

A DEVIL IN EVERY DETAIL

Posted on September 3, 2023 by Keghart



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The Impossibility of the Integration Of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) into Azerbaijan

By [Vahan Zanoyan](#), [Red Lantern Analytica](#), August 21, 2023

International and pan-Armenian attention is currently understandably focused on [opening](#) the Lachin Corridor ([Berdzor](#)), since that constitutes the immediate and most visible mitigation of an unsustainable situation for the population of Artsakh Nagorno Karabakh ([Artsakh](#)). Nevertheless, it would be a dangerous mistake to view the current crisis in Nagorno Karabakh merely as a humanitarian crisis. The damage done by the blocking of the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijan goes beyond the shortages of food and medicine and other necessities. An equally dangerous consequence of the blockade has been a shift in the focus of international attention from the right for self-determination, autonomy, and independence of the ethnic population of Nagorno Karabakh, to humanitarian assistance. This, and the concurrent shift of emphasis in the international narrative around Nagorno Karabakh, has created the risk that international mediators, once they “solve” the humanitarian problem, will consider the conflict resolved and their job done.

What makes this risk real and present is the fact that the international mediators have not yet shown the political will to tackle the difficult challenge and root cause of the blockade, namely, Azerbaijan's clearly demonstrated [intent](#) for ethnic cleansing and [Genocide](#). There seems to be a rush, perhaps even a competition, among international mediators to achieve (and then claim credit for) peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, at any cost, including turning the fate of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh collateral damage in the process.

Charles Michele, the President of the EU, in his [briefing](#) after the trilateral meetings in Brussels in mid-July, was deliberate in his exaggerated optimism about the prospects for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan; two points in his briefing were telling: First, that the two sides had accepted each other's territorial integrity with specific square kilometers cited as the area of each country, in effect confirming Armenia's recognition of Nagorno Karabakh, as well as 8 Soviet era Azerbaijani enclaves in Armenia proper, as part of Azerbaijan; and second, his praise of Azerbaijan's willingness to provide humanitarian supplies to Nagorno Karabakh through Aghdam. These two points are significant because they show total disregard for the basic rights of the population of Nagorno Karabakh.

In early July, the US Ambassador to Armenia, Christina Quinn, was unambiguous in her [statement](#) to the effect that Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh can live in peace as citizens of Azerbaijan. Of course, the Government of Armenia itself has formally and publicly [accepted](#) that Nagorno Karabakh is part of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. And Russia is not far behind, supporting the notion that the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh have to [accept](#) Azerbaijani rule.

Accepting that Nagorno Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan and that the Armenian population there can be integrated in and live comfortably as citizens of Azerbaijan, has many unimaginable consequences that make the premise simply *impossible*. Those who advocate this as a way forward have not thought through these consequences.

This paper will not dwell on the "territorial integrity" versus "self-determination" debate, nor will it delve into the complicated history of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, nor on the lack of any legal basis for Nagorno Karabakh to be part of Azerbaijan. Instead, it will highlight some of the *practical obstacles* of integrating Nagorno Karabakh in the Republic of Azerbaijan, a subject generally absent from the international discourse on the region.

At the risk of repeating a tired but true cliché, let me say that in this case for sure the devil is in the details. Some of those details include, but are not limited to, the following obvious facts:

—Every able-bodied male above 18 years of age has probably served in the Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army. According to the regime in Baku, these are terrorists. Thousands of soldiers who defended their homeland during past Karabakh wars will be accused of terrorism and arrested, like the recent [case](#) of Vagif Khachatryan, who was abducted from a Red Cross vehicle transporting him for medical treatment, because the Azerbaijan government mistook him for his namesake, a former soldier in the Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army. Aliyev's recent promise of [amnesty](#) to Nagorno Karabakh government officials if they resigned and dissolved the government, aside from being an utterly degrading offer for the indigenous population of Nagorno Karabakh, does not inspire much hope that thousands of soldiers in the Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army will be spared. Even if the Azerbaijan government formulates some kind of nominal umbrella "pardon," it will find enough loopholes for especially "grievous" cases to arrest and try thousands of military personnel.

—As citizens of Azerbaijan, the Armenian men who somehow do not get imprisoned or executed, and the new generation coming of age, will be required to [serve](#) in Azerbaijan's army. These will be the young men whose older brothers and fathers fought in the Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army, who now would be forced to join the very army their elders fought against. Let that sink in for a minute. And even if we imagine that some of them somehow manage to overcome this impregnable psychological barrier and do join the Azerbaijani army, what will be waiting for them in their military units? If the treatment by Azerbaijan of Armenian [POWs](#) is any indication, neither the safety nor the [life](#) of Armenian conscripts in the Azerbaijani army can be guaranteed. Granted, conscripts are not POWs; however, given that they or their family members have fought against the Azerbaijani army in the past, and given the widespread and deep-rooted xenophobia against Armenians in the Azerbaijani army, they might as well be.

—The military [pantheon](#) in Stepanakert, where the soldiers who died defending Nagorno Karabakh against Azerbaijan are buried and revered as national heroes, will be desecrated and eventually erased entirely. The Armenian population, after acquiring Azerbaijani citizenship, is thus expected to

simply forget their heroes and accept the erasure of their graves. This is bound to happen, as [destroying](#) graves and entire [cemeteries](#) is a well-established Azerbaijani practice. The ethnic cleansing of Nakhijevan did not stop until every trace of past Armenian life and heritage was systematically [erased](#).

—Even if we assume that the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh, or a segment of it, somehow manages to accept all of the above, they are bound to be second-class citizens in “their” new country. This does not have to be formal, as it was in the Ottoman empire, where Christians were obliged to pay the jizya tax. But it will certainly take place, considering the years of hatred and [xenophobia](#) and Armenophobia that generations of Azerbaijanis have been conditioned by. It can manifest itself in the form of impunity for crimes by Azerbaijani citizens against Armenians, as well as deliberate government neglect of key infrastructure projects in Armenian villages. There is considerable evidence of this from Azerbaijan’s behavior in Soviet times when the roads leading to Armenian villages in Nagorno Karabakh were in much worse shape than the general roads in Azerbaijan. This will affect also all other public services—Armenian villages will not have the same access to irrigation water, emergency, health and security services as Azerbaijani villages. It is a persistent way of making the population feel oppressed and second-class, with the intention of forcing them out.

—Attitudes in Azerbaijan about the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh are not encouraging either. Reportedly, a recent [survey](#) conducted by Focus Free Alliance of Euro-Asian Sociologists found that 67% of Azerbaijani citizens believe that Nagorno Karabakh Armenians will either be killed (43%) or displaced (24%), and 72% of Baku residents do not believe in peace with Armenians. The syndrome thus goes beyond the Genocidal intent of the government and is endemic in the broader Azerbaijani society.

—But probably the ultimate imponderable for the citizens of Nagorno Karabakh is moving from a democratic to an autocratic system of government. Nagorno Karabakh is a democratic country, and the people of Nagorno Karabakh have a deep-rooted tradition of living freely. Freedom and dignified living are not only a way of life, but an essential national value. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is a dictatorship which has been ruled by the same family for three decades. Ilham Aliyev, who “inherited” the Presidency from his father, Heydar Aliyev, has been President for 20 years, and has appointed his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, as Vice President. By contrast, in the past 29 years, Nagorno Karabakh has had 4 different democratically elected Presidents. The US State Department’s 2022 [report](#) on human rights practices in Azerbaijan talks of unlawful and politically-motivated killings, torture, cruel and inhuman punishment, arbitrary arrests or detention, and a myriad other human rights abuses. Equally damning reports on Azerbaijan’s [human rights](#) record, political and civil [liberties](#), and chronic [repression](#) can be found from credible international organizations.

No legal or territorial legacy left over from the Soviet Union can justify asking a people to leave their free, democratic society and get integrated into a brutal dictatorship, which has a proven record of

inhuman treatment and repression of its own citizens, let alone an ethnic minority which through years of hate-propaganda, both the government and the society at large have come to hate.

There are many more examples of incalculable implications of the integration of Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan, not to mention the repeated statements by Aliyev claiming that “present day” Armenia is historic Azerbaijani lands—but the latter is the subject of another article.

Suffice it to say that it should be abundantly clear to all those accepting Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno Karabakh, and to all those claiming that the Armenian minority can live safely under Azerbaijani rule, that the assured outcome of such an eventuality will be the full ethnic cleansing of Nagorno Karabakh from not only its Armenian population, but also from every trace of millennia-old Armenian heritage in the region.

All those who find the integration of Nagorno Karabakh into Azerbaijan acceptable, should have the intellectual honesty to come out and say that, in effect, they find another Genocide in a historic Armenian homeland acceptable. There is no reasonable way to separate the two.

Finally, it is important to note that the implications of allowing Azerbaijan to get away with its plans of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh go way beyond Nagorno Karabakh. This sets a dangerous contemporary precedent of [normalizing the use of force](#) to resolve conflicts, in spite of diplomatic and legal efforts to limit the methods of the aggressor. Azerbaijan has disobeyed the ICJ rulings of [February 22, 2023](#) and [July 6, 2023](#) with impunity, and neglected specific demands by the US, the EU, Russia, the UN and many other countries to open the Lachin Corridor. What message are the international legal and diplomatic authorities sending to other autocratic aggressors in the world if Azerbaijan not only gets away with these blatant infringements, but also succeeds to reach its ultimate objective of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh?

Another important implication is condoning the abuse of the concept of [territorial integrity](#). Under the guise of its sovereign rights within its territorial borders, Baku has tried to “justify” some of the most gruesome crimes against the population of Nagorno Karabakh—including mass starvation, deprivation of the most basic health services, electricity, water and internet. It has also methodically and repeatedly disrupted local agricultural production by shooting at farmers working in their fields. The weaponization of “territorial integrity” and its abuse as an umbrella rationalization for Genocide should never be condoned.

In conclusion, it would be a dangerous oversimplification to view the crisis in Nagorno Karabakh either as a matter of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereign rights, or as a merely humanitarian crisis to be addressed by opening the Lachin Corridor. By arguing for an integration of Nagorno Karabakh into Azerbaijan, the world is in effect enabling Genocide and condoning the normalization of the use of force in settling conflicts. It is imperative that the international mediators engaged in resolving this conflict—Armenia, Russia, the United States, France, the EU, as well as the OSCE Minsk Group, and other stakeholders in the stability of the southern Caucasus such as India, China, Georgia

and Iran—garner enough political will and moral courage to take a principled stand in support of the right for self-determination and independence of the population of Nagorno Karabakh.

The historic name of the ancient Armenian homeland is Artsakh. But the territory, with its defined borders, is formally known as Nagorno Karabakh, a terminology created by the Soviet Union. In this article the name Nagorno Karabakh is used strictly for the purpose of easier recognition by international readers. Similarly Lachin Corridor is used instead of Berdzor the Armenian name.

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Comments



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Responding to Roubik. The United Nations is only a tool for those that established it. The US alone can change the course of the current Armenian misery and losses. But “justice” is only a word. For whatever reason the big powers will continue to bend to dictatorial countries like Turkey and Azerbaijan until Armenia becomes strong, independent, and a country to be reckoned with.



Roubik Allahverdi – 2023-09-03 00:59:18

Why on earth has Pashinian government been allowed to declare Artsakh as an Azeri issue and territory? The Artsakh territories are Armenian homeland that has been unlawfully occupied by the many invaders in the past and Turks in recent times. These territories must be liberated from foreign occupation and returned to Armenians -- the rightful owners of the land -- to live in peace. Artsakh, Nakhijevan and western Armenia must be returned to Armenia. The United Nations has a duty to uphold justice and bring about peace and stability in this world. They have failed miserably due to geopolitics dominating all aspects of our lives .