"WHAT IF IT'S A POTEMKIN ARMY" FOUR YEARS LATER

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Nobody likes to be told, "I told you so." The person who utters the unwelcome sentence courts frosty looks and risks losing friends. A week before the disastrous Four-day War of 2016, we wondered in an editorial ("What if it's a Potemkin Army?") whether our army was strong enough to overcome an Azeri attack. We received angry letters and were accused of disloyalty and worse. The letters stopped when it became obvious that our army's effort had been less than stellar. Four years have passed, and we have learned to our chagrin that our 2016 editorial had been prophetic. The recent 44-day War showed we were close to the truth not only in 2016 but also in 2020. So here it is again: "What if it's a Potemkin Army?" ***Check PS*** **Ed. 19 November 2020**

On March 12 Armenian sources announced that more than 5,500 shots from various guns of different calibre were fired at Armenian positions by Azerbaijan forces. The Azeris also used howitzer cannon.

On March 17 two Artsakh servicemen were killed by Azeri fire. The Azeris fired more than 600 rounds from different calibre weapons. The Artsakh army "took retaliatory measure and killed two and wounded several," said an Artsakh government spokesman while the defense minister said, "The Azeri side has adopted an unrestrained strategy to destabilize the situation at the conflict line, the result of which is unpredictable."

In recent months Baku has upped the ante and deployed tanks, grenade launchers and 120 mm mortar.

We have heard of many similar incidents as the above and almost as often heard Armenian authorities promise they would take punishing counter measures.

The above Azeri bellicose actions came soon after Armenia's Deputy Defense Minister David Tonoyan announced that Armenia had abandoned its "static defense" strategy and had switched to a more active deterrence in its standoff with the Azeri forces.

According to Armenian sources, 38 soldiers and civilians were killed due to enemy action last year. Armenians claim they caused far greater number of casualties. It would surprise no one that both sides understate their losses and exaggerate enemy losses.

While casualty statistics are opaque, one fact is clear: the firefights across the border are more damaging to Armenia/Artsakh (pop. below 3 million) than to Azerbaijan (pop. 9.7 million). While Azerbaijan's population keeps ballooning, Armenia's population is shrinking because of emigration, poverty and lower birth rate.

Why has Armenia been so "circumspect" in its conflict with Azerbaijan? Why has Armenia been so "patient" for more than two decades despite almost daily provocations by an enemy which has frequently stated its intention to go to war against the Armenians?

Some believe the reasons for Armenian's conservative military strategy are Russia and world opinion. Moscow will be irate if Armenia goes to war against a country Russia is courting assiduously. Since the global diplomatic community maintains Artsakh should be given to Azerbaijan, Armenians don't want to appear as aggressors, despite the provocation.

However, these two considerations should be null and void when a state's existence is at stake. Azerbaijan has been waging an open-ended war of attrition. The Armenians can't afford such interminable war.

We have heard countless times that the Azeri military budget is bigger than that of Armenia's national budget. Azerbaijan oil fields continue to gush billions of dollars while Armenia's economy is stunted and devoured by the oligarchs. Petro dollars mean more high-tech weapons. In high-tech warfare, heroism and patriotism are of diminished value.

Armenian leaders are good at assuring their citizens that Armenia can win an Azeri-Armenian war with ease. Indulging in his usual panegyrics, during the recent Army Day, Artsakh President Bako Sahakyan typically said: "The glorious army is the offspring of independence, the pride of the entire Armenian nation, which it loves and cherishes like a child. Its brave soldiers follow the lead of their ancestors devotedly carry out the sacred duty of defending the Homeland, performing and displaying unique feats of courage..."

Meanwhile, in early February, Argati Ter Tateosyan, leader of the Artsakh commando squad, said Armenia could annihilate Azerbaijan in case Baku declares war.

If words were horses, we could ride them to victory.

Just because Armenians won the first war with Azerbaijan it doesn't follow that they would win the next one. Azerbaijan has one of the best-equipped armies in the region. In addition, it has Turkish and Israeli trainers and consultants. In case of war, it has a huge war chest to hire non-Azeri mercenaries to do their high-tech fighting, just as they did in the first round.

Hundreds of Azeris fighting on the side of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria have gained tremendous experience. Azeri commanders there have taken leading military and intelligence roles. Azeri fighters have built a reputation as fierce fighters. There are even Azeri women fighters in the ISIS all-female Al-Khansa brigade. In case of an Armenia/Azerbaijan war, these fanatics will surely fly to Baku to fight the "infidel" Armenians. In addition, there are the Mujaheddin, Taliban, Dagestani, Chechen, Circassian war-groupies, and Turks who would rush to help junior brother Azerbaijan. The Armenian small army has little experience.

Who will come to the assistance of Armenia? Not Russia. Not the CSTO, not Greece or Serbia. The Diaspora's attitude has changed since the first war when Diasporans were gung-ho. The endless depredations of Armenian authorities, the corruption, the oligarchs, have disenchanted the Diaspora.

Government corruption has also corroded the morale of Armenians in the homeland. Government-

friendly oligarchs have put an economic choke-hold on the citizens and driven many out of the country. How can a population suffering from a prolonged poverty and morale crisis nurse an army which has high morale? How can a corrupt and unpopular government nurture an army which has integrity, cohesion, determination and esprit de corps?

Was the decision not to open the Stepanakert airport an indication that the Armenians were cowed by Baku? Why so many suicides in the Armenia/Artsakh armies?

In late 18th century, General Potemkin, a right-hand man of Catherin the Great, built instant—and façade—villages to impress the Russian empress that progress was being made in the countryside. Once Catherine's entourage passed by, these phony villages were abandoned eventually giving rise to the phrase Potemkin village to describe something which is no more than a veneer, like a film set.

The inadequate response of the Armenian side to more than two decades of Azeri aggression impels us to wonder out loud whether the Armenian army is a Potemkin army: a cardboard military basking in the glory of its predecessors' heroism. If Armenia/Artsakh armies are superior to that of the Azeri forces, why don't Yerevan/Stepanakert give a bloody nose to the Azeris every time Baku snipers and saboteurs get busy killing our 18-year-old recruits? Armenia/Artsakh DON'T have to go to war: all they have to do is to teach the Azeris that they can't get away with murder anymore.

If a boxer is drubbed in the first five or six rounds without retaliating, fans conclude he will not last the 12 rounds. If after more than 20 years Armenians continue to absorb the Azeri punches without meaningful counter attacks, those who follow the Armenian/Azeri conflict are justified in wondering whether there's something seriously wrong with the Armenian armed forces.

P.S. A month-and-half after the Four-day War, (May 27), the Hayastan all-Armenian Fund held the 25th meeting of its Board of Trustees at the Government Reception Hall in Yerevan. During the gathering, an attendee who had been instrumental in raising a great amount of funds over the years suggested that the money allocated to building churches could be put into better use by purchasing drones which had been effective in recent clashes elsewhere. The practical suggestion was pooh-poohed. Among those who gave thumbs down to the suggestion was Mr. Patriot Himself--Catholicos Karekin II who was on a church-building binge. Ozymandias--that other eminent personality who suffered from edifice complex—comes to mind.