

Assessing the Current Threat of Armenian Terrorism

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Terrorism remains an obstacle to peace in the South Caucasus. Despite the consistent willingness of Azerbaijan and a series of positive signs given by Armenia since the end of the Second Karabakh War, a peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan remains elusive. So does the normalization of relations between Ankara and Yerevan. Much of the responsibility for this suboptimal state of affairs lies with extremist elements of Armenian society operating both within the country and in the diaspora.

The tragedy is compounded by the fact that a solid majority of Armenian citizens (like those of Azerbaijan) seem clearly to be in favor of peace. In this sense, Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War can be seen to have been a salutary shock to public opinion in Armenia. After all, the country's revanchist political opponents to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan failed to overthrow him in elections that took place in June 2021 in the wake of Armenia's defeat on the battlefield in late 2020. In fact, Pashinyan's party improved its electoral result, gaining an absolute majority in both votes and parliamentary seats.

Moreover, at various points throughout 2022, the same opposition forces could only mobilize a relatively small number of citizens of Armenia in remonstrance. Meanwhile, EU efforts led by Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, have been noteworthy. The most recent trilateral meeting between Michel, Pashinyan, and Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev, which took place in Brussels in late August 2022, appeared to ameliorate the situation incontrovertibly. Michel emphasized, in particular, the establishment of "direct communication line between the ministries of Defense of the two countries [to] prevent future incidents" and the fact that Baku and Yerevan had started to work on "a global peace agreement." And yet, since then, the situation has not linearly progressed further in a positive direction. This has most obviously been made manifest by what Baku has called a series of deadly military

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provocations by Armenian forces along the not-yet delineated state border with Azerbaijan in mind-September 2022, which caused Baku to respond with military force of its own.

One of the main yet under-examined reasons for this slow movement towards finalizing agreement a peace treaty is Pashinyan's growing fear of being assassinated by terrorists of his own ethnicity.

Indeed, the closer such a signature seems, the greater the risk that such an attack, designed to prevent such a peace, may occur. Pashinyan himself seems to be somewhat cognizant of this growing threat. On 14 September 2022—i.e., in the immediate aftermath of the deadly military clashes along the not-yet delineated state border—the Armenian prime minister indicated that he was ready to pay a high personal price for peace. “We want to sign a document, for which we will be criticized, scolded, and called traitors,” he told the country's parliament. “The people may even decide to remove us from power.” In the same speech, he defined such a document as one that would “ensure the territorial integrity of Armenia” and gave a figure (29,800 square kilometers) that made it quite clear that he was excluding all sovereign Azerbaijani territory, including the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and the seven surrounding areas previously occupied by Armenian forces, from his understanding of what constitutes his country's rightful possession.

Indeed, everyone understands that a peace treaty with Azerbaijan along such terms would effectually constitute an official abandonment by Armenia of any irredentist, “greater Armenia” posture. And not just towards Azerbaijan, but towards Türkiye, too, since a treaty with Baku would quite likely be followed in short order with a second one with Ankara. And this last would thus effectually constitute the end of Armenia's territorial claims on eastern Anatolia. In other words, peace with Azerbaijan and Türkiye would represent the definite end of the maximalist territorial dreams of ethnic-Armenian extremists—whether residing within the country or abroad in its large diaspora.

The Long and Bloody History of Armenian Terrorism

To better understand the clear and present danger to Nikol Pashinyan (and others) of assassination by ethnic-Armenian terrorists, it is necessary to delve into the relevant history of this subject.

Organized Armenian terrorist activity goes back more than a century, tracing its origins to the final few decades of the Ottoman and Russian empires. An early instance took place in 1896 when the Dashnak party—the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)—took hostages at the main branch of the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul and hurled bombs in the streets. In the twentieth century, this was followed by the notorious Operation Nemesis in 1920-1922 and various other terrorist attacks, primarily against Turkish

targets, from the 1970s to 1997. To cite three historical examples from a single year, namely 1972: on 24 April of that year, a group of ARF members attacked the Turkish consulate in Los Angeles; six months later, the show of a Turkish dance group in Los Angeles was interrupted by Armenian threats of bombing; and less than a week after that, also in California, a meeting held by Turkish-American Club on the occasion of Turkish Republic Day in the Belair Hotel was attacked by a group of Armenians. All in all, dozens of non-Armenians were assassinated in various countries around the world. One of the explicit aims of these terrorist attacks was the perpetrators' desire to provoke reprisals against its own population by those it perceived were its external enemies.

Less well-known is the intra-Armenian dimension of Armenian terrorism. This tradition of targeting “traitors” also goes back more than a century, to the 1890s. The results have resulted in the death of hundreds of ethnic-Armenians at the hands of their terrorist kin—the intended victims have even included senior clerics of the Armenian Apostolic Church. For instance, taking just the year 1958, we know that dozens were killed in Lebanon in killings perpetrated by the ARF and its ultra-nationalist rivals. Then in the period 1983 to 1988, mostly in Lebanon, dozens more were assassinated through internecine terrorist acts. There was also the attempt to kill Khoren Ashekian, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople in 1894 and the attempted insurrection in Yerevan involving a mass shooting in the Armenian parliament in 1999.

Also barely known (outside of Azerbaijan) is Armenian terrorism against Azerbaijani targets. This, too, has a history going back more than a century. The very first targets of Operation Nemesis were the first prime minister of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) Fatali Khan Khoyski and the ADR parliament's deputy speaker Hasan-bey Aghayev. Both were assassinated by Armenian terrorists in Tbilisi in 1920—nearly one year before the assassination of former Ottoman Grand Vizier Talaat Pasha in Berlin in 1921.

More recently, the number of victims of successful terrorist attacks against citizens of Azerbaijan from 1989 to 1994 was higher than the number of victims of such attacks against citizens of Türkiye from 1973 to 1997. Most of the Armenian terrorists responsible for these assassinations were in their 30s by the time the ceasefire ending the First Karabakh War was signed in 1994; most are still alive; and most are still physically fit. The available evidence suggests that they and those they have subsequently inspired remain unrepentant: such people are both willing and able to continue their assassination campaign.

Present-Day Terrorist Threat

Today, Pashinyan and his circle of Armenian decisionmakers, together with senior Azerbaijanis and Turks committed to the pursuit of peace involving their respective states, face a common threat of Armenian terrorism.

This threat can reemerge from two basic sources, with one not excluding the other. First, a rebirth of the ARF's terrorist activities: there are, for example, explicit and recurring threats in this regard on the French ARF youth wing's Facebook page. Second, the emergence of new terrorist cells from the ranks of existing radical organizations (e.g., ARF, Hunchaks, Republican Party of Armenia) disappointed by what they perceive as a lack of revolutionary (i.e., terrorist) action to thwart the agenda for peace.

Here it may be instructive to note that the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)—which at various points have been designated by the United States, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan as a terrorist organization (at the time, neither the EU nor most of its member states made such designations, but French courts sentenced ASALA members of terrorism in 1983, 1984, and 1985)—was allowed to construct a public memorial to its activities at a symbolically important cemetery near Yerevan. As late as 20 January 2021, the Armenian news website Hetq.am reported that “the 46th anniversary of the founding of ASALA was marked today at Yerevan's Yerablur Military Pantheon. A memorial service dedicated to those who gave their lives in the pursuit of Armenian liberation was celebrated by Archbishop Voskan Galpakyan.”

This news report illustrates the important yet underappreciated point that the cornerstone Western liberal democratic distinction between the nation, the state, and the church—a tradition that traces its origins back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution—appears not to have been embraced by the totality of Armenian society. The most obvious hotbeds for the revival of this sort of totalitarian mindset are the two paramilitary groups the Armenian government has been ordered to dissolve by the International Court of Justice in a landmark December 2021 ruling: VoMA and POGA. Reportedly, the former's membership includes both ASALA- and PKK-affiliated terrorists (the PKK has also been designated as a terrorist organization at various points by the United States, Britain, France, Germany, EU, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, as well as by the European Court of Human Rights.)

The past several years have seen an upswing of violence perpetrated by ethnic-Armenian extremist or terrorist groups. For instance, the legal advisor of the Turkish embassy in Paris was threatened with death in Paris in 2017; Azerbaijanis were attacked and wounded by members of the ARF and other Armenian nationalist organizations in Paris, Brussels, and Los Angeles in July 2020—that is to say, prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War. During this conflict, moreover, the assassination of presidents Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Türkiye was openly discussed on internet forums like armenews.com—the main French-Armenian web site, headed by former ASALA spokesman Jean-Marc “Ara” Toranian. Tellingly, after I exposed the worst instances of such death threats and related racist and antisemitic messages, Toranian chose to suppress the forum in its entirety. The removal of such dangerous filth from the public domain, however, appears to have simply driven the expression of the sentiments of its adherents into clandestine and private outlets. In other words, it is unlikely that

these simply dissipated, much less disappeared. All in all, it seems that what I and others uncovered represents but the tip of the iceberg. This is obviously a serious problem.

And this brings us into the present. There are at least two main factors that differentiate past and current periods of the ethnic-Armenian terrorist threat. First, foreign countries in which Armenian diasporas operate are less likely to lend direct support to such terrorist activities. Greece, for example, is unlikely to tolerate, still less fund, Armenian terrorist groups this time around, given its growing dependence on natural gas flowing from Azerbaijan through the Southern Gas Corridor via Türkiye (notwithstanding the current state of high tensions between Athens and Ankara). Lebanon also cannot play the same role as it did in the past, given the numerical and economical decline of the Lebanese Armenian community.

That having been said, help from Hezbollah, an official ally of the ARF since 2005 (and unofficially since at least 1996), remains possible. After all, Hezbollah is an Iranian proxy operating inside Lebanon and elsewhere, and at least some factions in Iran find it convenient to disproportionately support Armenia. The friendly ties between Azerbaijan and Israel and the Baku-encouraged Turkish rapprochement with the Jewish State form part of this narrative. So does the fact that Tehran supported ASALA from 1979 to 1984 before reconciling with the ARF (after a four-years long conflict). Relatedly, the American branch of the ARF completely opposes U.S. various UN Security Council and Western-led sanctions regimes against the Islamist Republic, and the party maintains a branch in Iran. Given such circumstances, it is not inconceivable that some in Tehran might be tempted to encourage ethnic-Armenian terrorism against the Azerbaijani-Turkish-Israeli triangle.

Moreover, the fact of a break between diaspora extremists and the Armenian government in Yerevan has never prevented terrorism historically. A majority of assassinations during Operation Nemesis took place in 1921-1922, namely after the collapse of the ARF regime in Yerevan and in the context of a struggle between it and the Bolsheviks. Moreover, the ARF tried to assassinate various Turkish statesmen on various occasions: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk six times between 1924 and 1927, İsmet İnönü twice (in 1923 and 1931), and General Kazım Karabekir once (in 1933). In 1984, the ARF leadership even briefly considered the possibility of assassinating Soviet diplomats after the Kremlin ceased its support of Armenian terrorism and irredentism directed against NATO member state Türkiye.

It is thus entirely possible for a resurgent Armenian terrorist network to target for assassination members of the Armenian government (including most notably, Prime Minister Pashinyan) as well as the leaders of Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and perhaps other states whose policies champion the peace process between Yerevan and, respectively, Baku and Ankara.

What Could Happen?

We may now consider the risks according to possible targets, in ascending order.

First, an attack inside Azerbaijan. This is not impossible, but it is the least likely scenario. The monitoring in this country is maximal and its land borders remain closed due to ongoing anti-pandemic restrictions. Logistical help by a faction located in a neighboring state interested in destabilizing Azerbaijan would be needed in such a scenario, but such a course of action would be fraught with peril, to say the least.

Second, an attack inside Türkiye. This is almost equally unlikely (but also not, strictly speaking, impossible). Since the 1980s, the PKK has taken the place of the ARF's terrorist branch and that of ASALA in perpetrating attacks inside this country, yet the capacity of the PKK to do so has decreased dramatically in the past few years as a result of multiple police operations inside Türkiye itself and its military operations in neighboring Syria and Iraq—including the establishment of Turkish forward positions in those war-torn states.

Third, an attack against a Turkish diplomatic target. This was the option favored by the ARF's terrorist branch during the 1970s and 1980s. The same can be said of ASALA during this period. Yet, precisely for this reason, Turkish embassies and consulates are like fortresses in countries where an important Armenian community exists. The ambassadors and consul-generals posted there travel in armored vehicles—an ASALA terrorist emptied a fully-loaded automatic weapon into the car of the Turkish ambassador in Budapest in 1991, but it was in vain.

That having been said, it is not impossible that a small group of Armenian terrorists (based in, say, France, Lebanon, the UK, Belgium, Canada, Australia, or the U.S.) could not attempt to assassinate a second-rank Turkish diplomat, operating along the logic that doing something is better than doing nothing. We know, for instance, that an Armenian ultranationalist hurled a Molotov cocktail into the garden of the Turkish consulate general in Marseille in 2016 (he was sentenced to three years in prison in 2021), explaining his act as a retaliation against Turkish support for Azerbaijan during the April 2016 clashes (what some call the Four-Day War).

Fourth, an attack against an Azerbaijani diplomatic target. This is much more likely than the previous hypotheses because, by and large, Azerbaijani embassies and consulates have neither the counter-terrorist experience nor the security measures adopted by the Turkish diplomatic service.

Explicit death threats have been made recently against the Azerbaijani consulate in Los Angeles (including one referring to Gourgen Yanikian, the inspirer of ASALA who assassinated the Turkish general consul and his deputy in Santa Barbara, California, in 1973) and in July 2020 stones were hurled by the ARF against the Azerbaijani embassy in Paris, causing broken glass and other damage. Even the British police failed to protect

the Azerbaijani embassy against a break-in by Islamists affiliated with the Mahdi Servants Union in the summer of 2022. On 18 September 2022, the ARF's youth branch attacked the Azerbaijani embassy in Paris—even trying to break open the entrance door—during an illegal demonstration, which the police ultimately was able to disperse. Then, on 23 September 2022, Charjoun—a group made of ARF's dissidents who find the Dashnak leadership inefficient—tried to prevent a conference on the destruction of Azerbaijani heritage in Yerevan from taking place at the cultural center of the same embassy. This time, the police was deployed before the demonstrators were able to cause damage and arrested three of them. It should be underlined that Charjoun makes unequivocal references to ASALA on its social media accounts.

These sorts of deeds have not been limited to Paris. The Lebanese police repulsed, and not without difficulty, ARF demonstrators that tried to attack the Azerbaijani embassy in Beirut on two recent occasions (16 and 18 September 2022). Meanwhile, the Georgian police prevented members of the local ARF branch from approaching the Azerbaijani embassy. And then other projects of violent demonstrations failed in Brussels and Stockholm, after a warning issued by Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry.

Fifth, an attack against an Azerbaijani NGO abroad. Such targets have even less experience with security measures. Such assaults have already taken place in France; Belgium has a notoriously weak state apparatus; and anything can happen in California and perhaps elsewhere in the United States, notwithstanding its general commitment to counter domestic terrorist threats).

Sixth, an attack against Nikol Pashinyan and his supporters. This is already a clear and present danger. In mid-November 2020, for example, the Armenian National Security Service announced that it had discovered a plot to assassinate him. Then, in January 2021, Vahan Badasyan, a former member of the Khankendi-based “Artsakh” assembly was arrested in Yerevan for having threatened to assassinate Pashinyan. Furthermore, in November 2021, Ashot Minasyan, an ex-military officer, was arrested for conspiring to assassinate the prime minister. In 2022, several failed insurrection attempts (e.g., taking over government buildings and the ARF's barely veiled threats to take power by force) further demonstrate that the terrorist option is now actively back on the table.

One of the most concerning aspects in this regard is that a longtime associate of the ARF, Hampig Sassounian, is understood to be one of the main organizers of the anti-peace demonstrations. Lebanese-born Sassounian was found guilty by a California state court of assassinating the Turkish consul general in Los Angeles in January 1982. He was sentenced to life in prison in 1984 but was granted parole in October 2021 and promptly moved to Armenia.

As late as September 2022—during the high-level week of the UN General Assembly—Pashinyan was publicly called a “traitor” in New York by local Dashnaks.

Action: A Necessity

The seriousness of the threat posed by Armenian terrorism has a long history of being underappreciated in various Western countries.

Consider a particularly telling example from the interwar period—particularly around 1933, the year that the ARF assassinated an Armenian archbishop, Leon Tourian, in New York, and the fact that the activities of all diasporic Armenian organizations in Lebanon and Syria were banned for years by the French High Commission as a result of another assassination by the ARF. Regretfully, the U.S. government failed to take similar action at the time, perhaps because official Ankara did not appear to have made a formal request to Washington to that effect—notwithstanding the voluminous files on Dashnak violent activity in its possession.

Similarly, the suspension of the activities of the ARF's terrorist branch against Türkiye in 1986-1987, and the assassination of Hagop Hagopian in 1988, were (wrongly) considered to mark the end of the era of ethnic-Armenian terrorism. Indeed, the very next year (1989) marked the onset of an even deadlier campaign directed against Azerbaijani targets, coupled with new—but unsuccessful—attacks against Turkish ones.

In order to minimize the risk of complacency in present circumstances—i.e., to avoid as much as possible the errors of the past with respect to assessing the Armenian terrorist threat—several measures should be taken into consideration. These include, most obviously:

Greater and closer exchange of intelligence information between Ankara, Baku, and key Western services (as well as with Israel's) with respect to threats to peace, stability, and security by Armenian extremist and terrorist organizations and affiliates. This should now be easier to accomplish than in the past since both Azerbaijan and Türkiye are growing in strategic importance to the West as a result of the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine, their respective roles in ongoing counterterrorism operations, and the supply of oil and gas to European markets.

Elevating the level of safety of Azerbaijani embassies and consulates at least to the standards of Turkish diplomatic posts. Priority should be given to diplomatic buildings in the United States and France as well as to those in countries like Belgium, the UK, Russia, Canada, Lebanon, and Australia. Concretely, installing double armored doors systems should be undertaken rapidly (Azerbaijan could choose the same local companies than the Turks did); moreover, the provision of effective defensive weapons (the Turkish MPT-76 assault rifle, which is fully NATO compliant, is a good choice) and bullet-proof vests to relevant diplomatic personnel should be expedited. Heightened engagement with the agencies in the host countries responsible for providing security to diplomatic buildings should also take place.

Although it is impossible to provide similar levels of protection to Azerbaijani NGO abroad, various other commonsensical measure ought to be taken.

Finally, engagement with the Armenian government itself on these issues (directly or indirectly, via a trusted third-party) should be explored, since derailing official Yerevan's pursuit of peace with both Baku and Ankara appears to be currently the number one objective of Armenian ultranationalists, extremists, and terrorists.