FROM “FAMILY FRIENDS” TO ENEMIES

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Category: Opinions

By Margarita Krtikashyan, Yerevan, 2 September 2025

When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were photographed vacationing together with their families in Bodrum in the late 2000s, Western media celebrated a supposed "golden era" of Turkish-Syrian friendship. Erdoğan called Assad his "brother," and the two leaders projected an image of personal intimacy, attending joint cabinet meetings and dismantling visa restrictions between their countries. At the time, commentators hailed it as a model for regional cooperation.

But the illusion collapsed almost overnight. By 2011, with the eruption of the Syrian conflict, Erdoğan recast Assad from "brother" into "butcher." Turkey armed opposition groups, hosted defectors, and later launched military incursions into Syrian territory. The very leader whose hand Erdoğan once clasped became the target of relentless political and military aggression. The message was clear: in Middle Eastern politics, "friendship" is tactical, not strategic. The smiles of yesterday can quickly become the daggers of tomorrow.

This history should serve as a chilling warning for Armenia today. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan speaks repeatedly of a "peace agenda," suggesting that the signing of a treaty with Azerbaijan will finally close the chapter of war. He insists that reconciliation is possible if Armenia abandons its "old fears" and accepts new borders as dictated by geopolitical realities. But just as Erdoğan's embrace of Assad was a temporary mask, so too is Ilham Aliyev's talk of "peace" nothing more than a weaponized narrative, designed to weaken Armenia from within.

Armenia is not the first state to be seduced by false assurances. For Armenia, the so-called "peace treaty" with Azerbaijan bears all the hallmarks of this trap. Baku demands constitutional changes, the removal of any reference to Artsakh, and the opening of a "corridor" through Syunik. These are not compromises—they are diktats. Yet Pashinyan presents them as if they were pragmatic steps toward stability. In reality, they erode sovereignty and invite further demands.

Aliyev has said openly: "Zangezur is our ancestral land." He has declared Yerevan itself to be "historic Azerbaijani territory." These are not slips of the tongue. They are the ideological framework of his regime, reinforced by years of anti-Armenian propaganda and pan-Turkic ambitions. When a leader builds his legitimacy on revanchism, no treaty will satisfy him until every one of his maximalist goals is achieved.

The danger is multiplied by Turkey's role. Erdoğan has consistently portrayed Azerbaijan and Turkey as "one nation, two states." In practice, this means Ankara acts as Baku's diplomatic shield, military trainer, and ideological amplifier. Turkey's Bayraktar drones played a decisive role in the 2020 war. Turkish advisors are embedded in Azerbaijan's military structure. And pan-Turkist rhetoric about a "Turan corridor" directly links Azerbaijan's demands in Syunik to Ankara's long-term strategy of connecting the Turkic world from Istanbul to Central Asia.



Armenia thus confronts not just Azerbaijan's ambitions but Turkey's geopolitical project. The same Turkey that once smiled with Assad while plotting regime change is now smiling at Armenia with promises of trade and normalization, even as it backs Aliyev's threats. To believe in Ankara's sincerity is to ignore decades of duplicity, from the unkept Zurich Protocols to Erdoğan's denialist stance on the Armenian Genocide.

What makes this situation even more dangerous is Armenia's internal disarray. Pashinyan's government has embraced a narrative that delegitimizes Armenia's own history of struggle. By labeling Artsakh's cause as "adventurism" and treating territorial defense as a burden rather than a duty, Yerevan signals weakness not only to Baku and Ankara but also to its own citizens. The demoralization is profound: soldiers feel abandoned, refugees feel forgotten, and the public feels trapped between authoritarian threats from abroad and a defeatist discourse at home.

The parallel with Assad is instructive here as well. When the Syrian uprising began, many believed Turkey's mediation could preserve calm. But Erdoğan had already made his calculation—Syria was to be carved and weakened, regardless of past brotherhood. Armenia now faces a similar dynamic: a government eager to believe in goodwill, even as its adversaries prepare the next stage of pressure.

This is not just about Armenia’s immediate borders. The so-called “Zangezur Corridor” is a project with global implications. For Turkey, it is the missing link in a pan-Turkic chain. For Azerbaijan, it is the symbol of triumph over Armenia. For Russia, weakened by war in Ukraine, it is a potential bargaining chip with Ankara. For the West, it is seen by some as a way to reduce dependence on Russian routes by opening east-west transit lines. Each power views Syunik not through the lens of Armenian sovereignty but as a piece of the chessboard.

Iran remains the only regional actor to consistently oppose this project, seeing it as a threat to its own north-south connectivity. But Tehran’s warnings alone cannot secure Armenia unless Yerevan itself adopts a survival strategy. Appeasement will not buy safety; only resilience and clarity of purpose can.

The Assad-Erdoğan story teaches us that political intimacy in this region is always provisional. Smiles, family photos, and warm rhetoric are tactical instruments. When interests shift, yesterday’s ally becomes today’s enemy. Pashinyan’s “peace agenda” assumes the opposite—that handshakes and treaties can transform the intentions of a regime that has built its entire legitimacy on Armenian defeat. This is not naivety; it is a deliberate political choice to trade sovereignty for the illusion of calm.

But illusions collapse. And when they do, nations that bet on them often pay with their survival. Armenia cannot afford another strategic miscalculation. It must recognize that Azerbaijan’s maximalism, Turkey’s duplicity, and the West’s instrumentalization of the Caucasus are not passing moods but enduring realities. To ignore them is to invite catastrophe.

The story of Assad and Erdoğan is not a distant anecdote; it is a mirror held up to Armenia today. Just as Damascus learned too late that Ankara’s embrace was a prelude to betrayal, Yerevan risks discovering that “peace” with Baku is merely the opening act of a new cycle of aggression.

Peace is a noble goal, but it cannot be built on unilateral concessions, denial of history, or the surrender of strategic depth. Real peace requires strength, deterrence, and alliances based on genuine mutual interest not illusions. Armenia stands at a crossroads: to follow Pashinyan’s path into the mirage, or to craft a strategy of survival grounded in reality. The choice will define whether the Armenian state endures or becomes another cautionary tale in the long, bloody history of broken promises.

Comments



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