

Equivocation in Arms

The Yerkrpah Militia and the Clash at the Armenian-Azerbaijani Provisional Border

Maxime Gauin

An Azerbaijani serviceman was wounded on 12 February 2024. The Azerbaijani army launched, as a result, what it called Operation Revenge. Four Armenian servicemen were killed by the strike. Yet, none was less than 40 years old. It was made public that they were not ordinary soldiers or border guards, but members of a paramilitary organization: the Yerkrpah.

Yerkrpah's Origins and Development (Until 2018)

Yerkrpah was established in 1993, during the First Karabakh War, as an organization of veterans. The name literally means: “defenders of the land,” a possible reference to Bachdban Hayreniats (translated as “Protectors of the Fatherland”), a secret, insurrectionist group established in Erzurum (Ottoman Empire, today Türkiye) in 1881, then dismantled by the Ottoman police in 1882, but having symbolic importance for Armenian nationalists by far superior to its short time of activity. Whatever the exact origin of its name, the organization seems to think of itself chiefly as a rival to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), a diaspora-backed nationalist organization and political party founded in 1890 in Tbilisi.

Yerkrpah was co-established by Vazgen Sargsyan, who twice served as Armenia’s Minister of Defense (1991-1992; 1995-1999) before becoming Prime Minister (1999), and Manvel Grigoryan, a commander of Armenian forces during the First Karabakh War (notorious for later having [said](#) in justification of his conduct, which involved

Maxime Gauin is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. He previously served as Scholar-in-Residence at the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) in Ankara. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

keeping a captured Azerbaijani soldier in captivity for two years, that “during war nobody had time to read Geneva conventions”) and one of the alleged initiators of the February 1992 Khojaly massacre who later served as the country’s Deputy Defense Minister before being elected to its parliament.

After the end of the First Karabakh War, Yerkrpah did not stand down. In 1998, for example, Human Rights Watch [observed](#) that in 1995, the “Yerkrpah Battalion was linked to violent attacks on non-apostolic religious groups—mostly Christian sects other than the Armenian Orthodox Church.” The same organization [indicated](#) that the “Yerkrpah Battalion also reportedly ransacked a human rights library in July 1997.”

The political importance of Yerkrpah peaked in the mid to late 1990s, during the period in which its leader, Vazgen Sargsyan, was serving his second term as Defense Minister and Prime Minister (a few months into the latter position, he was killed during the Armenian parliamentary shooting of 27 October 1999). Meanwhile, the political wing of Yerkrpah had merged with the Republican Party of Armenia. By this point, the Yerkrpah organization had come to be under the full control of Manvel Grigoryan and maintained a hard line on the Karabakh issue, dismissing the need for Armenia to end its occupation of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and seven surrounding regions of Azerbaijan. The next year, Grigoryan was appointed Deputy Defense Minister, going to serve in that role until 2008. About a year after his appointment (2001), Yerkrpah Day (8 May) became an official non-working day in Armenia.

By 2008, however, it seems that Yerkrpah’s influence was waning. A [leaked cable](#) from the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan provided the following assessment (the context is an upcoming election...regarding its aftermaths, see the below paragraph):

(COMMENT: Yerkrpah remains an "X" factor in the upcoming race. In the late 1990s it was a powerful and active political force, comprising thousands of NK war veterans, fresh from that conflict. The vets were passionately devoted to their war hero founder Vazgen Sargsian, who was later killed in the 1999 attack on the Armenian parliament. It remains unclear whether Yerkrpah can still mobilize large numbers of veterans to either the ballot box or the streets. It is also unclear whether the organization will be politically unified. END COMMENT)

In spite of a certain lack of unity, the group remained used by the Armenian government—both internally and externally. This can largely be explained by the personal proximity between the Yerkrpah leadership and the state leadership, reinforced by the merging of the political wing of the paramilitary group with what was the ruling party at the time. In 2008, too, Khankendi-born Serzh Sargsyan, by then having become President of Armenia, asked Grigoryan to use his most merciless men to crush the demonstrations protesting against allegations of electoral fraud (this was several months after the U.S. Embassy’s assessment quoted above). He knew them since the First Karabakh War and, as a result, trusted them fully. Eight demonstrators were killed. The demonstrations, however, proved that the divisions of the Armenian society did not spare Yerkrpah, as several of its local officials were [arrested](#) for having taken part in them.

During the April 2016 Four-Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Yerkrpah mobilized against the Azerbaijani army in Karabakh. Those who answered the call were not only veterans of the First Karabakh War, but also younger recruits. Then, in February 2017, Sargsyan [asked](#) Yerkrpah to “keep its powder dry.”

Crises During the Pashinyan Years (2018-Present)

In 2018, the Yerkrpah organization claimed to have [30,000 members](#), including its youth branch (i.e., not veterans of the First Karabakh War)—a figure that could not be verified at the time or since. The coming to power of Nikol Pashinyan in May 2018, as a result of the “velvet revolution,” was quickly followed by a fight against the most corrupt and brutal elements of the Republic Party era (1998-2018), and, naturally, Grigoryan was one of them.

The investigation against him for illegal possession of weapons and embezzlement started in June 2018—only one month after Pashinyan had come to power. Investigators found quite an impressive hoard of weapons in one of his houses: more than a dozen anti-tank grenade launchers, twenty hand grenades, more than 20,000 rounds of ammunition of various calibers, explosives, etc. They also discovered evidence that he had misappropriated donations for volunteer units that had been made in April 2016: food supplies “for soldiers” (as was written on the tin cans) had been used to feed animals in his personal zoo. The Republic Party stopped supporting Grigoryan the day those discoveries were made public. Grigoryan’s parliamentary immunity was stripped, and he was put twice in preventive detention. At some point near the end of the Second Karabakh War, he caught what turned out to be a fatal case of COVID-19. Nine days after Azerbaijan’s victory, he passed away.

Unsurprisingly, his alleged role in the Khojaly massacre and alleged mistreatment of Azerbaijani prisoners during the First Karabakh War (including the enslavement of a captured prisoner, as noted above) were never included in the charges against him. Perhaps of some surprise is that the Yerkrpah organization as such was not targeted, still less banned.

Remarkably, less than a week after he was first arrested, Grigoryan was [dismissed](#) by Yerkrpah. The man who was chosen to replace him as the organization’s leader in April 2019 was Sasun Mikayelyan. A brief biographical sketch may help to explain why Yerkrpah was allowed to live on.

Mikayelyan had come to prominence in 1988 as the founder of a volunteer unit that organized the “evacuation” of ethnic-Armenians from Shamkir and as a volunteer fighter in the First Karabakh War. He was first elected to the Armenian parliament in 1995—there he has served on and off ever since, changing parties and political allegiances several times: he started as a member of the Republican Party but broke

with the Kocharyan-Sargsyan clan in 2008 (he was even sentenced in 2009 to eight years in jail for his role in the 2008 demonstration). By 2015, he had been elected to the board of Pashinyan's Civil Contract, a party he co-founded.

In March 2019, Mikayelyan [stated](#) that “compromises cannot take place. [...] Let them know that if we are attacked, we'll march right to Baku.” This was broadly consistent at the time with statements made by other prominent Civil Contract members. In May 2020, he [provoked](#) a [brawl](#) in the Armenian Parliament, for reasons that are unclear. And only a few months later, during the Second Karabakh War—as a sitting MP—he was wounded in combat operations in Karabakh. Although he remains an elected official, he seems to have lost his leading position in Civil Contract party—as early as June 2019, he seems to have entered a period of ambiguity, but the reasons are not quite clear.

On the other hand, in January 2021, Armenia's Defense Minister Vagharshak Harutyunyan [had a meeting](#) with a delegation of Yerkrpah, led by Mikayelyan himself, concerning the “partnership of the Ministry of Defense with the non-governmental organization consolidating freedom fighters and the development of army-society relations.” This sort of meeting does not seem to be consistent with what some interpret as the Pashinyan Government's peace agenda. In the same year, perhaps not uncoincidentally, two Yerkrpah members were each sentenced to twenty years in prison by an Azerbaijani court for having tortured Azerbaijani prisoners of war during the First Karabakh War.

The Clash of February 2024

At the end of January 2024, Yerkrpah's leader Sasun Mikayelyan [stated](#):

In 2020, some 1,200 volunteers of Yerkrpah were on combat duty, in 2022 there were 1,700 of us, last year [i.e., in 2023] there were more than 8,000 volunteers of Yerkrpah on combat duty at the same time. [...] Now our country is facing the rift, people are divided into 4-5 parts, everyone considers each other a traitor, how to protect the border under these conditions?

Such a statement does not contain any irredentist claim per se, but, given both his record and that of the organization he leads, it was not one that allows for full optimism concerning the absence of provocation at the border. Only a month later, armed Yerkrpah paramilitaries present on the Armenian side of the provisional border with Azerbaijan opened fire on Azerbaijani military positions, wounding one soldier. The response was Operation Revenge, which killed four Armenians, all Yerkrpah members (as mentioned above).

Naturally, questions have arisen about the reasons for this unprovoked clash, particularly since it had been preceded by a period of significant calm.

First, it is necessary to examine the context. Obviously, the scope of this clash was of categorically lesser significance than what Azerbaijan has called its antiterrorist

operation to eradicate Armenian forces illegally present in the Russian peacekeeping zone on 19-20 September 2023. Casualties on both sides numbered in the hundreds.

What is notable here is that the Armenian army did not fire a single shot in response to Azerbaijan's armed action, which eliminated the last remnant of the ethnic-Armenian separatist entity in Karabakh—in striking contrast with its decision in 2020. Moreover, mere weeks after the antiterrorist operation, Pashinyan co-signed a [document in Grenada](#), where, for the first time, he put in written form the number of square kilometers of the Azerbaijani territory he recognizes (86,600), which includes all of Azerbaijan's liberated lands (plus the exclaves surrounded by Armenian territory that remain occupied). Moreover, on 7 December 2023, representatives of the two countries announced that they had reached an agreement—in direct talks—on the exchange of detained military servicemen. This agreement also provided for an unprecedented concrete expression of mutual diplomatic support in a multilateral context. To quote from the [jointly-released statement](#):

As a sign of good gesture, the Republic of Armenia supports the bid of the Republic of Azerbaijan to host the 29th Session of the Conference of Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, by withdrawing its own candidacy. The Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan do hope that the other countries within the Eastern European Group will also support Azerbaijan's bid to host. As a sign of good gesture, the Republic of Azerbaijan supports the Armenian candidature for Eastern European Group COP Bureau membership.

One could even argue that the period from November 2023 to January 2024 represented the calmest months in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict since both countries regained their independence in 1991.

It thus seems highly unlikely that Pashinyan or any official under his control had ordered Yerkrpah to undertake this provocation—not only because of the relative easing of tensions that had taken place but also because a state-organized provocation would have been more strident. Another indication that the Yerkrpah provocation had not been ordered by Pashinyan or any official under his control was that Armenia's Ministry of Defense announced the same day that it had begun an investigation into the origins of the clash, something that it had not done in previous instances. An even clearer indication is that President Ilham Aliyev agreed to hold a meeting with Pashinyan at the Munich Security Conference in the aftermath of the clash, and that the outcome of the meeting was perceived in Baku as having been rather positive. The same can be said about the follow up [ministerial meetings in Berlin](#), on 28 and 29 February 2024.

However, this does not mean that official Armenia is blameless. As Onnik Krikorian [observed](#), “in Yerevan a number of commentators have criticized Pashinyan for having Yerkrpah, a paramilitary but politicised force, deployed in the location instead of disciplined and formal units.” There is also another possibility: that his Defense Ministry was unaware of Yerkrpah's presence on the ground, unlike, presumably, the local commanders in the field. This, in turn, again brings to the surface the question of whether the Armenian Armed Forces are under the full control of the Pashinyan government.

All the difficulty in understanding the causes of the recent event precisely lies in the ambiguity of this politicization—at least since the crises of 2018-2020. On which side is the Yerkrpah leadership today? Is this leadership even in full control of its men? These questions are unfortunately impossible to answer for now. What we do know is the historical record: Yerkrpah has not always stood united. In 2008, for instance, a part of the organization’s membership demonstrated against the Sargsyan government while Grigoryan and other Yerkrpah members violently repressed those same demonstrations.

And then there is the bigger picture. The international context is not entirely favorable to peace. Indeed, the dissatisfaction of Iran concerning Armenia’s rapprochement with France and, more broadly, the European Union, and how Yerevan sees this as being connected to advancing the peace process, is so obvious that Pashinyan openly [admitted](#) as much in February 2024: “our good relations with other countries are causing tensions in Iran.” No Armenian leader has spoken such words since the country regained its independence.

Russia’s dissatisfaction is no less great, although the Kremlin did restart its weapons deliveries to Armenia in mid-January 2024, understanding that, for the sake of advancing its own interests, the stick should be used together with the carrot. Both Tehran and Moscow have a significant number of friends in Armenia, and Yerkrpah is typically a group where such persons are not rare.

Meanwhile, the EU mission in Armenia failed to see this incident coming, and it may very well be the case that its members were unaware of Yerkrpah’s presence at the provisional border. This raises the question of what else they may be missing.

However understandable is its wish to help Pashinyan, the EU mission (and its masters in Brussels) should not be blind to the errors committed by him and his government. The Armenian prime minister clearly overestimated his control over the members of Yerkrpah. To be fair, even in his own government, Pashinyan’s situation is not easy. For instance, in June 2021, he visited Paris for talks with French President Emmanuel Macron. Pashinyan’s car was bombarded with tomatoes and eggs, hurled by ARF members, who insulted him with rather expressive linguistic vulgarities. What is particularly troublesome is that some of these demonstrators were personally welcomed by the Armenian ambassador to France, Hasmik Tomaljian, in the Armenian embassy, later on the same day as the incident took place. She remains at her post as of this writing and was seen to be part of the Armenian delegation during Pashinyan’s very latest visit to Paris to see Macron, in late February 2024.

Conclusion

The importance and impact of the Yerkrpah-triggered February 2024 clash should not be exaggerated or underestimated. It was, at the end of the day, a small-scale incident; at the same time, it illustrates the tenacity of strong (or at least vocal) minority factions in Armenia to prevent the continuation of the peace process—but it also raises the issue

of the relative weakness of the Armenian government's authority. One gesture to show Yerevan's determination to bring the peace talks to a successful conclusion would be to implement the investigation seriously and withdraw all Yerkrpah elements from the provisional border. Another would be to take seriously Armenia's obligation to implement fully the [ruling](#) of the International Court of Justice (7 December 2021) that is taken to apply to the activities of other paramilitary ultranationalist paramilitary groups, like VoMA and POGA.