



RELIGIOUS
PERSECUTION
AND ONGOING
ETHNIC CLEANSING
IN ARTSAKH
2023



On the cover:

Holy Savior Cathedral, commonly referred to as Ghazanchetsots, is an Armenian Apostolic cathedral in Shushi, Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), consecrated in 1888. On 8 October 2020, the cathedral was bombed twice by Azerbaijan, which resulted in the collapse of part of the roof. A Russian journalist was seriously injured by the second strike. Two others were also wounded. Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that the two attacks “suggest that the church, a civilian object with cultural significance, was an intentional target despite the absence of evidence that it was used for military purposes.” HRW collected remnants of the weapon used against the church, which “corroborate the use of guided munitions.” On 7 November 2020, the Azerbaijani forces seized control over the town of Shushi. In May 2021, reports were made that the dome and the cross of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral had been removed. Azerbaijani state officials have claimed that the renovation project aimed to restore the “original” appearance of the church, which, according to them, lacked the conical dome. However, the conical dome of the church can be seen in photographs from over a century ago.

Briefing: Religious Persecution and Ongoing Ethnic Cleansing in Artsakh

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

In September, 2020, Azerbaijan launched an unprovoked military offensive against the indigenous Armenian population in Artsakh (also referred to as Nagorno-Karabakh), a region that has been the historic homeland of Armenians for thousands of years. In its attack, Azerbaijan resorted to an open military support by Turkey and mercenaries from radical terrorist groups in the Middle East. The aggression was marked by grave violations of international humanitarian law, indiscriminate shelling of the republic's infrastructure and medieval cruelty against Armenian prisoners of war and civilian hostages. Deliberate shelling of churches, schools, hospitals and residential areas led to heavy casualties among a peaceful population.

Launched in the middle of the COVID pandemic, the attack was timed to occur in the few weeks before the 2020 US Presidential election. The eyes of the United States and international communities averted, the aggression drew little attention and to date Azerbaijan has evaded any accountability.

In November, 2020, a ceasefire statement brokered by Russia mandated that Armenians (governed by the Republic of Artsakh) cede control of portions of Artsakh and adjacent territories to Azerbaijan. While the ceasefire statement brought a temporary standstill to the aggression, the current situation leaves the Armenians of Artsakh in a precarious situation and many Armenian monuments and religious places of worship at heightened risk of destruction.

Today the people of Artsakh **have been under siege for over 180 days** because of Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor, the narrow road between Artsakh and Armenia and the only viable avenue of egress and ingress between the Armenians of Artsakh and the outside world.¹



Azerbaijani military reinforces blockade of Artsakh
Photo source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-lachin-checkpoints/32375862.html>

¹ Based on a 10 November 2020 ceasefire statement between the Republic of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, Nagorno-Karabakh was left to be connected to the outside world by a single road, which was to be protected by a peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation. Under that statement, there was to be “road safety along the Lachin Corridor of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions.”

An open Lachin Corridor is indispensable to keeping 120,000 Armenians in Artsakh safe and, indeed, alive, as it is the only entry point for food, medicine, and fuel, among other necessities of life. Now electricity and internet are affected, as well as the functioning of administrative and civil infrastructure in Artsakh. Schools, hospitals, and hospices are intermittently open, creating psychological terror and instability for the population.² For a full description of the humanitarian consequences of Azerbaijan's action, we refer you to the [Report](#) of the Human Rights Defender of Artsakh.³ Despite the fact that the International Court of Justice delivered a binding order indicating provisional measures requiring the Republic of Azerbaijan to "take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions," Azerbaijan has continued to impede access and in late April, escalated the situation by installing a military checkpoint on the corridor.



Grocery shop in Artsakh capital Stepanakert
Photo source: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32331317.html>

Azerbaijan's intent is clear: having initiated the war in an attempt to ethnically cleanse the region of Armenians, Azerbaijan now seeks to make life so difficult for the remaining population of 120,000 Armenians, that they will be forced to migrate. Further, once the region is completely ethnically cleansed, Azerbaijan has stated it plans to initiate cultural genocide, the act of removing every monument, church, monastery, khachkar or other physical indication of the presence of Armenians from the land.

This is a toxic environment where racial hatred of Armenians is taught in the schools, racial discrimination is practiced by the population and encouraged by the leaders of the country against Armenians, religious persecution is rampant against the Armenian Christian minority population by the Azeri Muslim majority population, disrespect of cultural and religious heritage of Armenians is not condemned and remains unpunished, and destruction of the Armenian people, their communities and culture is rewarded.

Yet, to the interfaith communities, the United Nations, and our State Department, Azerbaijan presents itself as a model of religious freedom and tolerance. Vigorously promoted by their public relations campaign and funded with oil money, this fiction is directly contradicted by reality. This is gaslighting on an international scale. At the same time, the autocracy openly ignores repeated calls from the White House, the US State

² See "The Lachin Corridor: A Looming Humanitarian Catastrophe" dated December 14, 2022, online: <https://evnreport.com/politics/the-lachin-corridor-a-looming-humanitarian-catastrophe/>; Eurasianet, "Supplies begin to run low as Nagorno-Karabakh blockade continues" dated December 19, 2022, online: <https://eurasianet.org/supplies-begin-to-run-low-as-nagorno-karabakh-blockade-continues>; Eurasianet, "Blackouts and food rationing as Karabakh blockade enters second month" January 12, 2023, online: <https://eurasianet.org/blackouts-and-food-rationing-as-karabakh-blockade-enters-second-month>.

³ Human Rights Defenders of Armenia and Artsakh, "Joint Ad Hoc Public Report, The Humanitarian Consequences of Blocking the Only Road Connecting Artsakh with Armenia and the World" dated December 15, 2022. Online: <https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/976>; Second Report. Online: <https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/1013>.

Department, the International Court of Justice and European allies demanding to restore the unimpeded access between Artsakh and the world as required by Azerbaijan's assumed international obligations.

ARMENIAN CHRISTIANS AND CLERGY ARE NOT GUARANTEED PHYSICAL SAFETY

It is estimated that some 30,000 Armenians have fled Hadrut, Shushi, and other areas in Artsakh taken by force by Azerbaijan. Ethnic Armenians have been understandably reticent to return to their homes in territories controlled by Azerbaijan as their security is not assured.

A report from the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh documented the circumstances of the deaths of civilians at the hands of Azerbaijani forces during and after the 2020 war.⁴ Many of the murdered civilians were elderly and disabled men and women, from various regions including Hadrut, Shushi and Martuni. Two civilians, were tied up in the Hadrut town square and shot on October 15.⁵ Another was found with her legs bound with rope and her skull separated from her body.⁶ Some of the civilians mentioned in the report suffered traumatic head injuries,⁷ and the bodies of some civilians were found in their homes. Among those killed and found in his home was Vahram Lalayan, a 46-year-old scholar and chair of the history department of the Grigor Narekatsi University in the capital city of Stepanakert. Professor Lalayan earned a PhD in Theology from Yerevan State University and was a specialist in medieval theology. His remains were found in his home office in the village of Mets Tagher in December 2021, during search operations by Russian peacekeepers and the International Red Cross.⁸



Professor Vahram Lalayan

Photo source: <https://iravaban.net/en/308949.html>

⁴ Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, Interim Report on the Cases of the Killing of Civilians in Artsakh by The Armed Forces of Azerbaijan, January 29, 2021, available at: <https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/785> ("Ombudsman Interim Report"). See also General Report on Damage to Life Dignity, Health, Vital Needs and Property of the People of Artsakh, available at <https://bit.ly/3Ao5xWC> (Please be aware of graphic images).

⁵ Ombudsman Interim Report, Section 3, cases number 42 and 43. This case is also reported in the United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Azerbaijan's Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2020, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/>

⁶ Ombudsman Interim Report, Section 3, case number 66.

⁷ Ombudsman Interim Report.

⁸ See Ombudsman Interim Report, Section 3, case number 60; *Society for Armenian Studies, Society for Armenian Studies (SAS) Publishes the Late Dr. Vahram Lalayan's Mystical Perception of the Book of Lamentations by Grigor Narekatsi in the 13th – 18th Centuries: Dr. Lalayan was Killed during the Artsakh War of 2020*, available at:

<https://societyforarmenianstudies.com/2021/07/28/society-for-armenian-studies-sas-publishes-the->

NOT ONLY CIVILIAN SECURITY IS THREATENED, THE SAFETY OF CLERGY IS NOT ASSURED

Dadivank is a monastery complex built between the 9th and 13th centuries located in the Karvajar/Kalbajar district. It has been a center for literary production and is one of the largest known monastic complexes in medieval Armenia. Dadivank is a working monastery and was an active religious site, where worshippers and pilgrims would regularly attend mass even up to the very last hours before Azerbaijan occupied the territory.

Under the protection of Russian Peacekeepers, after the Ceasefire Statement, monks remained in the monastery and pilgrims were still allowed to visit for a time. Since April 2021 until the present, Azerbaijan has refused to allow pilgrimages to Dadivank Monastery.

There are now only six members of the Armenian Apostolic clergy remaining in Dadivank. In a report by *Azadutyun* Newschannel (RFE/RL), translation available upon request, entitled *"We are left alone with you, Lord." Clergymen of Dadivank await Armenian pilgrims*, the situation in Dadivank is documented from the monks' perspective.⁹

In that report, Father Atanas Sarkisyan, a 27-year-old monk at Dadivank, says that the phrase *"We have remained alone with you, Lord"* is often repeated as the monks carry on their religious rites even as they are not able to receive any worshippers or pilgrims.



The monastic complex is currently protected by a small force of Russian Peacekeepers but surrounded by hundreds of Azerbaijani troops. Since April, 2021, Azerbaijani officials have blocked access to pilgrims and worshippers using various excuses such as the pandemic, road construction, and requests for reciprocal access to unknown mythical areas in an attempt to leverage pilgrims' access to Dadivank to extract other concessions.¹⁰ Following the blockade of the Lachin Corridor, there have also been increased attacks on civilians, including the assassination of three police officers in an ambush.¹¹

[late-dr-vahram-lalayans-mystical-perception-of-the-book-of-lamentations-by-grigor-narekatsi-in-the-13th-18th-centuries-dr-lalaya/](#); see also USC Dornsife Institute for Armenian Studies, *Intentional Killings of Karabakh Armenian Civilians Documented*, December 23, 2020, available at: <https://armenian.usc.edu/report-details-intentional-killings-of-civilians-in-karabakh-war/>.

⁹ "Մենք մենակ ենք մնացել քեզ հետ, Տէր" Դադիվանքի հոգևորականները հայ ուխտավորների են սպասում

(Menk Menag Enk Mnatsel Kez Hed, Der: Dadivanki Hokevoragannere Hay Oukhdavorneri en sbassoum) (Translated: *"We are left alone with you, Lord." Clergymen of Dadivank await Armenian pilgrims*), Azadutyun News Channel, July 7, 2021, available at: <https://www.azadutyun.am/a/31346025.html#comments>

¹⁰ The Report refers to a region called *Aghbaban*, which Azerbaijan apparently claims is a holy site and which it requests to access. However, as noted in the report, the Head of the Artsakh Diocese of the Armenian Church, after consulting peacekeepers, historians, elderly residents, cannot locate this site on the map. As such, Azerbaijan's request seems pretextual to block access to pilgrimages.

¹¹ <https://en.armradio.am/2023/03/05/three-police-officers-killed-in-artsakh-in-azerbaijani-subversive-attack/>

CULTURAL GENOCIDE HAPPENED AND IS HAPPENING

Azerbaijan has a lengthy, documented history of denying the existence of, and intentionally destroying, Armenian cultural and religious heritage and monuments. From 1997 to 2006, Azerbaijan deliberately obliterated nearly all traces of once prevalent Armenian culture in an area known as Nakhichevan. Armenian medieval churches, thousands of ancient carved cross-stones (*khachkars*), and historical tombstones were razed.¹² Video footage from 2005 depicts Azerbaijan destroying the surviving portions of the medieval necropolis of Djulfa, that housed tens of thousands of Armenian cross-stones (dating back to the sixth century A.D.)¹³ The cross-stones are listed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity,¹⁴ and are used for devotional and worship purposes by Armenian Christians and pilgrims in addition to documenting the history of the region.



Destruction by missile strikes and subsequent "modification" of the Sb. Chazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi, Artsakh by Azerbaijan's authorities. Photos from open sources

¹² [Special investigation: Declassified satellite images show erasure of Armenian churches](#), The Art Newspaper (June 1, 2021); Christina Maranci, ["The Medieval Armenian Monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh Must be Protected,"](#) Apollo Magazine (December 9, 2020); Dale Berning Sawa, ["Monumental loss: Azerbaijan and 'The Worst Cultural Genocide of the 21st Century,'"](#) The Guardian (March 1, 2019); Nora McGreevy, ["Why Scholars, Cultural Institutions Are Calling to Protect Armenian Heritage,"](#) Smithsonian Magazine (November 24, 2020).

¹³ Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman, ["A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture,"](#) Hyperallergic (February 18, 2019); ["Destruction of the Armenian Cemetery of Djulfa,"](#) ICOMOS Heritage at Risk; ["Azerbaijan: Famous Medieval Cemetery Vanishes: IWPR reporter confirms that there is nothing left of the celebrated stone crosses of Jugha,"](#) Institute for War & Peace Reporting; ["When the World Looked Away: The Destruction of Julfa Cemetery,"](#) Radio Free Europe (December 10, 2020); Kate Fitz Gibbon, ["World Heritage Committee Meeting in Baku Will be Hosted by Cultural Destroyers,"](#) Cultural Property News (March 19, 2019); ["Azeri Soldiers Vandalized a Cemetery in Nagorno-Karabakh. Rekindling Fears of Destruction of Armenian Heritage,"](#) Archyde (November 27, 2020); ["Silent Erasure: A Satellite Investigation of the Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhichivan, Azerbaijan,"](#) Caucasus Heritage Watch (September, 2022).

¹⁴ ["Armenian cross-stones art. Symbolism and craftsmanship of Khachkars,"](#) UNESCO.

CONTINUING DESTRUCTION – DISCONNECTING PEOPLE FROM PLACES OF WORSHIP

Since 2021, many organizations were established and are monitoring and documenting any destruction in Artsakh. Those organizations include Save Armenian Monuments, Caucasus Heritage Watch, and Monument Watch.¹⁵

Caucasus Heritage Watch, led by archeology professors from Cornell University and Purdue University, is a research group that monitors and documents endangered and damaged cultural heritage using high-resolution satellite imagery. Its June 2021 Monitoring Report documented its observations about “two primary areas where significant damage to heritage is most clearly visible” – in the town of Shushi/Shusha and along two corridors in the southern part (one corridor from Fuzuli to Shushi and another corridor along the Hakari/Aghavno River valley).¹⁶ Caucasus Heritage Watch has reported that the 51 sculptures in the park of the Shushi Museum of Fine Arts appear to have been removed or destroyed.¹⁷ Many of these sculptures had spiritual and Christian themes.



The destruction of cemeteries, most notably in Mets Tagher and Northern Shushi, is another alarming development.¹⁸ This was called out by the USCIRF in its September 2021 Factsheet on the Destruction of Cemeteries.¹⁹ Desecrating the dead is a crime and destroying the cemeteries is yet another attempt at destroying evidence that Armenians lived and died in the region and an attack on Armenian-Christian religious burial practices. It is reminiscent of the total destruction of Armenian cross stones in Nakhichevan and is another attempt to continue to try to disconnect the Armenians-Christians from the land where they exercised their religious rites and paid respects to their deceased ancestors and loved ones.



As of October 2022, Caucasus Heritage Watch has also documented the complete destruction and erasure in July, 2022 of the Saint Sargis Church, and the partial destruction of other sites.²⁰

¹⁵ Caucasus Heritage Watch: <http://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/>; Save Armenian Monuments: <https://savearmenianmonuments.com/>; Monument Watch: <https://monumentwatch.org/>.

¹⁶ Caucasus Heritage Watch, Monitoring Report 1, at pages 19 and following, available at: <http://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/index.php/report>

¹⁷ Caucasus Heritage Watch, Twitter Notification, <https://twitter.com/CaucasusHW/status/1426236001794543623?s=20>

¹⁸ Caucasus Heritage Watch, Monitoring Report 1, at pages 21 and 31, available at: <http://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/index.php/report>

¹⁹ USCIRF Factsheet: Destruction of Cemeteries, available at: <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-09/2021%20Factsheet%20-%20Destruction%20of%20Cemeteries.pdf>

²⁰ “Caucasus Heritage Watch: Monitoring Report #4,” Caucasus Heritage Watch (October, 2022).

PROMPT ACTION IS NEEDED

There are approximately 120,000 Armenians living in their ancestral homeland, Artsakh. Their lives are at risk, if not from racial hatred and religious persecution, then from the ongoing blockade. Using the blockade, and deprivation of food and medicine, restriction of medical care, and no guarantee of safety, Azerbaijan is trying to force the migration of the remaining Armenian population and ethnically cleanse the region. As of the last week of April, there is an additional alarming development: a checkpoint in the Lachin Corridor restricting movement in AND OUT of Artsakh. This step, isolating the population with no means of escape, is another indicator that Azerbaijan intends to clear the area of all Armenians.

As Dr Martin Luther King Jr. said: *"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."* Please do not remain silent. Your assistance is needed NOW to prevent another genocide.



The Armenian Bar Association is a non-profit, non-partisan organization formed in 1989 to enable attorneys of Armenian heritage and other interested individuals to better serve the law, the legal profession, and the Armenian community.

The Association provides pro bono services and legal education in Armenian communities across the country and abroad and sponsors programs to promote democracy and the rule of law in the Republics of Armenia and Artsakh.

Coming together socially and professionally, members from around the world have the opportunity to learn from one another as they join their different backgrounds and experiences in Association activities.

The Association is a democratic organization. It is supported and directed by its members, who approve its By-Laws, elect its Board of Governors, nominate prominent jurists as honorary members, and set the Association's annual goals and policies.

The Armenian Bar Association is committed to serving the profession of law, addressing the legal concerns of the Armenian community and fostering respect for human and civil rights.

To learn more, visit: ArmenianBar.org/Artsakh.



This report was published in June, 2023, in Los Angeles, California.



Inside the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi which was bombed twice with precision strikes by Azerbaijan that injured a journalist and several others on 8 October 2020. (Photographed by Simon Ostrovsky for Newlines)



www.ArmenianBar.org