

# "NAGORNO-KARABAKH: THE WAR IS OVER BUT THE CONFLICT ISN'T" INTERVIEW WITH VETERAN ARMENIA-WATCHER JIRAIR TUTUNJIAN

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**WGI** (*World Geostrategic Insights*) *After 44 days of bloody armed clashes a Russian-brokered deal has bought an end to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan is celebrating: the country has re-captured much of the territory it lost almost 30 years ago, without offering any sort of autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh. But how a deal that Armenians view as capitulation can represent a reliable foundation for a sustained peace in the region? Can an imposed peace that leaves Armenians resentful be a recipe for peace? Can the principle of self-determination of peoples be sacrificed for the imperatives of respect for the territorial sovereignty of states? So, what can we expect in the near future will happen?*

**JT** (Jirair Tutunjian): Before replying, I would like to address the most important question...the heart of the conflict which governments and the international media, with rare exceptions, ignored throughout the war. Every news and op-ed started by pointing out that Nagorno-Karabagh (N-K) or Artsakh in Armenian belonged to Azerbaijan but was occupied by ethnic Armenians. The wrong-headed assertion influenced their coverage and the perception of the viewers and readers. According to the lazy and biased mainstream media, Azeris were trying to take back their lands from "separatist" and "rebellious" Armenians. Armenians were thus the villains. This perception colored world public reaction, especially in the last few days of the war when Armenians had their backs to the wall and desperately needed help.

But the truth is different from the way the media depicted the reason for the conflict. Some people are bored by history but to do justice to the conflict we have take a look at history to know how we reached here.

Since at least 6th century BCE, Artsakh has been part of Armenia. Azerbaijan was founded in 1918 by the Russians. Ancient historians, such as Greek Strabo and Roman chronicler Pliny the Elder (69 AD) have referred to Artsakh as a region of Armenia more than two-thousand years ago. While over the centuries various empires have occupied it, Armenians have always been the majority of Artsakh's population. Azeris are ethnic Turks who were called Tatar until WWI. Their ancestors—nomads from Central Asia—raided and pillaged West Asia, including Armenia in the Middle Ages. Erdogan and Aliiev have described the relationship of their two countries as "One Nation, two States."

In the early 1920, Lenin and Stalin were hoping to draw Turkey into the Soviet camp and become at least socialist. To woo Turkey, Stalin ordered that Artsakh and another Armenian province (Nakhichevan) be given to Azerbaijan although the population of Artsakh was 95% Armenian. Armenians couldn't complain against the unjust decision of Stalin because they would have been executed or shipped to Siberia. Thus, people who say Artsakh belongs to Azerbaijan are going along with the unjust decision of one of 20th century's ruthless dictators.

During the next 70 years of Soviet Azeri rule, the government in Baku tried unsuccessfully to drive out Armenians from Artsakh. Ilham Aliiev's father, who ruled Azerbaijan for many years, has been recorded as saying the plan was to make Armenians leave Artsakh. With that in mind, Baku turned Artsakh into an economic backwater; public services were left to rot, publishing of Armenian books was banned, and Azeri families were settled in Artsakh to change the demographic balance. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Artsakh's 300,000 population (1922) had been reduced to 160,000 and the Armenians had been reduced to 76 percent.

When the Soviet Union was collapsing and the Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan, were declaring their independence, Artsakh Armenians also declared their independence which was their right under Soviet law. In response, the Azeri government launched pogroms of Armenians in five major cities of Azerbaijan and attacked Artsakh. Armenia came to the rescue of Artsakh Armenians. The war ended with Armenia/Artsakh victory (1994). Thirty-thousand people were killed. There were close to a million refugees. There were more Azeri refugees than Armenian refugees.

Since then the Azeris have demanded that Armenians "return" Artsakh and the buffer zones Armenians occupied since the war in the early 1990s. Because a belligerent Azerbaijan regularly threatened to take Artsakh by force Armenians began to arm. But Armenia's weapon's purchases were much less because Armenia couldn't compete with petro-dollar rich Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's defense budget was bigger than Armenia's national budget. With 10-million population, Azerbaijan had a larger army. Armenian armaments came from Russia: these weapons were yesterday's weapons and incapable of overcoming modern armaments (drones). The Israeli and Turkish drones, which Azerbaijan deployed, were the game changers. They rained death and destruction on Armenian soldiers, civilians, residential areas, streets, hospitals, schools and even nursing homes...forcing 100,000 Artsakh Armenians to seek shelter in Armenia.

It wasn't the Azeri army which defeated the Armenians. Although it has a population of 10 million (Armenia is 3 million) and vast financial resources due to oil and gas extraction, Azerbaijan asked for Turkish help. Turkey, which has the second-largest army in NATO, sent planes, tanks, senior military officers, technical experts plus several thousand jihadist mercenaries from Syria who were paid a monthly salary of of \$2,000 plus a \$100 bonus for beheading Armenian POWs. Then there were Pakistani troops and Afghan mujahideen who fought on the Azeri side.

Because their blitzkrieg was so intense and their armies larger and better equipped than the

Armenian army, the invaders thought they could finish the Armenians in three to five days. The war lasted 44 days.

The Armenians had no military allies or support. France made several pro-Armenian statements but that was it. The rest of the world remained silent in the one-sided war. Armenian soldiers fought heroically demonstrating skill, courage, and dedication. At the end they couldn't overcome the drones which killed and destroyed at will. Azerbaijan had hundreds of drones.

Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan was forced to sign a humiliating and one-sided ceasefire agreement because he knew he had to stop the war before all of Artsakh was conquered by Azerbaijan. Backing Pashinyan was Gen. Onnig Karabetian who said he had recommended to Pashinyan to end the war ASAP because of the dire state of the army. Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan echoed the same sentiments and said: "Armenian forces fought in conditions of total blockade of army supplies" from Russia. Nonetheless, Pashinyan's opposition accused him of treachery for signing the agreement which saw Armenians cede a large part of Artsakh to Azerbaijan in addition to the land around it and the Lachin land corridor to Armenia.

Since then the country has been in turmoil...accusations of treachery, charges of incompetence and military unpreparedness have flung liberally. People opposing the terms of the truce rushed on the legislature and to Pashinyan's residence. They demanded his resignation and called for the resumption of the war. Miraculously, no one has been killed during these demonstrations although people were injured. A number of protesters have been arrested. Some believe the two previous presidents of (both friends of Vladimir Putin) sabotaged the Armenian war effort through means which have not been aired yet.

Because of the volatile condition, no one can say, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, what is happening in Armenia now or will happen in the near future. But increasingly, in the past few days, more and more Armenians have been saying that this is no time for acrimony and that Armenians should regroup and rebuild the country and its defenses. The war is over but the conflict isn't. The loss will reverberate in Armenians psyche permanently. Azeris, not content with their skewed victory, have claimed all of Armenia belongs to Azerbaijan.

According to truce terms, both sides have agreed to the placement of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers to patrol Artsakh and to prevent friction or violence. Some Armenians are leaving Artsakh for Armenia because they fear Azeri attacks. Meanwhile, Armenia is encouraging Artsakh Armenians who had fled to Armenia to return. The government is providing free bus service to Artsakh.

Re the terms of the truce agreement: How a deal that Armenia views as capitulation represents a reliable foundation for sustained peace? An imposed peace that leaves Armenians resentful can't be the recipe for permanent peace.

Can the principle of self-determination of people be sacrificed for the imperatives of respect for the territorial sovereignty of a state, especially when that sovereignty was acquired illegally?

**WGI:** *Do you think Armenia will be able to keep a leading role in the shrunken Artsakh? Or it could become like a Russian or International protectorate?*

**JT:** The situation is evolving. We don't know what Azerbaijan and Russia have in mind. The status of the parts of Artsakh which Azerbaijan didn't conquer remains unclear. At present we only know that 2,000 Russian peacekeepers will patrol the area. Armenia will try to maintain a leading role in Artsakh because Artsakh Armenians would need support—economic, military, cultural, and psychological. If the Armenian government fails to provide a robust commitment to Artsakh then Armenians might leave and the Russians might occupy what's left. Of course, Azerbaijan would like to move in but the Russians would not leave once they have established a foothold. It would be the most southerly Russian outpost discounting Syria.

But we are faced with Russian games. Russia could have stopped the war before it began. It could also have kept Turkey and jihadi mercenaries out of the war. The U.S could have done this too because Turkey was using American-built F-16 and the U.S. could have used sanctions against Turkey.

Regarding Armenia becoming a Russian protectorate...the way many, if not most, Armenians feel about Russia, this would be impractical. There's widespread feeling among Armenians that Russia betrayed us. Perhaps I will have chance to address that later in our conversation.

If you would allow me a sidebar... When Stalin handed Artsakh to Azerbaijan against the advice of his foreign minister Georgi Chicherin, he also handed Nakhichevan (another Armenian region) to Azerbaijan. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there were exactly 26 Armenians left in Nakhichevan. During the 70 years of Azeri rule, Armenians had emigrated because of discrimination and racism.

**WGI:** *Azerbaijan was winning militarily and Armenia faced a crushing defeat. But Azerbaijan's victory came due mainly to external support. Ankara largely contributed to Azerbaijan's victory with both diplomatic and military backing for Baku; meanwhile Israel has supplied ultra-modern weapons to Azerbaijan, including a fleet of military drones, which overwhelmed Armenia's air defense systems. In your opinion, why have the international community and media remained largely indifferent to this unequal battle?*

**JT:** The international community and media historically kowtows to Turkey. It's an embarrassing fact but there you are. This timorous response to Turkey is a mystery to me: without the West, Turkey would collapse before you can spell Caliph Erdogan. That huge Turkish army would be useless without the economic and military support of the West...and yet, Europeans do nothing despite Turkey's insults and threats of Europeans. Of course, Azerbaijani oil and gas are important to Europe. The international community and media remained deaf to Armenia's plight for several reasons. The international public is unfamiliar with the conflict. That fact was inadvertently underlined by a media which often described the war as taking place in a remote part of the Caucasus "which one can't find on the map." They framed it as a squabble among Lillipudians whose

If not indifferent, the western media sided with Azerbaijan because their governments support Azerbaijan's "territorial integrity" argument versus a peoples' "right to self-determination" espoused by Artsakh and Armenia. Many states (France, Spain, Italy, Britain, Canada, India, China, etc.) have separatist groups thus the U.N and other international organization are automatically anti- people's right to self determination. States automatically support territorial integrity. This is, of course, hypocritical because the West supported Yugoslav people's right to self-determination and made sure Yugoslavia disintegrated. Self-determination was fine in Yugoslavia and unacceptable in Artsakh. Because wanted to see is fine in Yugoslavia but unacceptable in Artsakh.

**WGI:** *The peace deal of Nov. 10 has redrawn the map of the South Caucasus. Turkey is among the winners. What is your opinion? Will Turkey be able to further achieve its ambitions in the region? Meanwhile, what about the Russian role? Can the deal also be seen as a victory for Russia and its influence in the region? Or has it lost ground?*

**JT:** Russia thinks it is the power broker now but the war has created chaos. Turkey was the winner of the war. It brought its F-16s and troops into Azerbaijan and the Caspian in pursuit of neo-Ottomanism and Turkism which are against Russian interests. Russia will pay a price for letting Turkey into Azerbaijan. Through the war, Turkey achieved it's long-dreamt ambition of forming a land bridge to Azerbaijan through Azeri Nakhichevan. Turkey has a short border at the northern tip of Nakhichevan. The agreement creates a corridor from southern Nakhichevan though southern Armenia to Azerbaijan. Thus Turkish troops can march to Azerbaijan through the Nakhichevan and the corridor. And they can go all the way to the Caspian Sea, thus forming a contiguous Turkic lands from Istanbul to the Chinese border. This has been the Turkic/Turanic dream for ages.

Azerbaijan won for obvious reasons. I am not certain about Russia. While it won some prestige for brokering the truce and has placed 2,000 soldiers in Artsakh, Russia lost credibility in the international forum when its support of Armenia turned out to be wishy-washy.

The Russia/Armenia pact called for Russian military presence if Armenia was attacked and had not been the initiator of the fight. During the 44 days when the territory of Armenia proper and its peaceful settlements were repeatedly subjected to Azeri and Turkish strikes (the last one the day truce was signed) Russia refused to send its troops to defend Armenia. The armaments Russia was flying to Armenia became a trickle in the last few weeks thus Armenian fighters had no ammunition to stop the invaders.

In my book, Russia was obliged to defend Armenia not just because of their defense pact but for two other cogent reasons. The war is the result of Russian action. The conflict began when Russia's Stalin handed Artsakh to Azerbaijan. This caused 70 years of Azeri oppression of Artsakh Armenians, followed by a four-year war in the early '90s, almost daily shooting from Azerbaijan, plus the horrendous war of the past month-and-a-half.

Russia should also have helped Armenia in the self-interest of Russia. It's highly likely that the Azerbaijan victory (with Turkey's assistance) will encourage Chechens, Circassians, Dagestanis and other Muslim nations of the Caucasus to rise against Russia and drive Putin's army north. And before you can say "Niet", NATO would be at the southern gates of Russia. Putin's reluctance to defend Armenia remains a mystery.

As well, Russia's refusal to help its Armenian ally brands Russia as an unreliable ally and will hurt its reputation for a long time.

**WGI:** *Armenia and Israel share the trauma of greatest atrocities and genocides. Why, in your opinion, Israel not only has never officially recognized the Armenian genocide, but also strongly supports Azerbaijan. Only for reasons of prioritization of geopolitical interests?*

**JT:** Israel has not recognized the Armenian Genocide because it doesn't want to offend its friend the genocidier Turkey. On a minor note, some believe Israel wants to maintain the "sole distinction" of having a citizenry which suffered from genocide...so Armenians are johnny-come-lately although the Armenian Genocide took place 25 years before the Holocaust. Many German soldiers witnessed the Armenian Genocide (Germany and Turkey were allies during WWI) and learned what to do and not to do for an efficient Holocaust.

It's not only that Israel doesn't recognize but the Jewish Lobby in the U.S., upon the direction of Israel has stopped every Armenian attempt to have the Armenian Genocide recognized by the United States. The Israeli Lobby's efforts have brought Turkey and Israel even closer.

Regarding Israel's support of Azerbaijan: Israel gets 40% of its energy from Azerbaijan and sells vast amounts armaments—from Uzis to drones. A few years ago Ilham Aliev said Azerbaijan had bought close to \$5 billion worth of armaments from Israel. During the war, almost every day an Azeri jet owned by one of Aliev's daughters landed at a military base in southern Israel, loaded with fresh armaments and took off for Baku via Turkey.

Israel has also trained Azeri soldiers and Aliev's bodyguards. Finally, Israel uses Azerbaijan as window to watch Iran and spy on Tehran. If Israel attacks Iran, it will most likely use Azerbaijan as a landing and take-off point. Azeris study in Israel and Israel trains Azeri agronomists. Finally, there is an influential Jewish community in Azerbaijan. They are known as Mountain Jews. The Azeri wholesale market owner in Moscow who wouldn't let Armenian trucks enter the market was an Azeri Jew who was showing "solidarity" with the Azeris.

**WGI:** *The Armenians consider Nagorno-Karabakh as intrinsically part of their history and culture. Do you think that the defeat could lead to the resignation of the Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan and throw the country into turmoil? Or will the Armenians be able to strengthen their unity in this difficult time, preparing for revenge?*

**JT:** Armenia is already in turmoil. Some people are demanding Pashinyan's resignation. So far he has

refused to do so and has explained more than once that he had no choice but to sign the truce document. The army supports Pashinyan and appreciates Pashinyan stopping of the fighting, which probably saved the embattled Armenian army from massacre—a hallowed Turkish tradition.

Every Armenian I have spoken to and every Armenian analyst I have read have been unanimous that the one-sided ceasefire is untenable. Armenians will never reconcile to the loss of so much of their lands.

It's important to remember that the current Armenia is just 10 percent of historic Armenia. The rest is occupied by Turkey and is called Eastern Turkey. Until the late 19th century, maps identified the area as Armenia. Sultan Abdul Hamid II of Turkey ordered the maps illegal and replaced Armenia with "Kurdistan" on the map. Even Armenia's sacred mountain—Ararat—is captive of Turkey. Practically every diasporan Armenian or his parents come Western Armenia. Armenians have been forced to cede the majority of their homeland to Turkey and now to Turkey's cousin—Azerbaijan.

We have been around since 2,250 BCE (Yerevan, the capital of Armenia is older than Rome). We have felt adversity more than most nations. But we have recovered. We will recover just as we recovered after the Genocide. We lost the war not because we were unprepared, lacked courage or made bad military decisions but because our foe was too strong...3 million people could not defeat an enemy which included NATO's second-largest army, in addition to the latest in Israel's drones, an Azeri army twice the size of that of Armenia's and armed to the teeth. Our army was smaller and our armaments not cutting edge because Armenia is not a wealthy country. We have no oil. What we have is drive, love of our homeland, work ethic, and survival instinct.

Right now our aim is unity among Armenians of Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora. We don't seek revenge. Just justice. But we will remember those who stood aside and let this one-sided war continue for 44 days or supplied Azerbaijan and Turkey with weapons that murdered thousands of Armenian soldiers and civilians, wrecked Armenian cities, and drove us from our lands.

Armenia and Artsakh are not alone. Close to 8 million diasporan Armenians are already organizing not just to revive their homeland but to prepare it for the future. During the war— in a few weeks—they sent close to \$300 million to Armenia and held demonstrations in more than 50 capitals—from Santiago, Chile to Sidney, Australia, from Los Angeles to London . The Diaspora has been energized by the emergency. No matter the unpredictable developments in Armenia in the next few weeks, Armenia is in the process of getting back its bearings. Aliev's victory jig is premature.



## Comments



**Onnig Beylerian** – 2020-11-20 12:30:02

Friendly reminder: The Armenian general's name is Col Gen Onik Gasparyan (Chief of General Staff, Armenian Armed Forces ) and not Onnig Karabetian: big difference!!