of the most violent military operations yet seen in the disputed territory.

This report is only one part of a broader effort by STJ to monitor the ongoing recruitment of Syrians to fight as mercenaries in conflicts they are alien to. We will report any new reliable information provided on this subject.

## Methodology

For this report, we interviewed 19 sources, among them senior leaders in the SNA; registrars of the fighters, known as ‘brokers’ and associated with armed groups and Turkish intelligence services; fighters who have already been transferred into combat; others on the waiting lists, including civilians; and in addition relatives of fighters killed recently in Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, our researchers have verified dozens of photos and videos on the subject matter that were shared via the internet.

Additionally, our digital forensics expert tracked the Turkish military aircraft flights which transported fighters from Turkey to Azerbaijan, as was reported by officers and fighters who were on those flights. Our team collected open-source information evidence, analysing and presenting it in a simplified way.

### 1. Transfers of Caucasian jihadists to Azerbaijan during July 2020

According to a statement given exclusively to STJ by an officer in the SNA, Caucasus jihadists were transferred with their families from Syria to Azerbaijan through Turkey. This was effected through the Sochi Agreement that was reached between Turkey and Russia on 22 October 2019, under which Turkey undertook to remove foreign fighters from Syria’s northwest. Nevertheless, almost a year after signing the agreement, the only ones to have been removed – exclusively to Azerbaijan – are Caucasian fighters.,

The same source confirmed that those Caucasian fighters were stationed in Turkmen Mountain and the Kurd Mountains in rural Latakia, and that they were transported to Turkey through a land military crossing in Latakia. They were then taken to Azerbaijan by Turkish military aircraft in three flights on 5, 18 and 23 July 2020 (about two months before the start of the most recent military operations in the Karabakh region in September). The source, however, did not mention the departure and landing points of the plane.

According to STJ’s digital forensics expert:

- On 18 and 23 July 2020, round-trip commercial flights were carried out by civilian aircraft between Turkey and Azerbaijan, whereas on 5 and 23 July 2020 Turkish A400 military aircraft conducted several flights from Turkey to Baku, Azerbaijan.
- **Outbound civilian commercial flights**
  - On 18 July, two commercial flights from Istanbul to Baku were monitored, one on Azerbaijani Airlines and the other on Turkish Airlines.

On the same day, there were multiple domestic flights by an A400 military plane taking off from [Kayseri Erkilet Airport](#), a military airbase and public airport. It flew to Gaziantep and then to Istanbul, before returning to Gaziantep and then to Kayseri. STJ believes that there is likely a link between these domestic flights and the abovementioned commercial flights between Turkey and Azerbaijan, which may have carried Caucasian jihadists.



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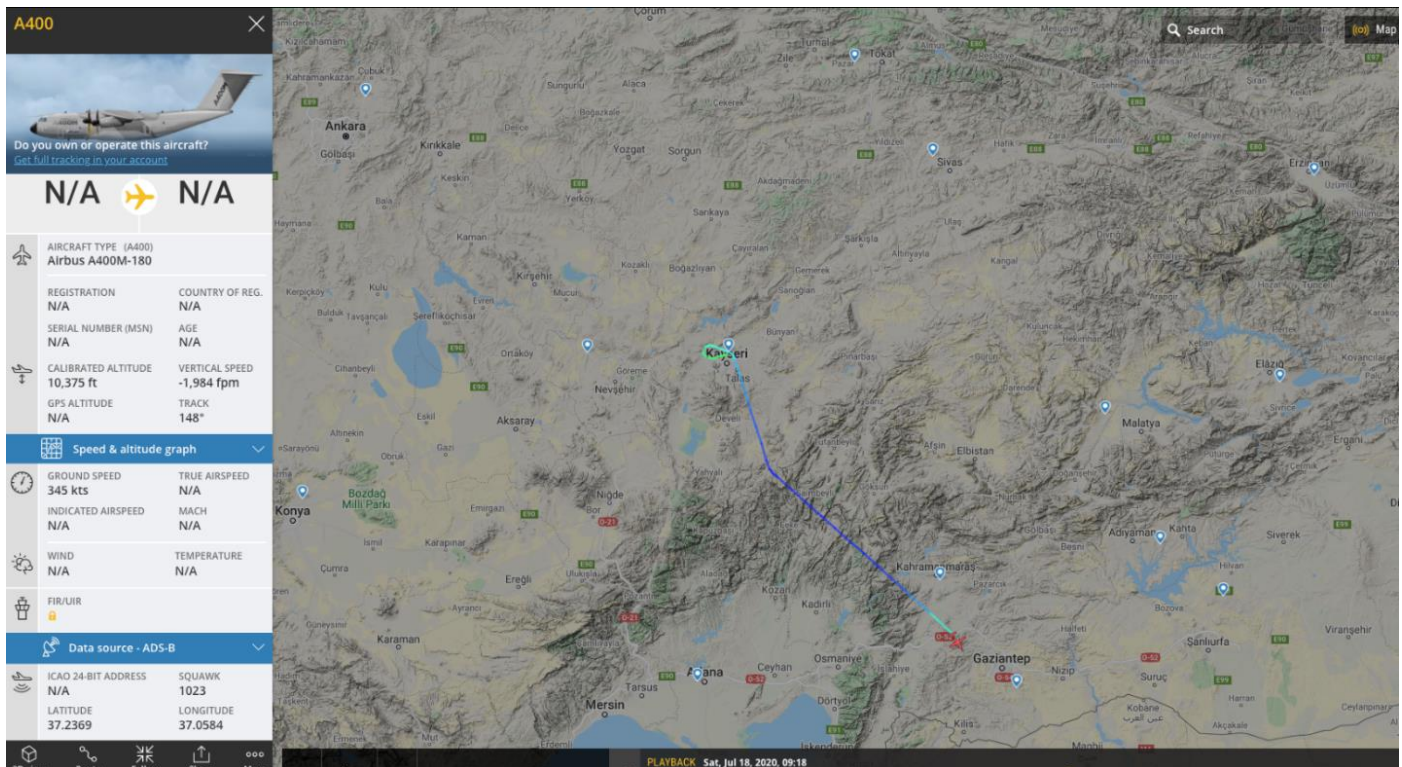


Image 1: data on a flight that took off from Kayseri air base towards Gaziantep on the morning of 18 July 2020, the same day that according to our military source Caucasian jihadists were transferred to Azerbaijan. Credit: Flightradar24 website.

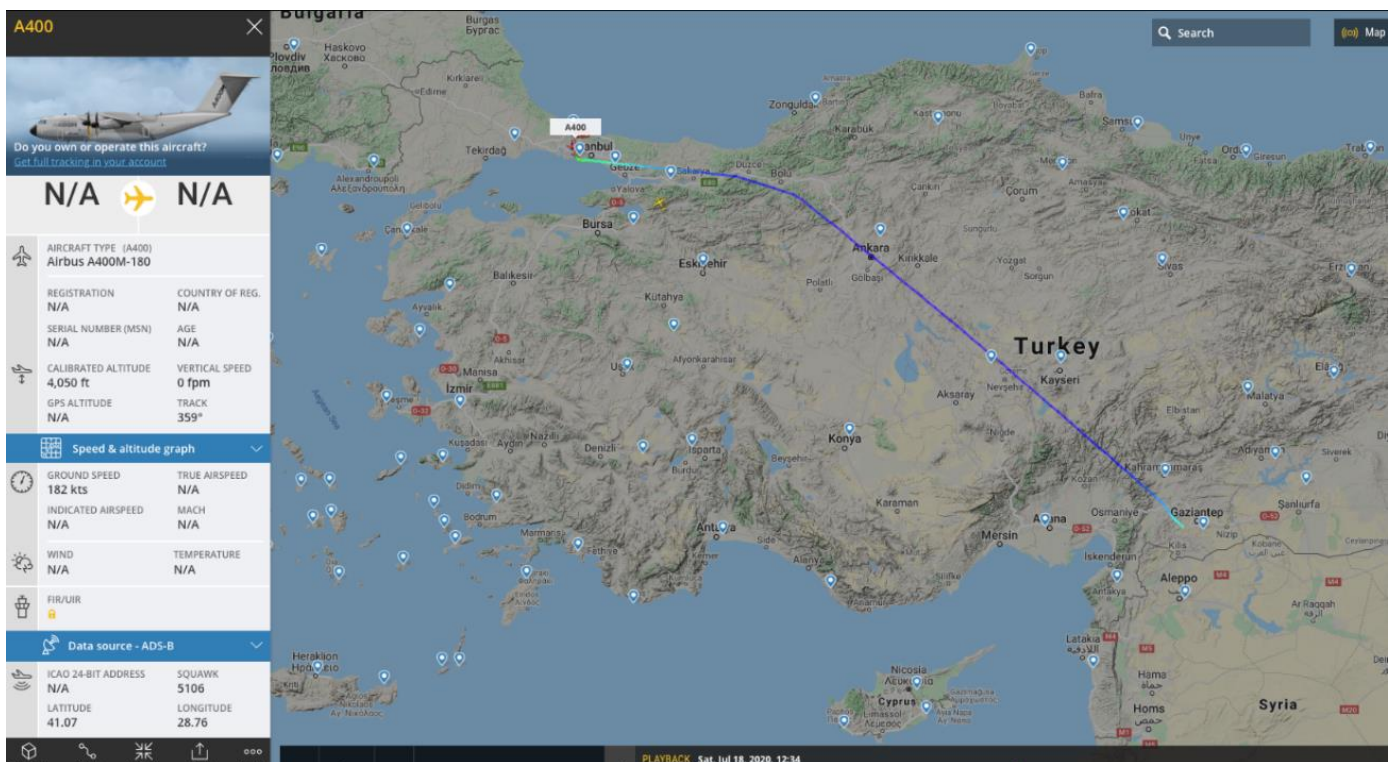


Image 2: data on a flight by an A400 aircraft which took off from Gaziantep towards Istanbul in the afternoon of 18 July, a few hours after arriving from Kayseri. We believe that this flight carried Caucasian jihadists to Istanbul. Credit: Flightradar24 website.

The Kayseri Erkilet Airport is known to have the largest number of A400 military aircraft.



Image 3: four photos taken on different dates, showing an A400 military aircraft at [Kayseri airport](#), from where military aircraft take off mainly.

- On 23 July, three commercial flights departed from Istanbul to Baku; two of them were operated by Silk Way West Airlines (an Azerbaijani company), while the third was operated by Azerbaijani Airlines.
- **Military flights by Turkish A400 aircraft**
  - On 5 July, a Turkish military cargo plane landed in Baku, as reported by the Turkish TV channel TRT in a post on its [Twitter account](#) in which it stated that a Turkish A400 airplane had arrived in Azerbaijan carrying medical aid for the coronavirus response. STJ could not verify if there were Caucasian jihadists on this flight or not.





Image 4: a photo published by TRT TV on 5 July, confirming the arrival of an A400 military aircraft in Baku.

- The website Flightradar24 tracked a Turkish A400 military aircraft that took off from Ankara on 22 July 2020 at 21:19 pm and landed in Baku, before taking off again on 23 July 2020 at 02:08 am towards Afghanistan and returning to Turkey at 09:08 am the same day. STJ believes that the Istanbul-Baku flight carried Caucasian jihadists.

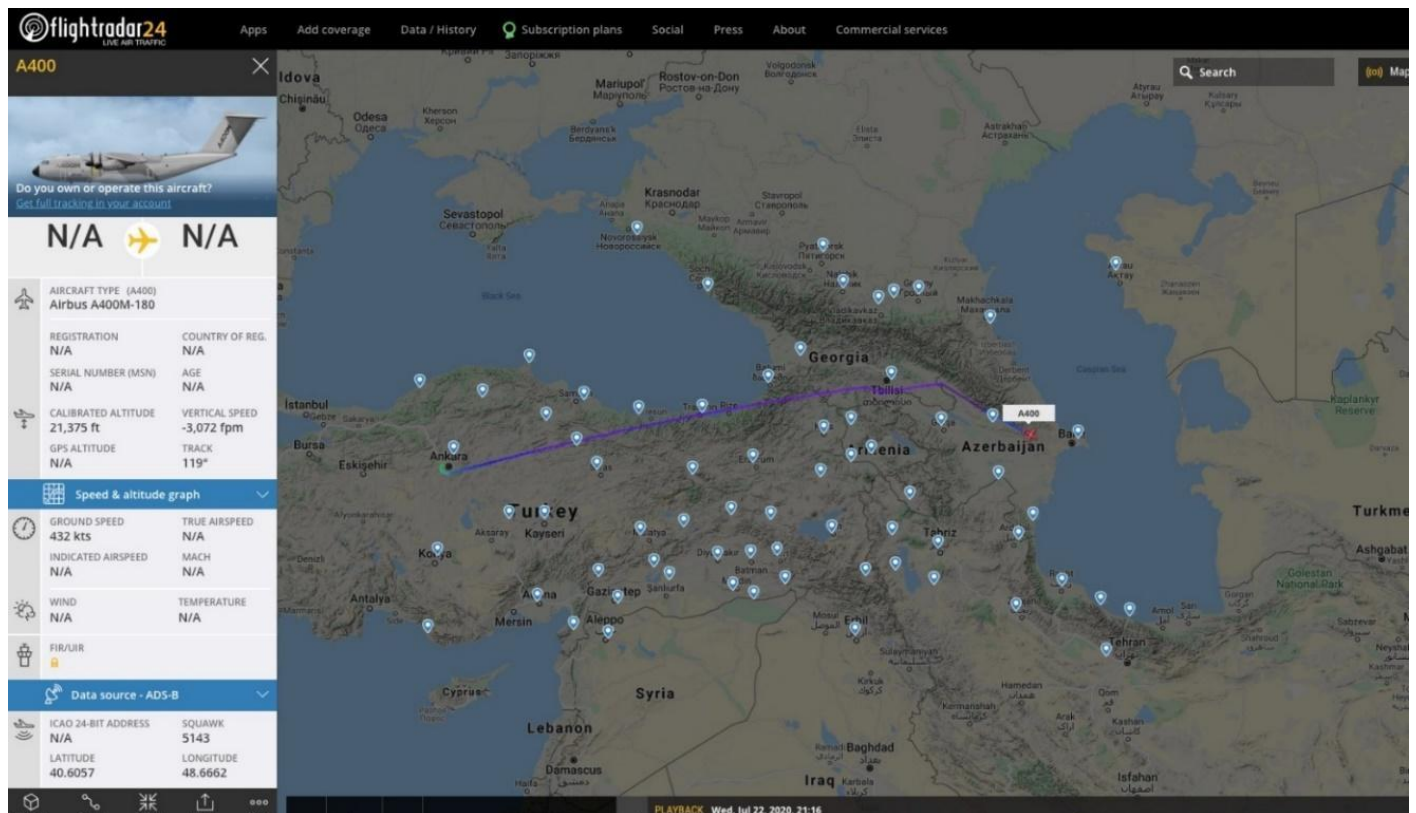


Image 5: data on a flight by a Turkish A400 military aircraft which took off from Ankara towards Azerbaijan on 22 July. Credit: Flightradar24.

## 2. Recruiting Syrians to Azerbaijan

### A. The Syrian armed groups involved

A former leader in the SNA told STJ that the Turkish government instructed its proxies in Syria to recruit people (both military and civilian) to fight in Azerbaijan in early September 2020, prior to the offensive which was launched in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh on the 27<sup>th</sup> that same month. Yet the leader's statement refutes what was stated by Ziad Haj Ubaid, a current officer in the SNA, on 7 October 2020 on 'The Talk is Syrian,' a TV program broadcast by the US-based Alhurra news channel; there he said that the Syrian fighters sent to Azerbaijan had been recruited by Turkish security companies.<sup>1</sup> Numerous sources and witnesses, however, confirmed that Turkey's government and security forces are directly involved in this recruitment, and dismissed the possible involvement of security companies.<sup>2</sup> As the SNA officer explained:

**"The recruitment of Syrian fighters to Azerbaijan followed the same recruitment procedures that were deployed in Libya, but with stricter conditions. Turkey refused to recruit people under the age of 18 and over 45. It also required that they pass a medical examination proving their physical ability to engage in combat, before they were given approval from the Turkish security/intelligence services and transferred to Turkey."**

A broker, one of those responsible for registering fighters, detailed the recruitment procedures for STJ, saying:

**"Those who want to go to Azerbaijan can register directly at one of the headquarters of the Sultan Murad Division or the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd, in the Olive Branch areas; or through people who have strong ties with the Turkish intelligence. In Idlib and the internally displaced persons camps, the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham is primarily responsible for the registration process: civilians and military personnel came individually or in groups to registration centres, giving their ID information and their phone numbers, to be contacted later."**

He added:

**"The fighters were transferred to Turkey through the Hawar Kilis military border crossing, where they were subjected to a full search by the Turkish intelligence, which confiscated their cell phones. They then underwent a medical examination and attended a lecture given by a Turkish officer about their assigned tasks in Azerbaijan. Initially an officer stated that the fighters' mission in Azerbaijan would be to guard Turkish bases there; this was then refuted by another officer, who said that the**

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<sup>1</sup> "Syrians fuel the war raging in Nagorno-Karabakh", The Talk is Syrian', 7 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAPckb6UJF8>, (Last visited on:12 October 2020). See the clip on the role of security companies <https://twitter.com/alhurranews/status/1314702180394430471?s=21>.

<sup>2</sup> SADAT is among the Turkish security companies that previously recruited Syrians to fight in Libya as mercenaries alongside the Turkish-backed forces of the Government of National Accord.



**mission would be guarding the borders alongside Turkish soldiers. , Finally it was said that the mission in Azerbaijan would be to fight alongside 'the Shi'a' without any Turkish forces there."**

The source added that the registration of mercenaries started on 13 September 2020, with the first batch of fighters arriving in Azerbaijan on the 22<sup>th</sup> of that month – five days before the launch of military confrontations in Nagorno-Karabakh. Regarding this, a senior officer in the SNA said:

**"On 21 September 2020, Turkish intelligence sent us a list of 1500 names of Syrians approved to go to Azerbaijan. Indeed, they were to be transferred there through Turkey in batches, with 250 fighters in each batch."**

He added:

**"Requirements for fighting in Azerbaijan are stricter than those stipulated in the Libyan case; for instance, Turkey refused to recruit youths born after 2003. There are several registration centres, among them the headquarters of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division in the village of Kaljibrin and the headquarters of the Suleiman Shah brigade in Afrin. However, some people registered with the commander Ahmed al-Duj at the Hawar Kilis military border crossing."**

STJ field researchers confirmed that headquarters of the SNA in Afrin are the main registration centres for recruitment to Azerbaijan, having been led directly by the Sultan Murad Division, the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat), the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd, and the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham.



Image 6: on the top right, the emblem of the Sultan Murad Division; on the top left, the emblem of the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd; on the bottom right, the emblem of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham; on the bottom left, the emblem of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat).

Information provided by STJ field researchers, officers in the SNA, and local activists contradicts the statements made by the president of the Syrian National Coalition, Naser al-Hariri, to the state-run Turkish TV, TRT HABER, in which he said: “These fighters have nothing to do with the National Coalition, the Syrian Interim Government or the SNA, so we cannot say that those Syrians fighting in Karabakh are affiliated with the opposition.”<sup>3</sup> He added that the armed groups involved in the recruitment are directly linked to the Ministry of Defence of the Interim Syrian Government, one of the organs of the Syrian opposition coalition: the Sultan Murad Division is a part of the SNA’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, while the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya falls under its 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps.

A source in Liwa Samarkand/Samarkand Brigade confirmed that on 12 September 2020, the Free Police in Afrin sent about 400 of its members to Azerbaijan to serve as border guards for a monthly salary ranging between 1700 USD and 2000 USD.

### **B. Armed groups defraud fighters to make money**

In its recruitment drive for Azerbaijan, Turkey offered almost the same incentives with which it has lured Syrian fighters to go Libya: a monthly salary of 2000 USD, financial compensation of up to 40000 USD in the event of the death of the fighter/mercenary, and promises to grant Turkish nationality to the families of the dead; the latter has not happened so far (as of 13 October 2020), although credible information says that families of two Syrian fighters died in Libya have commenced procedures to obtain Turkish nationality. However, STJ found that Syrian opposition groups have not provided pecuniary compensation to the families of those killed in the military confrontations in Libya.

A register (broker) told STJ that Turkey signs a three- or six-months contract with the fighter, stipulating a monthly salary of 3000 USD and a compensation of 75000 USD to his family if he dies. He asserted, however, that the armed group does not give all this money to the fighter, but rather withholds part of it in exchange for giving him immediate approval to travel.

He added: “the armed groups always breach the contracts and give the fighters salaries between 800 USD to 1400 USD. A fighter receives only 300 USD in Azerbaijan and the rest of the money is given to his family in Syria. As for compensation in the event of his death, the groups agree with him to give his family only 50000 USD out of the 75000 USD stipulated in the contract, with a pledge to return his body to Syria for burial.

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<sup>3</sup> Naser al-Hariri denies the opposition's link to Syrian fighters in Azerbaijan”, Orient website, 8 October 2020,

[https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/184968/0/%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%B0%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86](https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/184968/0/%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%B0%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86) (Last visited: 12 October 2020).

The original news link in Turkish: Suriye Ulusal Koalisyonu Başkanı al-Hariri: Karabağ'da Suriyeli muhalifler savaşıyor. 7 October 2020. Last visit: 10 October 2020. <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/suriye-ulusal-koalisyonu-baskani-al-hariri-karabagda-suriyeli-muhafifler-savasmiyor-521605.html>

The foregoing information was confirmed by another source, who is a senior leader in the SNA:

**“The armed groups offer different payments. For instance, the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division issues the fighter a monthly salary of 800 USD with an immediate approval to travel, while the Suleiman Shah Brigade pays 1400 USD. It is certain that the groups withhold the fighters' money and give them only a part of it,”** the officer said.

A fighter in the Sultan Murad Division who is now in Azerbaijan talked to STJ, saying:

**“They offered us a monthly salary ranging between 1500 USD and 2000 USD, determined according to the fighter's specialty, in addition to a compensation of 40000 USD in the event of death, 30000 USD in the event of an amputation of a limb and disability, and 15000 in the event of serious injury (without amputation); this is alongside promises to give Turkish citizenship to the families of the dead, although we don't know the extent to which these promises are genuine.”**

Each of the armed groups competes to register the largest number of fighters in order to appropriate part of their salaries or the financial support provided to them by Turkey. For more information regarding this, STJ conducted an online interview with a witness residing in northwest Syria, in which he said:

**“I went to the headquarters of the Sultan Murad Division with 20 young men, and expressed our willingness to go to Azerbaijan. They offered 1400 USD as a monthly salary to the fighter, 3000 USD to the battalion leader, and 2500 USD to his deputy. Then we went to the headquarters of the Suleiman Shah brigade and met the recruiting official, Hatem Diab, who said that they offer the fighter 1800 USD, 4000 USD to the battalion leader, and 3000 USD to his deputy.”**

STJ field researchers talked to Syrian fighters who are currently in Azerbaijan and described in detail for us the recruitment process and their assigned tasks. One fighter – asking to speak anonymously – who is originally from south Damascus stated:

**“I went to register to join the fight in Azerbaijan at the Sultan Murad Division headquarters, where I saw fighters affiliated with other groups also registering to come here with the Division. They gathered us at the Hawar Kilis crossing border point – we were about 250 people – and transferred us to Turkey and from there to Azerbaijan where we arrived on 24 September.”**

Another fighter, who asked us to refer to him by the pseudonym Abu Omar, said:

**“After reaching the Hawar Kilis military crossing, we were taken by bus to an airport inside Turkish territory, and then flown to Azerbaijan. When we arrived there, they put us in underground vaults and confiscated our cell phones. They kept only one phone for every 15 Syrian fighters.”**

A fighter from the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, justified his coming to Azerbaijan by virtue of his poor living conditions:



**“I cannot secure my children’s needs, especially those of my adult girls. The Levant Front gives me only 400 Turkish Lira every 50 days. Therefore, I decided to go to Azerbaijan to secure a decent and dignified life for my family.”**

### **C. Gathering fighters at the Hawar Kilis border crossing between Syria and Turkey**

On 24 September 2020, Syrian news pages [circulated](#) the following image, claiming that it depicted SNA mercenaries. Some news organizations, however, claimed that it was taken in Azerbaijan, while others said that it had been taken in an unidentified assembly point before the mercenaries were transferred.

It should be noted that the fatigues worn by the soldiers in the picture have never been worn by fighters of the Syrian opposition groups, specifically those of the SNA.



Image 7.

On 25 September 2020, Syrian opposition pages on social media published [footage](#) which they claimed shows fighters of armed groups affiliated with the SNA in a training camp (it was not mentioned when or where the footage was filmed).



Image 8: a screenshot from the abovementioned [footage](#) shows a fighter sitting on the ground wearing a light camouflage military uniform with white spots in its pattern; and another standing, wearing the same uniform with a red hat matching that worn by members of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Sultan Murad Divisions.

Subsequently, on 8 October 2020, digital forensics experts were nevertheless [able](#) to [geolocate](#) the circulated footage and photo to (36.671596, 37.216536), which is a military training camp of the SNA at the Hawar Kilis border point.



Image 9: matching the photo and video with a satellite image by our digital forensic experts.



STJ compared all published photos to see if the fatigues worn by fighters seen at the Hawar Kilis border point, matches those of the SNA.



Image 10.

[Digital forensics experts](#) concluded that the uniform worn by the soldiers who appear in the aforementioned footage and photo matches that of the Azerbaijani border guards.



Image 11: a collage of published photos confirmed to be of Syrian fighters in Azerbaijani border guard uniforms.

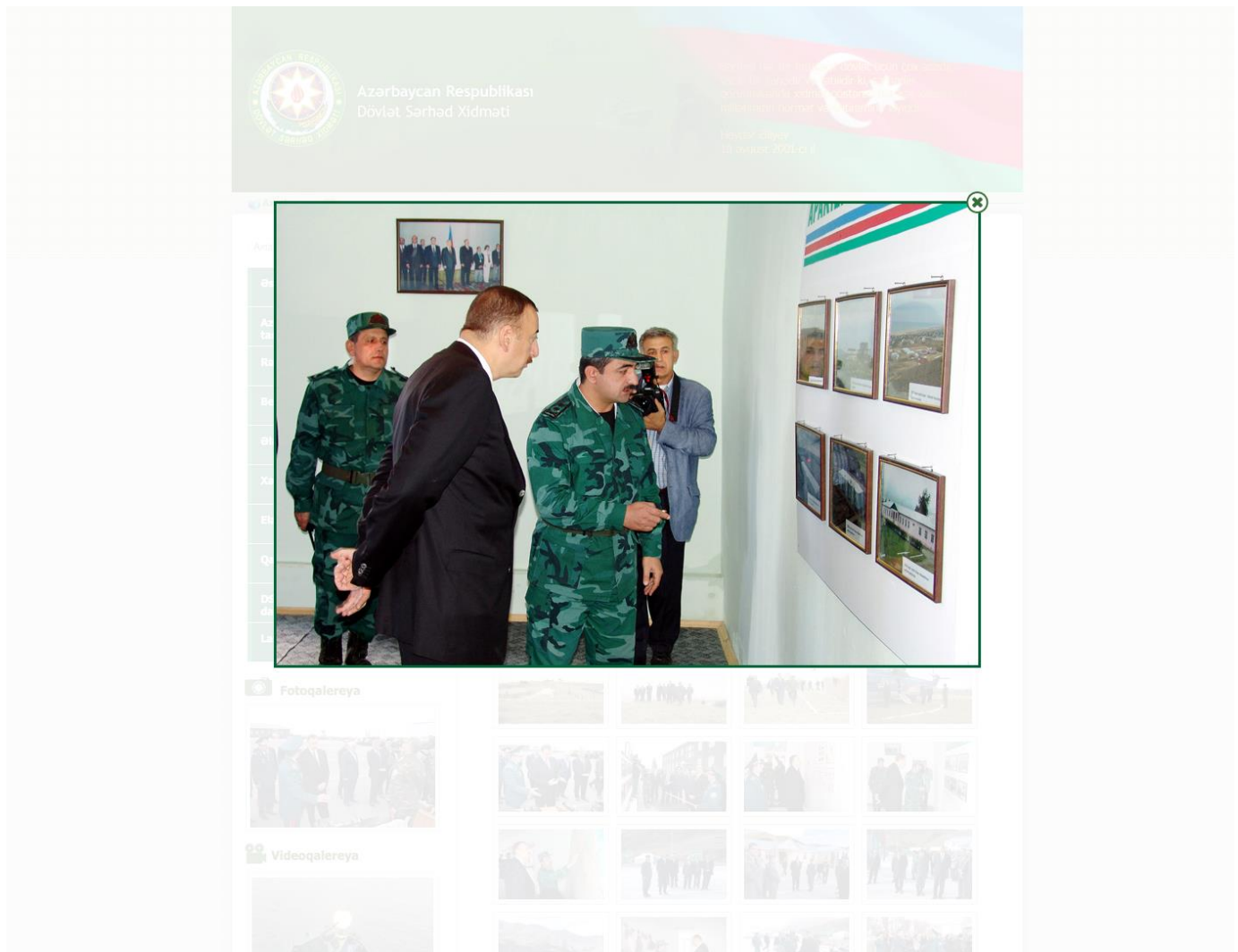


Image 12: From the [Azerbaijani State Border Service](http://www.dsx.gov.az) (Dövlət Sərhəd Xidmətinin) website.





Image 13: a Syrian fighter identified as Abd al-Razzaq/Abu Hurairah, killed in combat in Azerbaijan.  
Published on 30 September 2020.

Credit: [Jesr](https://www.jesr.org) website.



Image 14: a collage of published photos of Syrian fighters in Azerbaijan.

Credit: a [Telegram](#) post.



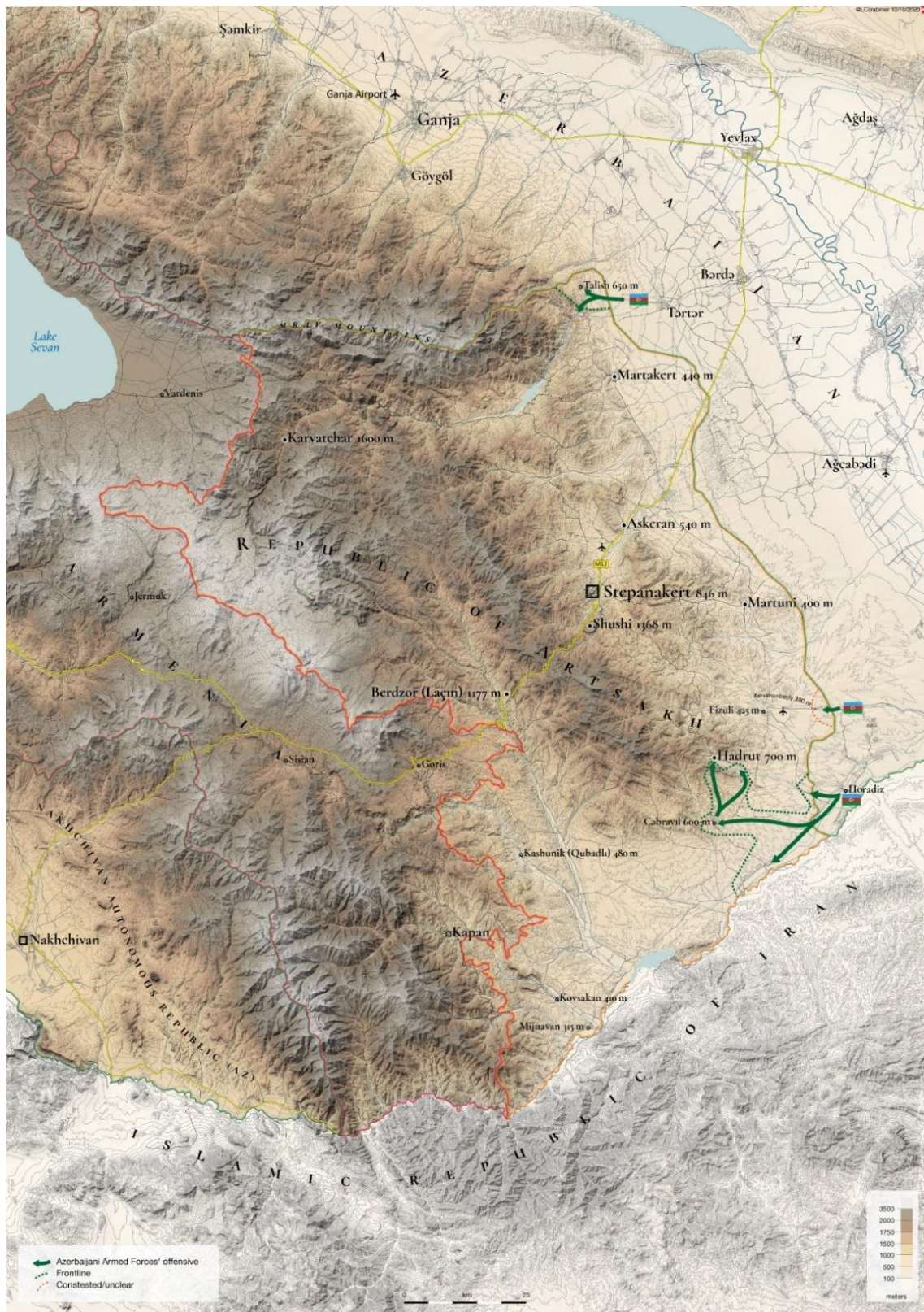


Image 15: a map of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh) showing the advancement of Azerbaijani forces with the support of Syrian mercenaries, as of 13 October 2020).

Credit: a [Twitter](#) post.



## D. Rejection of Applicants

On the other hand, STJ met military personnel and civilians who did not obtain approval from the Turkish intelligence to go to Azerbaijan due to age issues, as well as others who were accepted but reversed their decision to go at the last minute. One of them – asking to speak anonymously – told STJ:

**“A member of the Sultan Murad Division called Abu Ayad asked me to bring 150 people to be used in the hostilities in Azerbaijan for a monthly salary ranging between 1200 USD and 1500 USD. Indeed, I was able to acquire the requested number; among them were 25 people from Deir Ballout displaced persons. I went with the recruits to the headquarters of the Sultan Murad Division in Afrin, and the following day we were taken to the Hawar Kilis military border crossing; but they took us back and asked us to wait until Thursday, for there was already a batch of fighters there waiting to enter Turkey. On Thursday we returned to the border crossing where the Turkish intelligence inspected our applications and thus approved 148 of us; another man and I were rejected because we are over 50 years old.”**

A fighter, 50, of the Sultan Murad Division who resides in north Syria, revealed:

**“Turkish intelligence refused to send me to Azerbaijan with others because I am over 45 years old. They reject all those under 18 and over 45, as well as those with chronic diseases or war injuries.”**

There are, however, people who reversed their decision to go to Azerbaijan at the last minute, among them a man called Abu Samer, who explained that:

**“I registered to fight in Azerbaijan with my 18-year-old son, Samer, driven by our bad conditions. They claimed that our task there would be guarding the Turkish bases, but we then discovered that was untrue and that we had been taken to participate in hostilities; that is why me and my son refrained from going.”**

## 3. Itineraries of the flights carried Syrian fighters to Azerbaijan

According to numerous statements given by STJ field researchers, witnesses, sources, fighters and officials, including a senior in the SNA, 1500 Syrian fighters/mercenaries were transferred from Turkey to Azerbaijan in six flights by Turkish military aircraft on 23, 24 and 25 September 2020.

A STJ digital forensics expert tracked the aforementioned flights and confirmed the occurrence of other flights on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 26<sup>th</sup> of the same month:

### A. Flights on 22 September 2020

The website Flightradar24 tracked an A400 Turkish military aircraft which took off from its usual base at the Kayseri airport at 12:22 pm local time towards Gaziantep, where it stopped for two hours and then departed for Ankara.

STJ believes that this plane took fighters who had been assembled in Gaziantep to Ankara, to be transferred subsequently to Azerbaijan. Flightradar24 did not detect any other movements by the same plane that day, but it did monitor a flight from Ankara to Azerbaijan the next day (23 September 2020).

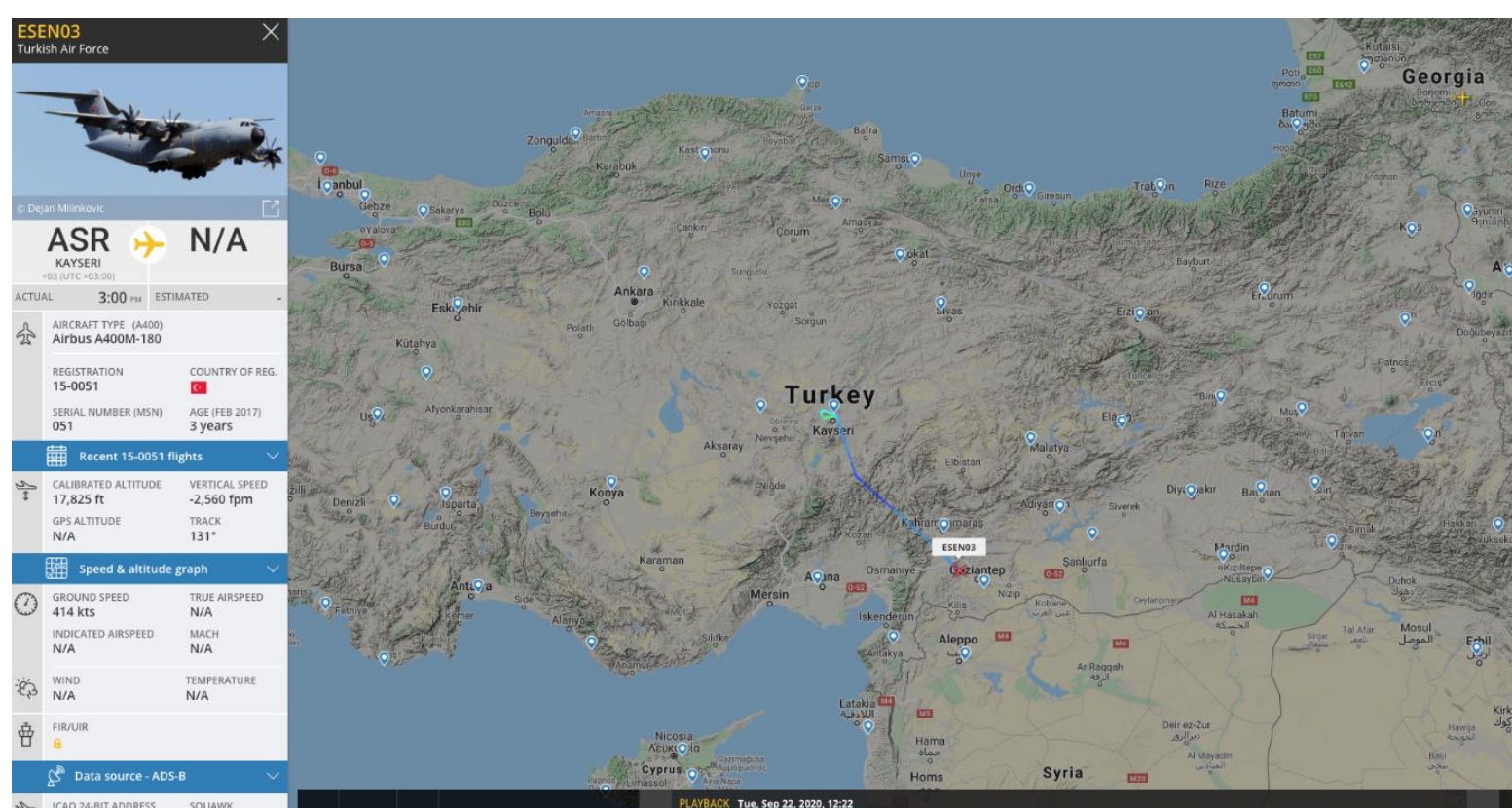


Image 16: data on a flight which took off from the Kayseri base towards Gaziantep, Turkey, operated by a Turkish A400 military plane on 22 September 2020.

Credit: Flightradar24.

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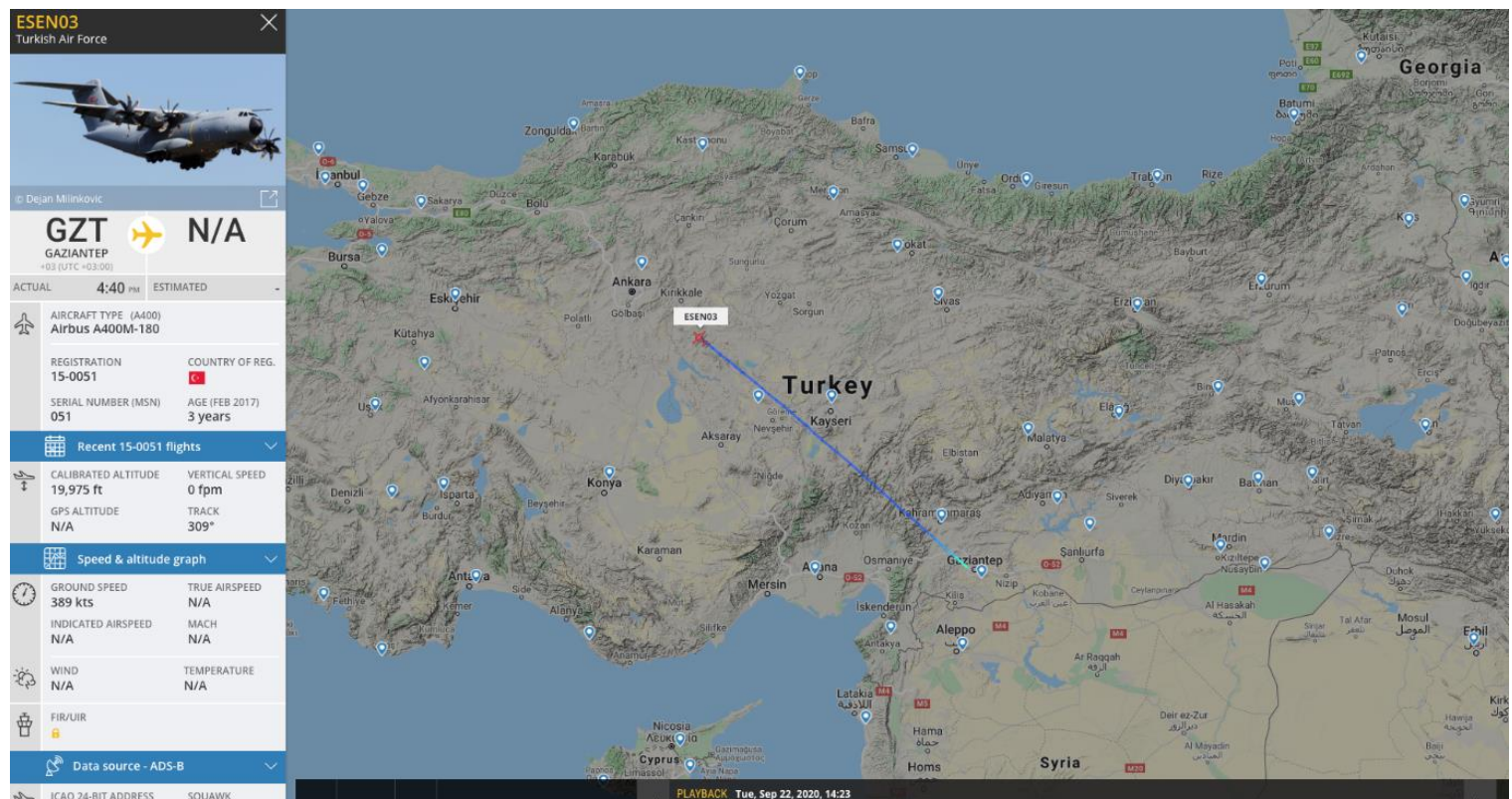


Image 17: data on a flight which took off from the Kayseri base towards Gaziantep and then headed to Ankara, Turkey, operated by a Turkish A400 military plane on 22 September 2020.

Credit: Flightradar24.





Images 18 & 19: The date of the image above is unknown, but it was first shared online on 22 September 2020. The bottom image at the bottom shows the interior of an A400 plane and that clearly matches the plane in the above image. Most of the sources who published the photo on social media said that it belongs to Syrian fighters who were recruited to fight as mercenaries in Azerbaijan. We have not received any further information about these photos, but we will post any updates as soon as we get them.

## B. Flights on 23 September 2020

According to the aforementioned sources, including a military source in the SNA, a Turkish military aircraft carried a batch of fighters from Turkey to Azerbaijan on that day. Nonetheless, he refrained from disclosing the type of aircraft and the place from where it took off.

The digital forensics expert monitored a single flight by a Turkish C-130 military aircraft that departed from Merzifon, Turkey, for Ganja near the front lines in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, at 10:43 am local time.

Given the location from which the plane took off, we can't say for certain that it was carrying fighters, but it likely transported military equipment.

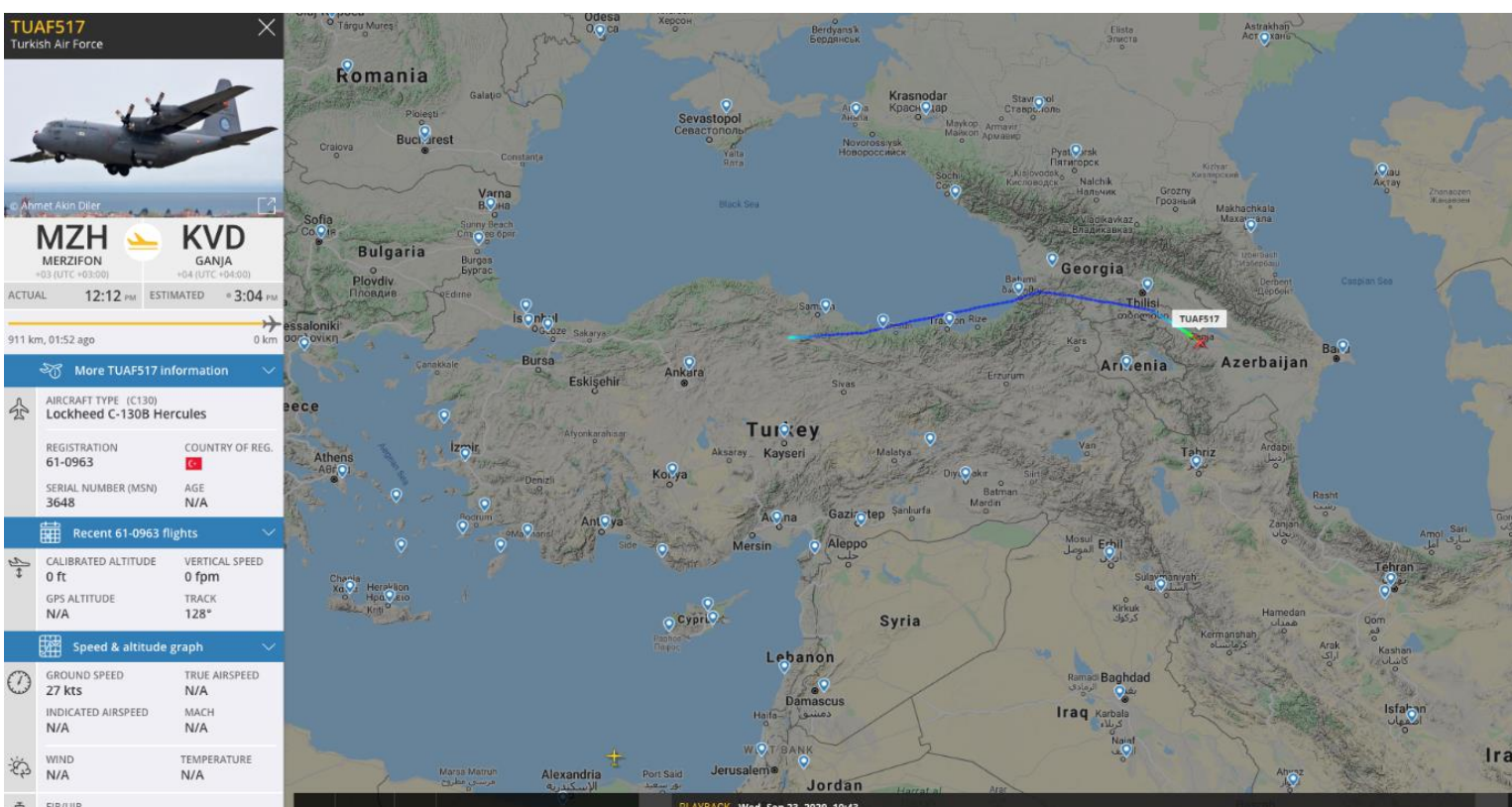


Image 20: data on a flight took off from Merzifon, Turkey, towards Ganja near the front lines in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, operated by a C130 Turkish military aircraft on 23 September 2020.

Credit: Flightradar24.

## C. Flights on 24 September 2020

STJ's military source confirmed the departure of four flights from Turkey to Azerbaijan – he did not mention the model of the planes nor their departure or landing points – carrying 250 fighters each. One of those flights took off from Tekirdagh military base and transported military equipment with the fighters.



Indeed, STJ's digital forensics expert tracked four flights, one of which took off from Tekirdagh military airspace. An A400 Turkish military aircraft was tracked landing at Tekirdagh airbase in western Istanbul at 10:45 a.m., however the Flightradar24 tracked it between Ankara and Kayseri; so we are unsure of its departure point. Later in the same day, Flightradar24 tracked the same plane flying from the Tekirdagh military airbase toward Azerbaijan at 14:20 Azerbaijani time, but it could not detect its landing point.

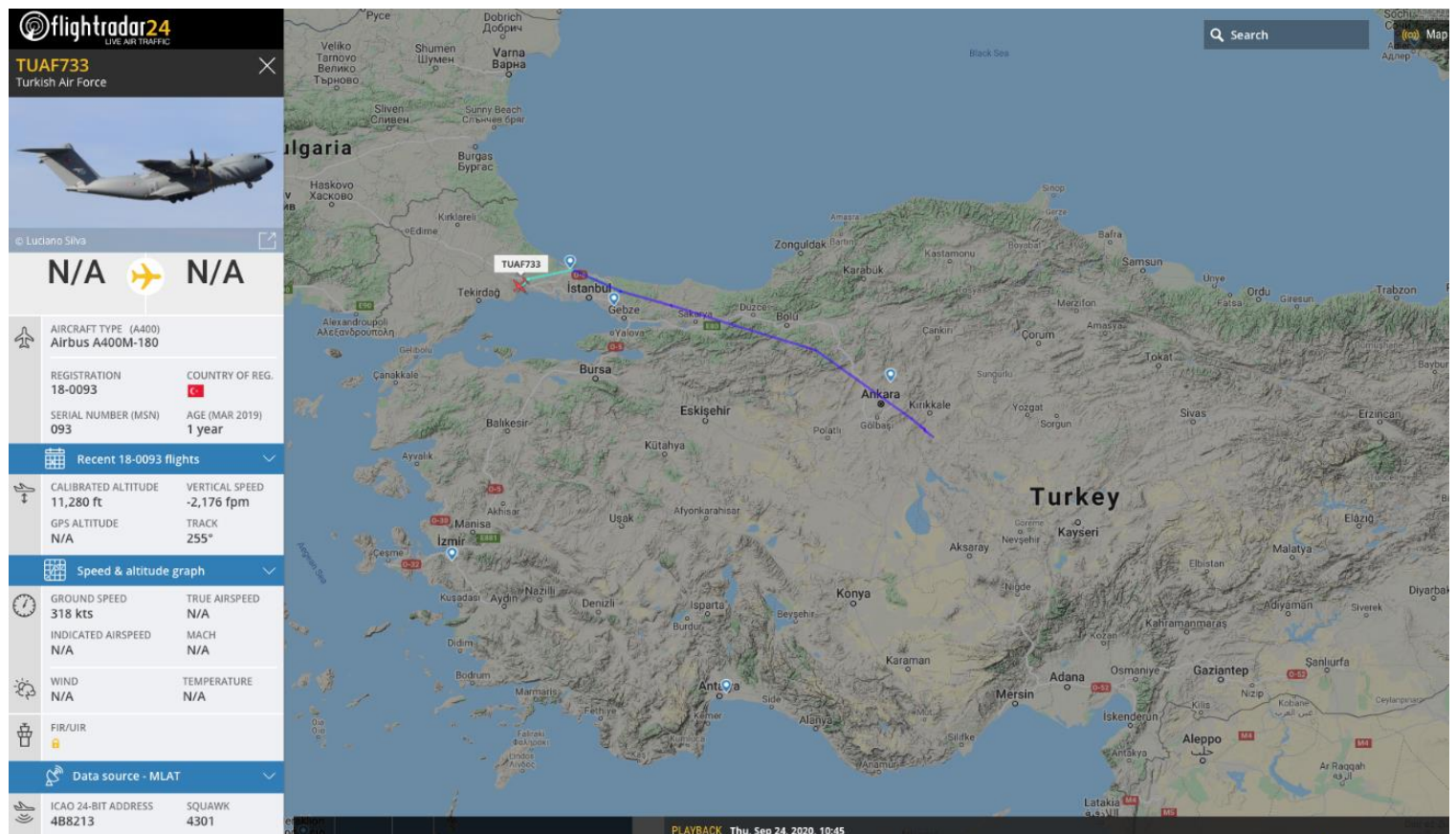
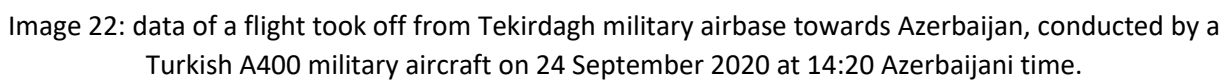


Image 21: data on a flight operated by an A400 Turkish military aircraft, landing at Tekirdagh military airbase in western Istanbul on 24 September 2020 at 10:45 am.

Credit: Flightradar24.





The following three images show data of the flights conducted by three A400 aircraft as detected by the Flightradar24.

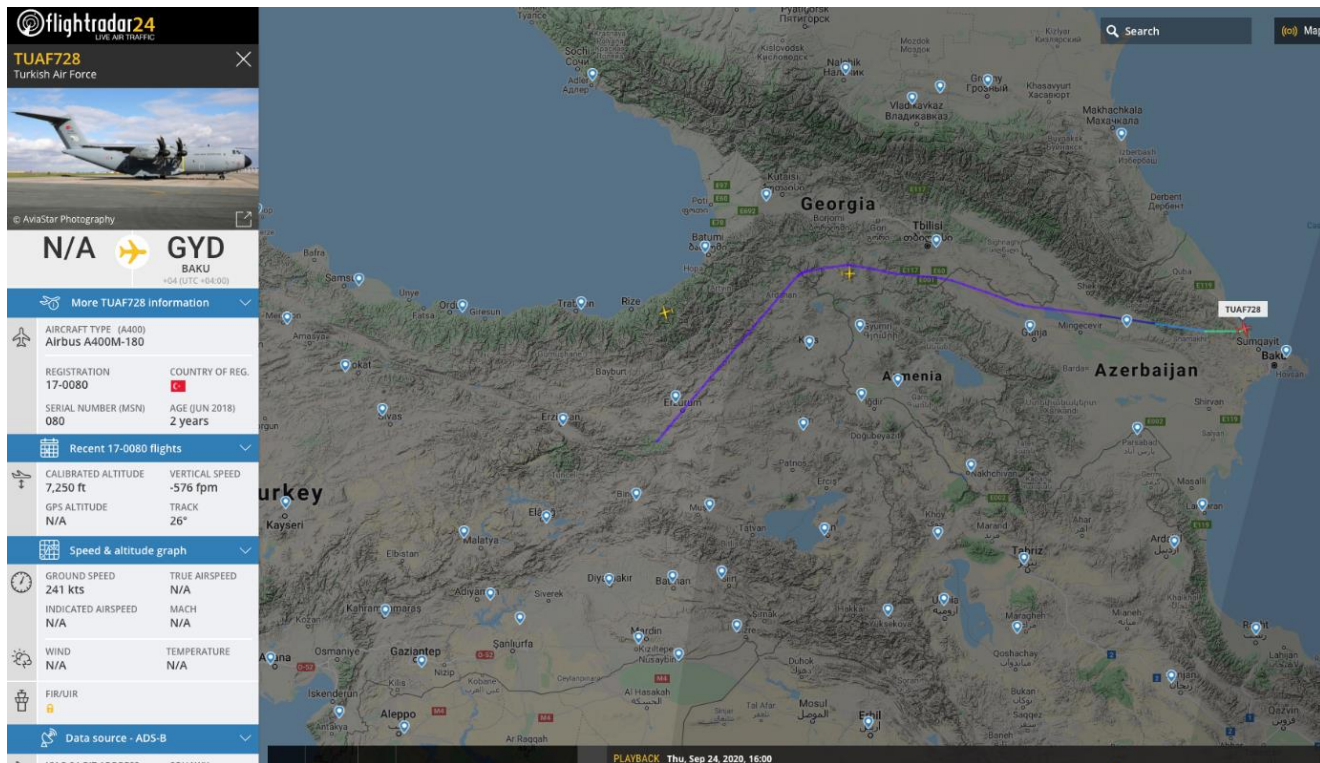


Image 23: data on a flight which took off from an unknown point in Turkey to Baku, Azerbaijan, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 24 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

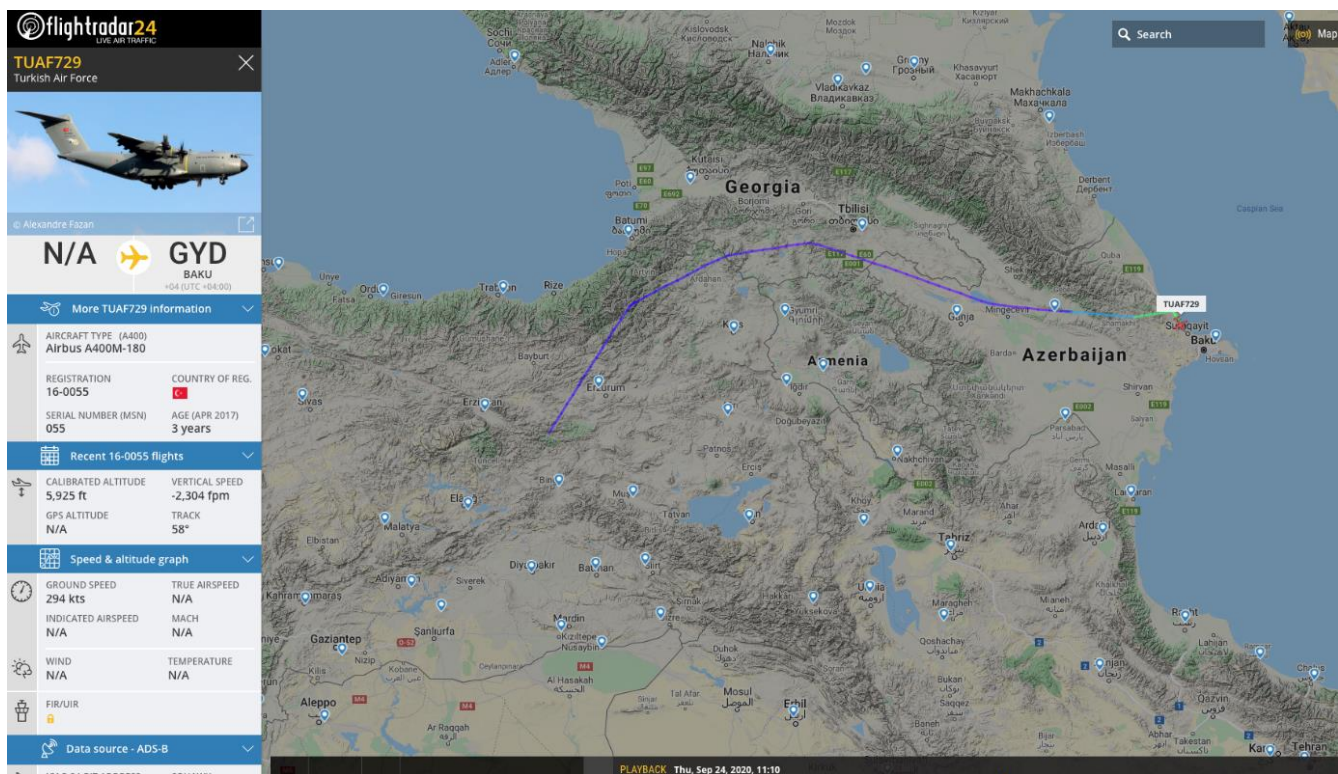


Image 24: data on a flight which took off from an unknown point in Turkey to Baku, Azerbaijan, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 24 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.



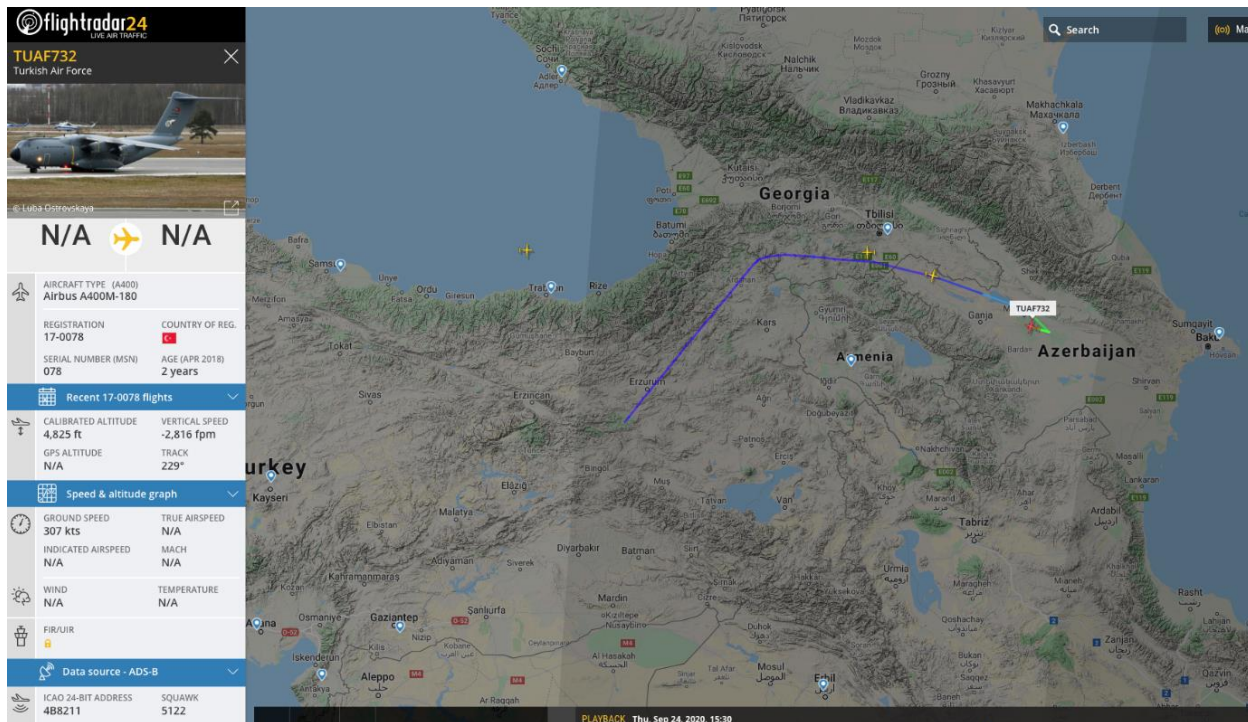


Image 23: data on a flight which took off from an unknown point in Turkey to **Yevlakh**, Azerbaijan, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 24 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

The following three images show the return flights of these aircraft from Azerbaijan towards Kayseri in Turkey the same evening.

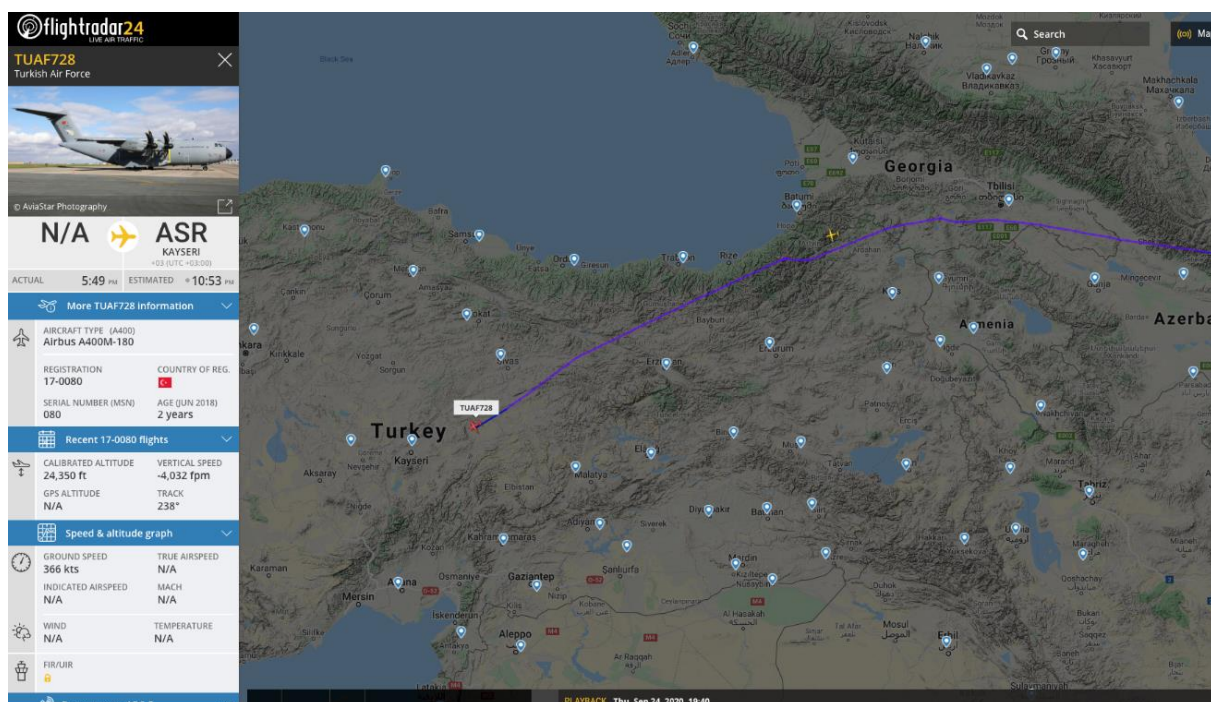


Image 26: data on a flight which took off from an unknown point in Azerbaijan to Turkey, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 24 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.



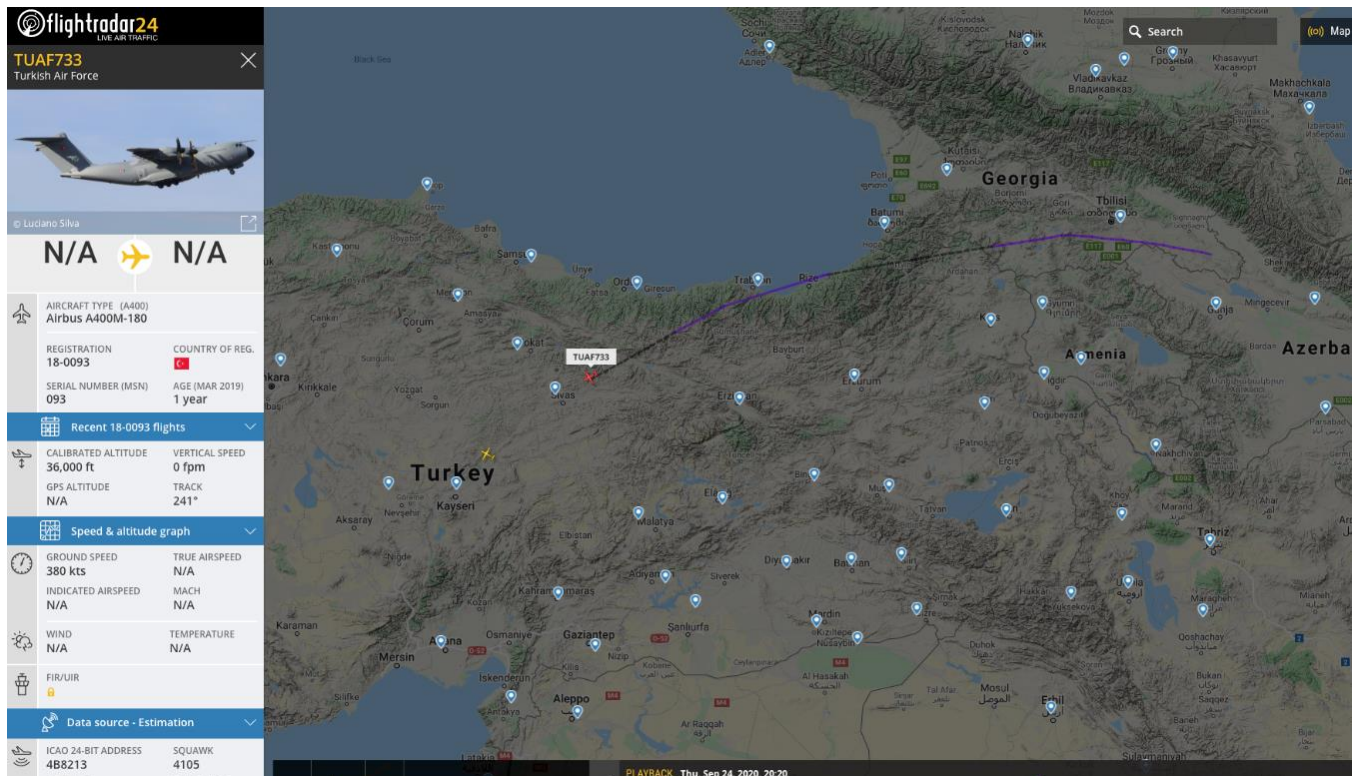


Image 27: data on a flight which took off from an unknown point in Azerbaijan to Turkey, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 24 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

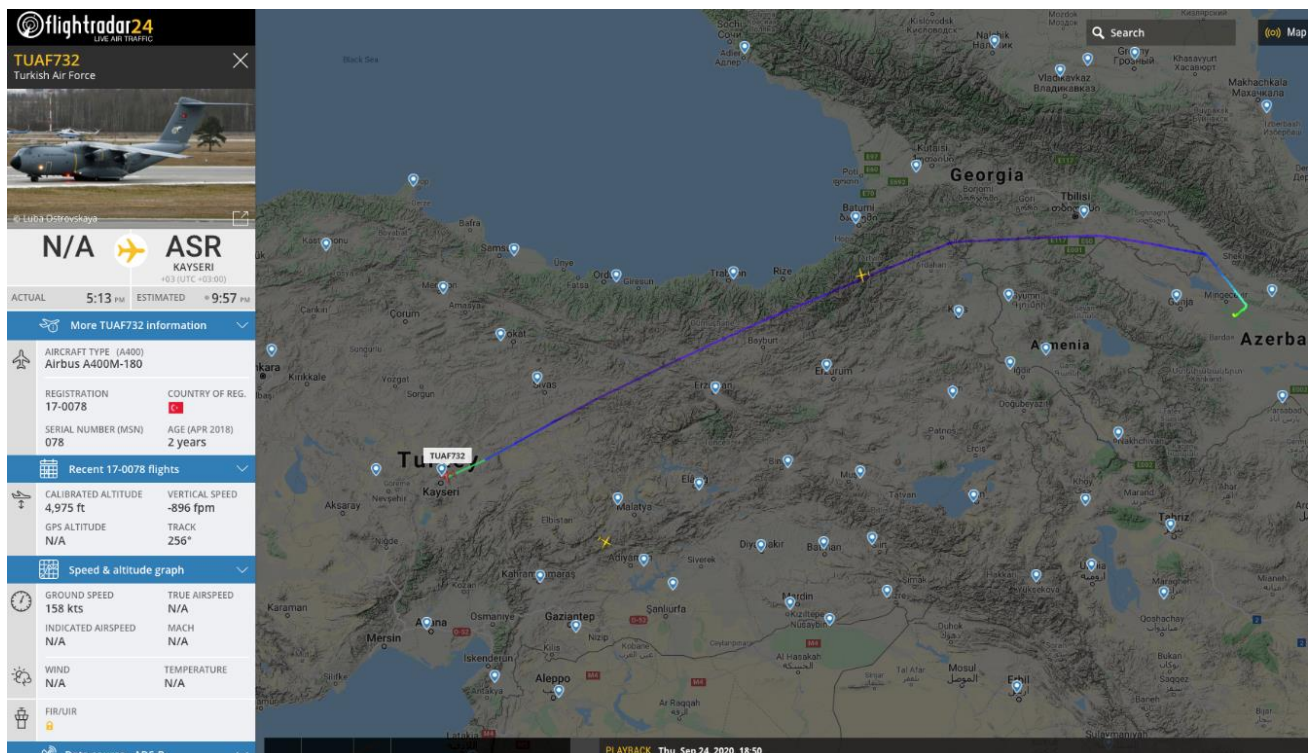


Image 28: data on a flight which took off from an unknown point in Azerbaijan toward Turkey, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 24 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

#### D. Flights on 25 September 2020

According to our private military source, the plane that carried fighters on this day also carried officers and soldiers who had been residing in the officers' camp in Syria, which houses soldiers and officers who defected from the Syrian regular army.

The same source confirmed that this plane took off from Tekirdag military airbase and landed in the Hajji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev airport, although our digital forensics expert could only detect its departure point and tracked it on its way back to Turkey.

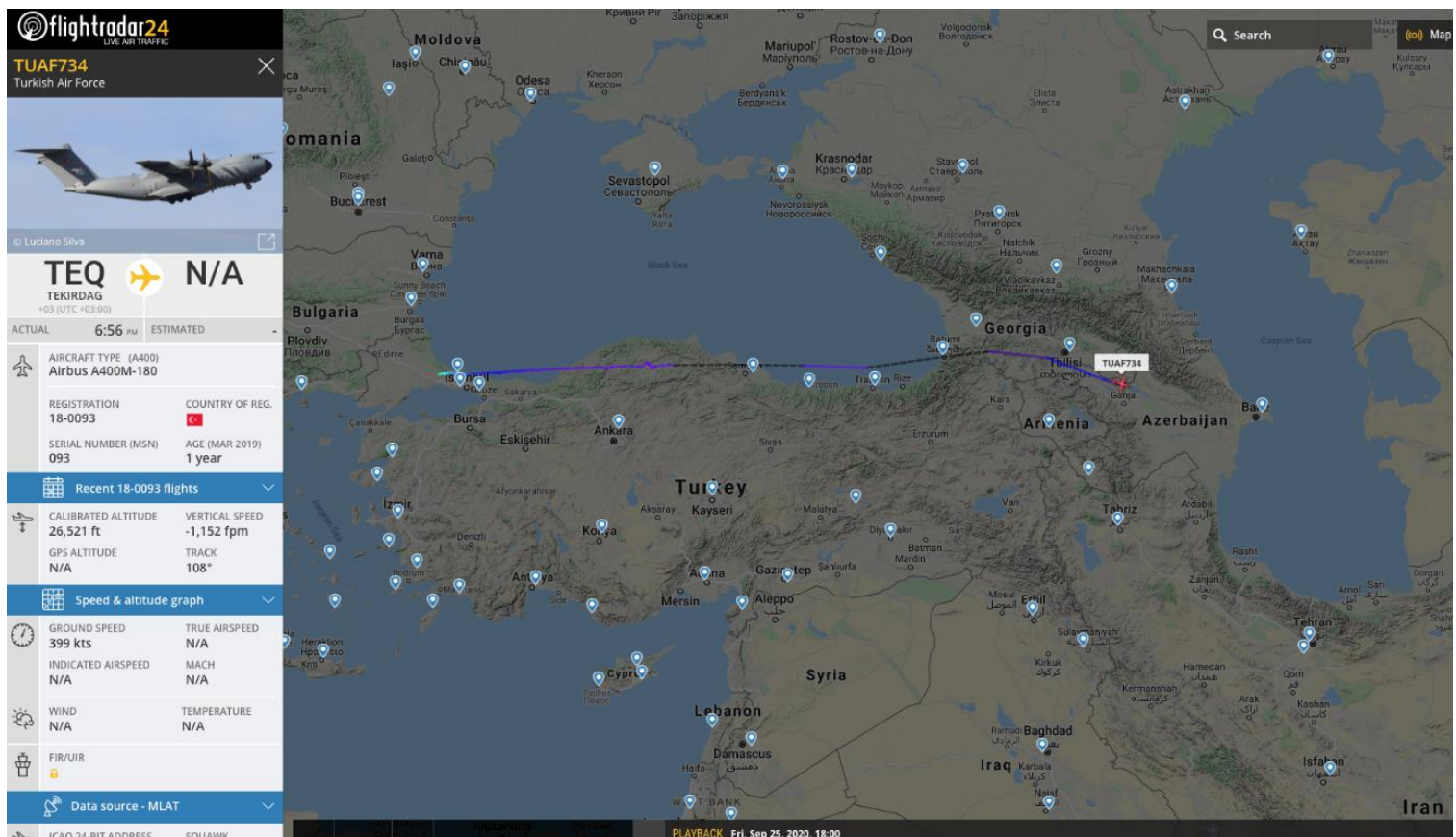


Image 29: data on a flight which took off from Tekirdag airbase towards Azerbaijan, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 25 September 2020.

Credit: Flightradar24.



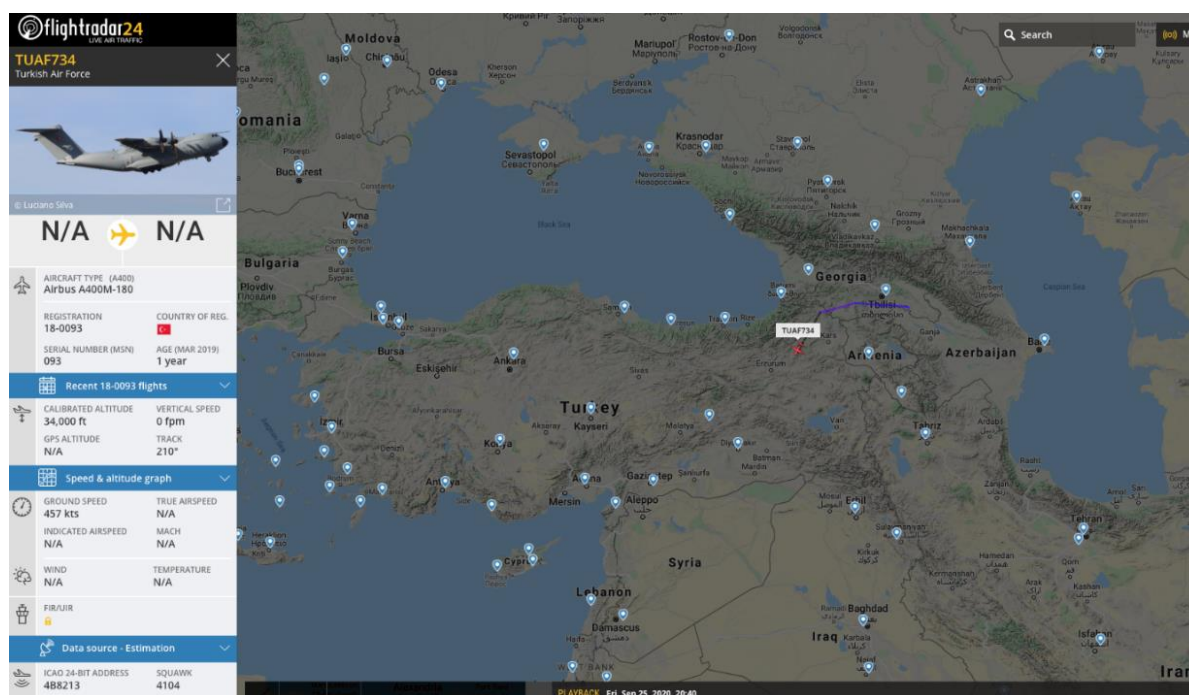


Image 30: data on a flight from Turkey to Azerbaijan, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft, on 25 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

### E. Flights on 26 September 2020

On this day, Flightradar24 spotted a Turkish A400 military aircraft flying from Kayseri to Tekirdag airbase in Istanbul, which then took off from there to Yevlakh in Azerbaijan. It was then tracked on its way back from Azerbaijan to Diyarbakir, Turkey.

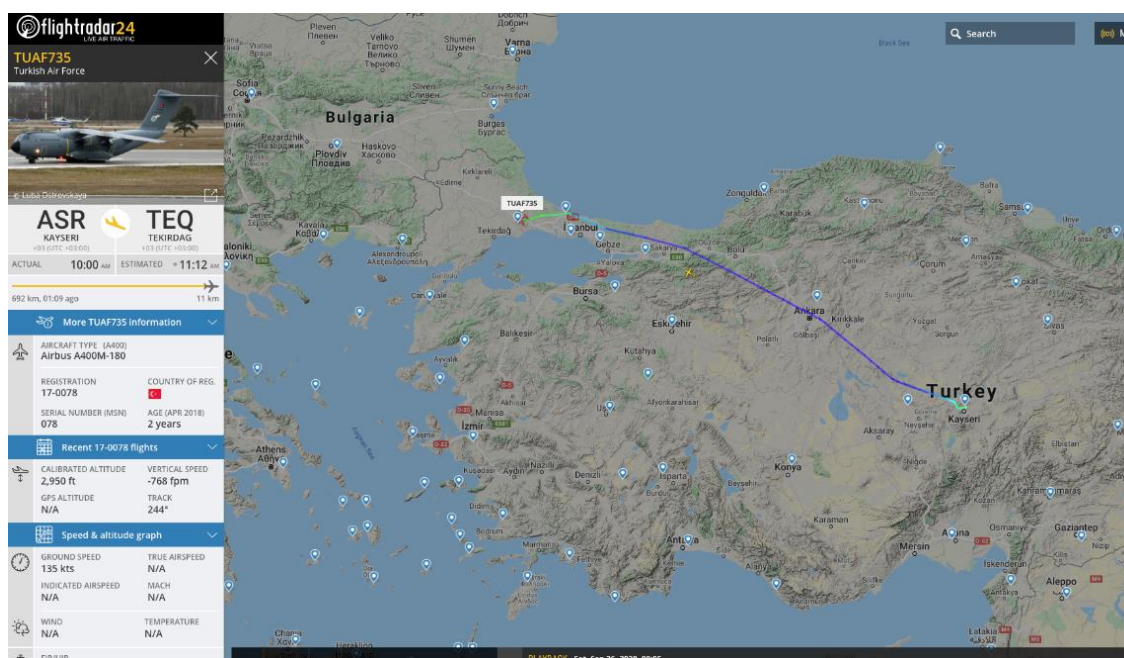


Image 31: data on a flight from Kayseri airbase to Tekirdag airbase,, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 25 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.



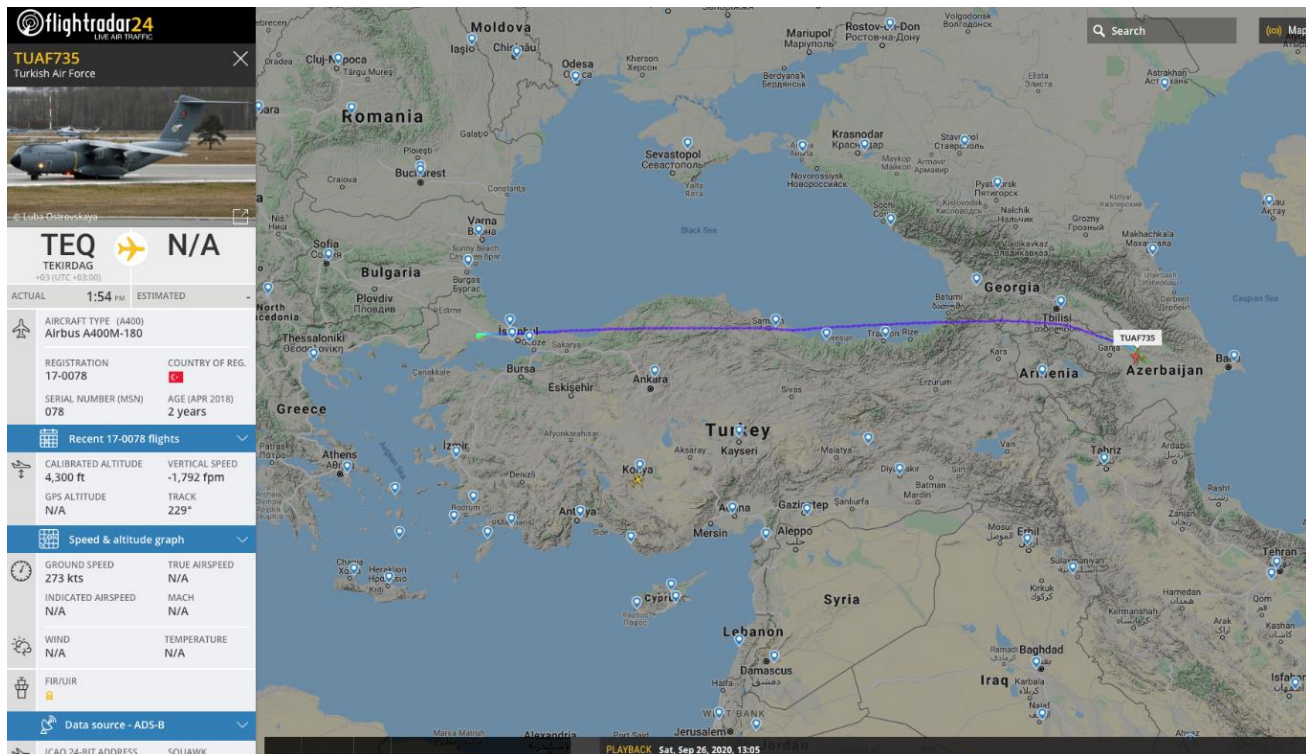


Image 32: data on a flight from Tekirdagh airbase to Azerbaijan, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 26 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

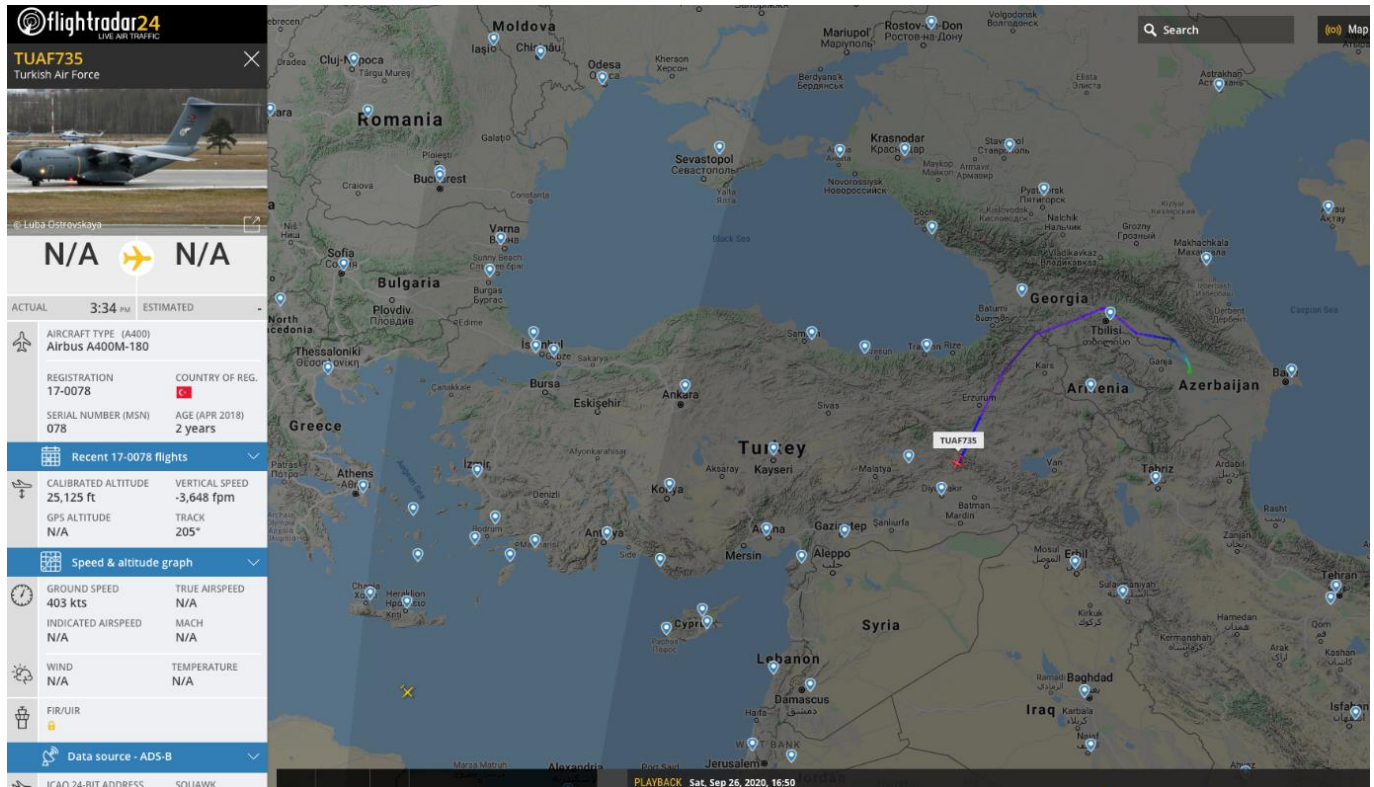


Image 33: data on a flight from Azerbaijan to Tekirdagh airbase, operated by a Turkish A400 military aircraft on 26 September 2020. Credit: Flightradar24.

## 4. Dozens of Syrians died in Azerbaijan, their bodies handed over to families

Soon after the arrival of the first batch of Syrian fighters to Azerbaijan, local Syrian media outlets began to report that dozens of them had died in a bombing on their post in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, before photos and videos of the bodies were leaked.

On 4 October 2020, videos were circulated showing bodies of fighters killed in Azerbaijan, after which they were handed over to their families in Syria by the SNA.

STJ interviewed relatives of a number of those dead in Azerbaijan, some of whom received the bodies of their sons and others have not yet.

In late September, a STJ field researcher went to the Hawar Kilis border crossing, where the fighters' bodies were gathered before being transferred to their relatives. Our researcher obtained information confirming that 64 bodies were waiting to be handed over. He quoted a commander at the border crossing saying:

**"We inform families about their sons' deaths as soon as they occur and request that condolence tents be set up for them immediately, even before the bodies are transferred; we bring bodies from Azerbaijan every 15 days in batches, not each individually."**

STJ field researchers also met with a relative of the fighter Muhammad Khaled al-Shihnah, who hails from the city of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, Idlib, and was recently killed in Azerbaijan. The relative stated that:

**"Muhammad moved between several factions before joining the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) and through them went to Azerbaijan. I last saw him on 15 September, when he told me then that he was going to Azerbaijan. On 19 September he phoned us saying that he was still in Turkey and that his flight was the next day; we have not heard from him since then. Two days ago, however, the leader of his group told us that he had been killed and they would send us his body, which we received on 4 October. "**



Image 34&35: the fighter Muhammad Khaled al- Shihnah before and after his death in Azerbaijan.

There have recently been reports of several deaths among Syrian fighters/mercenaries in Azerbaijan. STJ verified the reports and confirmed the deaths of:

1. Abd al-Razzaq (known as Abu Hurairah) and Abu Shadi al-Akkari, from the Sultan Murad Division.
2. Mahmoud al-Najjar and Abd al-Hanan Abd al-Razzaq, from the Mu'tasim Division.
3. Kinan Farzat, a battalion commander in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division.
4. Yasser Farzat, from the Malik Shah group.
5. Bilal al-Taybani, from the 112<sup>th</sup> Division.
6. Walid al-Ashtar, from the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham.
7. Abu Jassem Al-Zaghloul, from the Sultan Murad Division.
8. Saddam Droubi, from the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division.
9. Muhammad al-Sha'alan, a commander in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, and his escort guard, Hussein Talha.

STJ's field researcher met a fighter in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, who is present in Azerbaijan and disclosed:

**"Muhammad al-Sha'alan was a commander in the Thwar al-Sham/ Revolutionaries of the Levant, He left the group several weeks ago and with his battalion joined al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, in order to go and fight in Azerbaijan. However, when he arrived there, he had a dispute with Saif Abu Bakr, leader of al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division after asking to return to Syria with his battalion because the situation there did not sit well with him. This request contravened the Division's laws, and. Abu Bakr therefore detained al-Sha'alan for several hours, and before releasing him under pressure from his battalion. Al-Sha'alan and his battalion were then transferred to the Armenia-Iran border, where al-Sha'alan and his escort guard Hussein Talha were killed in the fierce combat taking place there."**





Image 36 & 37: On the right: Muhammad al-Sha'alan. On the left: Hussein Talha.

A Syrian fighter in the Sultan Murad Division who is stationed in Azerbaijan told STJ that there are fighters who have arrived to the country but refused to take part in hostilities, since they had been told that their mission would solely be to guard Turkish bases and borders. They are reportedly still waiting to be returned to Syria.



Image 38:

From the top right: Yasser Abu Omar Farzat, Qasim Mustafa al-Jathmour, Abd al-Hanan Abd al-Razzaq and Bilal al-Taybani.

From the middle right: Muhammad al-Sha’alan, Mahmoud Najjar, Haitham Ali Salman and Hussein Talha.

From the bottom right: Major Kinan Farzat, Walid al-Ashtar/Abu Basil, Muhammad Khaled al-Shihnah (before his death), Muhammad Khaled al- Shihnah (after his death).



Image 39:

Kinan Farzat before and after his death in Azerbaijan.

## 5. Analysis of open-source photos and videos

Geolocated video of SNA in Horadiz:



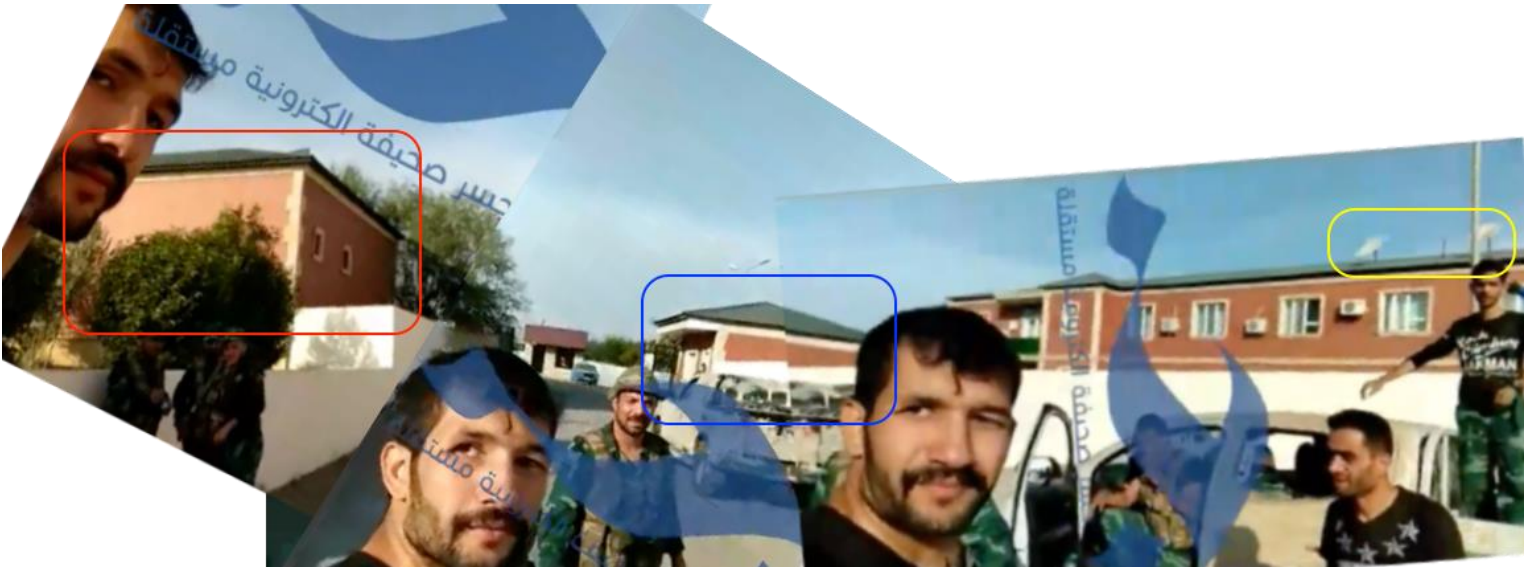


Image 40:



Image 41:





Image 42: Location: 39.441490, 47.343645

- On 3 October a video was shared around the internet showing Syrians wearing the same Azerbaijani fatigues and standing by two trucks. According to [Jesr Press](#), the song the men are listening to in the video is praising the SNA faction Furqat al-Sultan Murad, and that are originally from Eastern Ghouta. The video was [soon geolocated](#) (credit: **@JulianRoepcke** and **@obetrix**) to a group of buildings in the Azerbaijani town of Horadiz, only several kilometres from both the frontlines of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Iranian border. This is the clearest evidence of the deployment of SNA fighters to Azerbaijan.
- Other videos have been shared to social media showing Syrians active in the conflict. One such video, containing several clips, included locations that matched shots from [a video published by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense](#) on October 3. Two of these show a small structure apparently used by Armenian forces to store ammunition. The first clip, shot from the outside, shows the front of the structure having been decorated with unique markings.



Image 43: ([source: @obretix](#))

The second clip, filmed by a man wearing the same uniforms seen on SNA fighters, shows boxes of ammunition stacked up inside the small building. When compared with shots from the MoD video, it is clear that this is the same structure.





Image 43 & 44: ([source: https://t.me/khalil124kh/4811](https://t.me/khalil124kh/4811) )



Image 45: However, it must be noted that some of the ammunition boxes in the second clip appear to have been moved during the time between when the filming of the two videos.

Another video clip circulated on social media shows a Syrian man dressed in Azerbaijani border guard fatigues hiding behind a building, before then running out past it. Although the low quality of the video prevents us from being completely certain, various respected analysts on social media believe this location to be the same as the one featured in another clip published by the Azerbaijani MOD.

It should be noted that we were not able access to this satellite imagery, so this case we have decided to include screenshots of the two clips of what appear to show the same place and explain their similarities.





Image 46: (Source: [@obretix](#))



Image 47: ([Source: @ryanmofarrell](#) )

- **Two possible convoy videos**

Two other videos potentially showing SNA fighters in Azerbaijan were leaked as well. Both of these were filmed by Azerbaijanis on the street and show convoys of civilian pickup trucks carrying unidentified fighters; they have since been geolocated. The first, [published on 27 September](#) (the day the Azerbaijani offensive began), was filmed in the southern town of Horadiz.





Image 48.



Image 49: Location: 39.453033, 47.334649 ([original source](#) ©obretix).

[The other](#) was shot in the town of Darda near the northern front lines of Nagano-Karabakh and circulated on social media on 1 October.

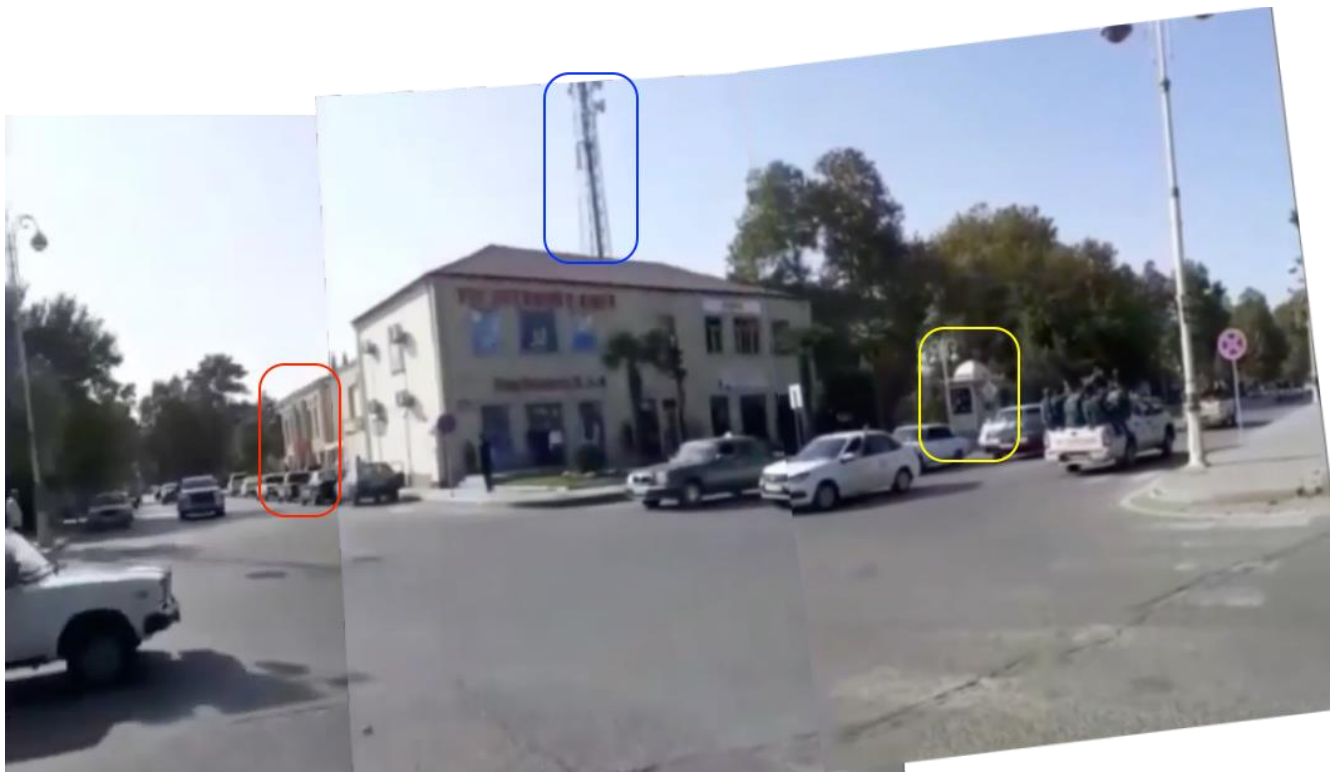


Image 50 & 51: Location: 40.384025, 47.124205

The [video game store](#) that can be seen in the video is marked on Google Maps.



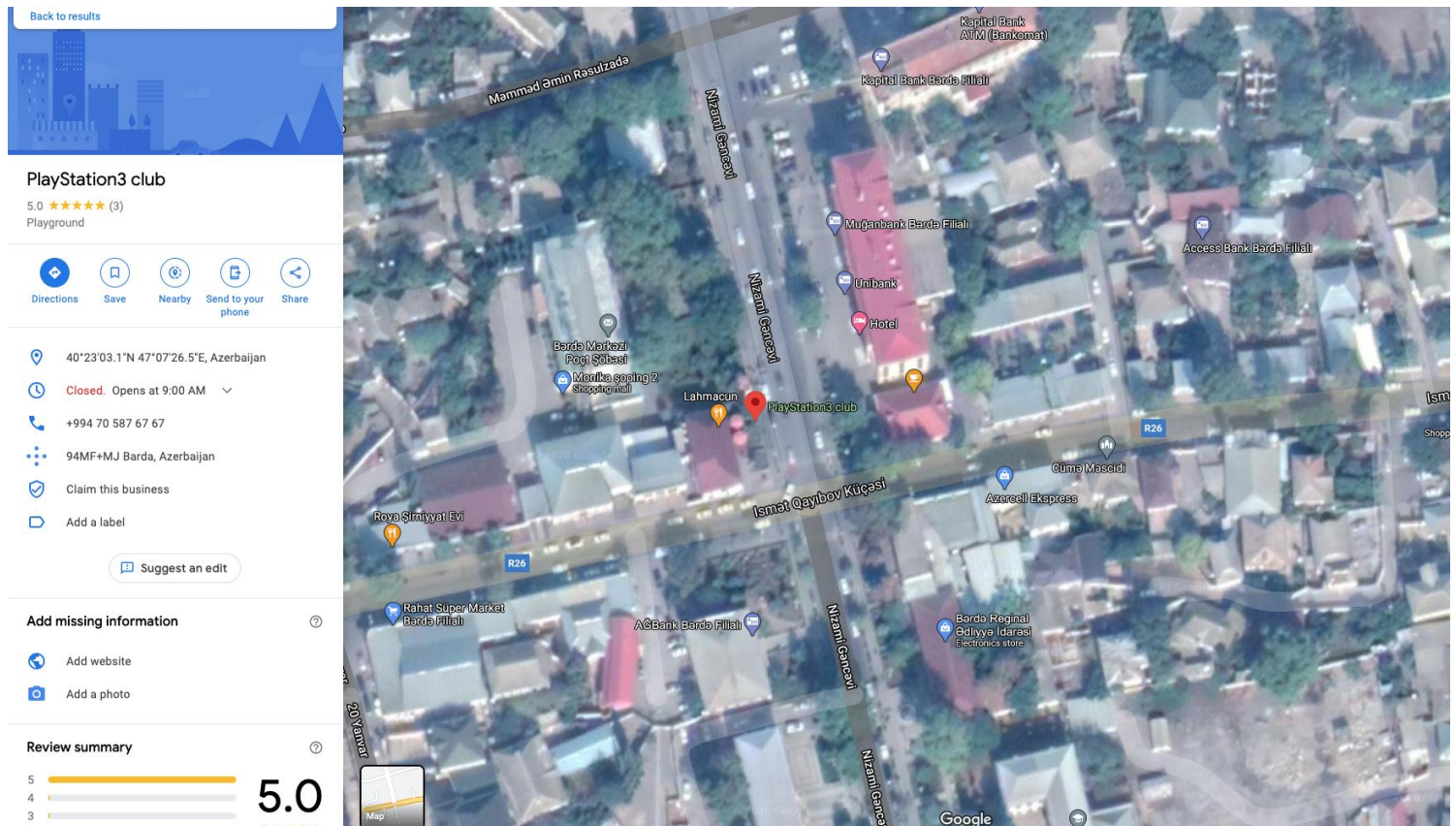


Image 52.

We cannot conclusively say that the fighters in either of these videos are Syrian. However, it would be unusual for a well-equipped, conventional army like that of Azerbaijan to transport soldiers in civilian vehicles such as these – especially when there has been no evidence to begin with of them doing so.

Other videos have been published on social media showing the dead bodies of Armenian soldiers and appear to be narrated by men speaking in Syrian Arabic, one referring to the bodies as the ‘pigs of the Armenian Army.’

On 10 October 2020, social media circulated a [video](#) in which a fighter of al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division (The Farouq Brigades/Abu Zaid Group) speaking in a Syrian dialect:

**“Alhamdulillah (thank God), we could trample on (kill) those Armenian pigs.”** He then referred to a box of ammunition found beside a fighter body as a spoil.

**“Thanks be to God, these are the carcasses. Thank God for all these carcasses. Allahu Akbar.. Allahu Akbar.”** He added: **“this is real, this video is not fabricated. Look, these are their carcasses.”** He then repeated that he is affiliated with the al-Hamza Division, adding **“May God enable us to kill every pig and every infidel.”**

Our digital forensics expert was able to geolocate the video, and provided us with the following images:



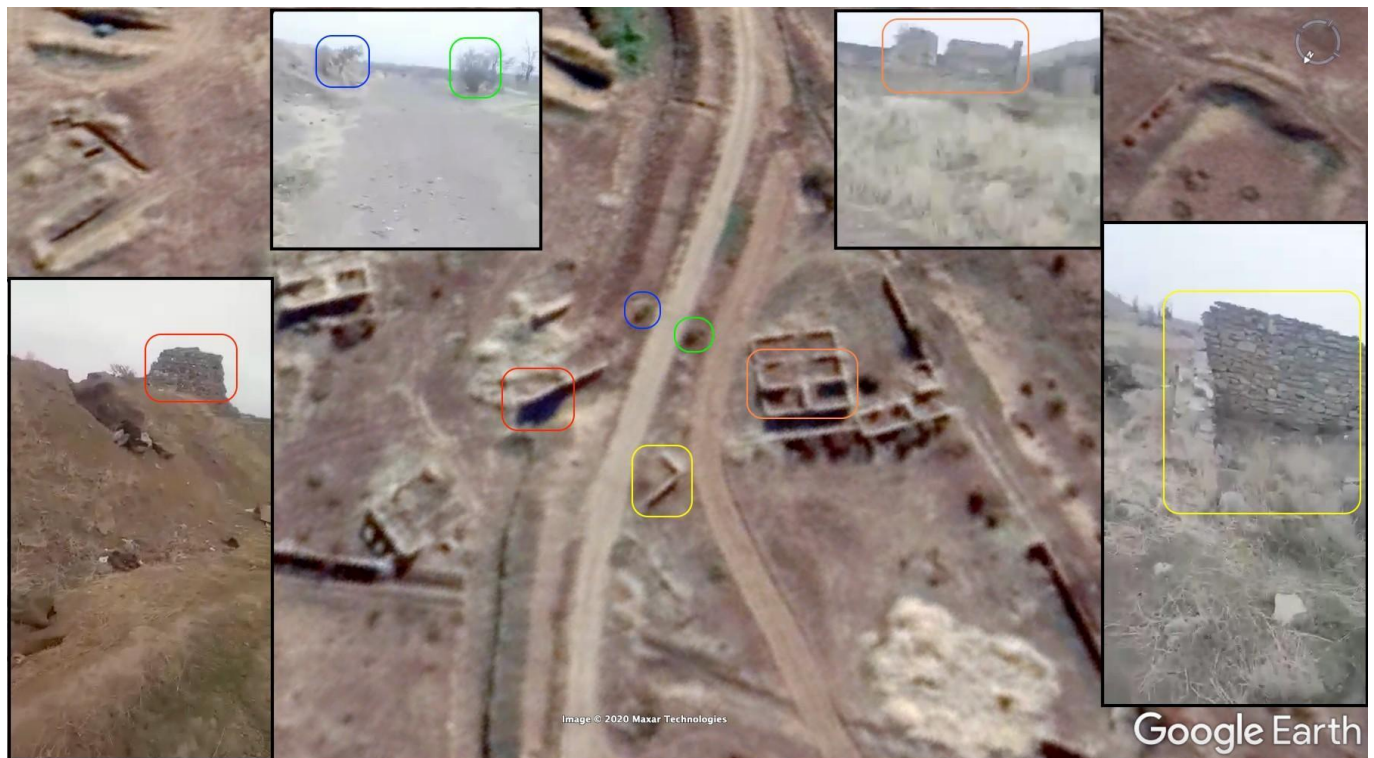


Image 53 & 54: geolocation: 39.379392, 47.234368 (village of Marlan, 5km from the frontlines).



A village that was captured by Azerbaijan in the first week of fighting. It is unclear when exactly the video was filmed.

On 10 October 2020, another video was circulated on social media showing Syrian mercenaries participating in hostilities.



Image 55: Three vehicles are visible: a Turkish-made Otokar Cobra on the left and an Israeli-made IAF Storm on the right; both types of vehicles are owned and operated by the Azerbaijani military



Image 56.



Image 57 & 58.



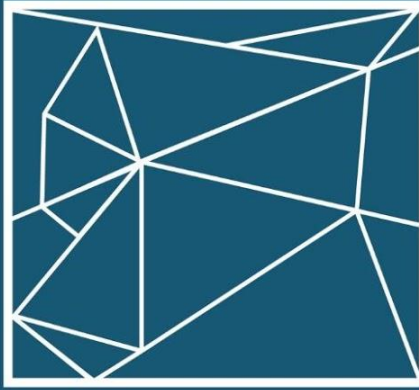
3 Three vehicles are visible: a Turkish-made Otokar Cobra on the left, and an Israeli-made IAF Storm on the right; both types of vehicles are owned and operated by the Azerbaijani military

On 11 October 2020, a [video](#) published to social media – originally by the Jarabulus al-Kabous group on Telegram – showing Syrian fighters, one of whom is making the sign of the Grey Wolves paramilitary group and promising to liberate Armenia. An offscreen voice can be also heard saying “Iran is over there,” which indicates their proximity to the Iran-Azerbaijan border.



Image 58: A Syrian fighter in Azerbaijan making the sign of the Grey Wolves.

سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
والعدالة  
Syrians  
For Truth  
& Justice



## History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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