

# CHRISTIANS FOR ARMENIA

## REFORMED FAITH AND LIFE

### A Broadcast and Literature Ministry

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Dear friends

#### **Waging war against Armenians**

As I write this letter, heavy fighting continues on the border between Armenia and its Muslim neighbor, Azerbaijan, around the territory of Nagorno-Karabagh (4,388 km<sup>2</sup>/1,694 sq mi, about 150,000 inhabitants) in what seems to have become a full-scale war, threatening to destabilize the whole Caucasus region. For international observers, there is little doubt that on Sunday morning, September 27, the Azeri side engaged into a massive military offensive alongside the whole Karabagh frontline, prepared by months of aggressive war rhetoric. Recently, threats to bomb Armenia's only nuclear plant South of Yerevan, Armenia's capital, were even lashed out by an irresponsible Azeri spokesman, as if a nuclear cloud would miraculously stop at the border of his own country, through the most merciful Allah! To date, international calls for ceasefire and a return to the table for negotiations remain unheard on both sides, all the more as Azerbaijan's traditional ally, Turkey led by president Erdogan, is fueling the conflict by supporting the Azeri military with its F-16 air fighters and deadly drones. According to various independent sources, Erdogan also organized the transfer of thousands of ISIS fighters from Syria to the frontline. The number of casualties at this stage is unknown, but it is very likely that hundreds of lives (soldiers as well as civilians) have already been lost. All Armenian men between 18 and 55 have been called up to fight.

#### **Ministering in a given context**

For most of you, the cause of this ongoing conflict over the territory of Artsakh (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabagh) may be quite obscure. As several friends of our ministry asked me to clarify the origin and nature of it, I will devote this newsletter to try to summarize its tenets, not in the least pretending to be neutral, but presenting a number of facts and issues that everyone can go and verify on their own. As a Christian ministry towards Armenians, we know that the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds (2 Cor 10:4), therefore we put on the armor of light (Rom 13:12). However, our ministry does not extend to Armenians in a decontextualized vacuum, we are called to reach out to them in their actual life circumstances, as dramatic as those may be. Today, issues of life and death are at stake for the Armenian nation, a tiny island of old Christian heritage, surrounded by an ocean of Muslim populations, many of them being also ethnically related (like Turks and Azeris). Pakistan and Afghanistan have come in support to the Azeri side. Iran, a traditional ally of Armenia, is concerned about possible repercussions of the fighting on its Northern border, shared with these two countries. Russia, a friend of both Armenia and Azerbaijan (it sells weapons to both...) has a military alliance with Armenia and a few other ex-Soviet republics. It maintains military bases in the North of Yerevan and could be brought to intervene under certain conditions. However, in order not to worsen its already complicated relationship with Erdogan's Turkey, Russia prefers to rely on a cease-fire and a hypothetical new round of negotiations between the belligerents. Russia, along with France and the U.S., form the so-called Minsk group, supposed since 1994 to help both parties negotiate a peaceful settlement, which it has never been able to achieve.

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## **Some historical background**

Christian Armenians have been living in Artsakh for many centuries and constitute a demographic majority in this mountainous region of Transcaucasia. This was already noted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Russian emissaries of the czar, after Russia overtaking the entire region following the defeat of the Persian empire. Self-governing Armenian principalities had managed to remain independent from Persian rule well until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of their Medieval churches and monasteries going back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century provides indisputable proof of this.

In 1915-1918, Armenians were devastated by the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman regime of the *Young Turks*. After WWI, they were promised by the Allied countries led by President Woodrow Wilson a consistent territory extending westward in Anatolia. Until then, this territory had been under Ottoman rule (Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians - all Christians – and subjects of the sultan, albeit as second-class citizens). The treaty of Sevres, enforcing the dismantling of the Ottoman empire, was signed in 1920 by all parties, including the new Turkish authorities. However, as things turned out, it was never put into effect. A subsequent war launched by general Mustafa Kemal, allowed the new Turkish republic to regain control over the regions of Anatolia where Armenians had been a majority since antique (even Biblical) times, until they were wiped out from their ancestral homeland by the Genocide. The treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, cancelled de facto the very existence of an independent Armenia within the borders defined and guaranteed by the Allies at Sevres.

## **Armenia under Soviet rule**

In the meantime, the Eastern regions of Transcaucasia, which had been subjected to the Russian czar, rapidly fell under Soviet rule. A small independent republic of Armenia that had been established upon the debris of the Russian empire, lived only two and a half years (May 1918-Nov. 1920). Armenia and Azerbaijan soon emerged from the post-war chaos as two Soviet republics. Before WWI, there had already been bloody clashes between ethnic Armenians and Azeris over various territories, because of resettlement policies imposed by the Czar's administration. The Armenian district of Shusha, a city called by Western visitors "the Paris of the Caucasus" due to its vibrant cultural life, theater and bookshops, was entirely burnt down and its population massacred in March 1920. In July 1923, for the sake of dividing ethnic and religious groups and weakening their aspirations for independence, Stalin, then Commissar of Nationalities in Soviet Union, attached Karabagh to the Azerbaijan republic instead of the Armenian republic, granting it a status of autonomy. To implement his clever scheme, Stalin made sure that the new administrative district would have an overwhelming Armenian population (close to 90%). In any case, all nationalities were now supposed to live in a loving and brotherly atmosphere, in the Communist paradise towards which everyone was joyfully striving...

## **Second independence for Armenia in the contemporary era**

This situation lasted until the late eighties, when growing support of the Karabagh population to be united to the Republic of Armenia led to anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azeri capital Baku and the city of Sumgait in February 1988. The Azeri-Armenian conflict flared up again, and became one of the triggers of the fall of Soviet Union, along with other nationalist conflicts throughout the Soviet empire. On September 21, 1991, the people of Armenia voted in a referendum to proclaim their independence from the Soviet Union. In the meantime, newly independent Azerbaijan suppressed the status of autonomy of the Nagorno-Karabagh enclave. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan that followed caused the death of about 30,000 people, the forced transfer of about one million. It ended in 1994 with Armenian forces eventually gaining the control of Nagorno-Karabagh as well as adjacent territories surrounding the

actual Karabagh inside the Republic of Azerbaijan (these territories are the main battlefield of the current fighting). A ceasefire was brokered but no peace agreement whatsoever was signed, thus leaving the possibility of renewed military conflict. Over the years, a number of skirmishes have erupted, some more serious than others, but never with the range and intensity of what is currently happening. The newly constituted Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh, existing as an enclave within Azerbaijan, was never recognized by the international community. To this day, it depends entirely on the support of the republic of Armenia, to which it is connected via a thin mountain pass, the Lachin corridor. Endowed with its own constitution, an elected Parliament and a president, it governs itself in line with democratic standards.

### **Where to stand?**

Azeris, governed by a dynasty of dictators, the Alyev family, are motivated to regain control over territories which constitute 14% of the land that was attributed to them during Soviet times, and was recognized as theirs by the U.N. after the fall of Soviet Union. Armenians are struggling to maintain their presence and civilization in the heartland of the Caucasus, where they have been living for centuries. Needless to say, in this struggle for survival, the specter of the 1915 Genocide is omnipresent. Who could realistically blame them after all they have been through?

Twenty-five years ago, the right of self-determination, entrenched in the U.N. charter, was brutally applied in the heart of Europe, with the artificial creation of a Muslim entity called Kosovo. It took the heavy bombing of Serbia by NATO forces, without any U.N. resolution, to achieve this goal. On what grounds can we deny the resilient Armenians of Nagorno-Karabagh a right to self-determination after so many sacrifices and two referendums overwhelmingly in favor of it?

Please pray that a just peace settlement would at long last be agreed upon, implemented and respected, so that no more lives, whether Armenian or Azeri, would be lost in ongoing clashes and wars. But remember also that maintaining and developing a Christian presence in this region of the world depends on the survival of a nation, Armenia, which was the first in the world to adopt Christianity as its religion (AD 301) and had to fight heroically against Persian, Arab, Seljuk, Mongol, Ottoman, Soviet and Azeri forces to maintain it alive.

Rev Eric Kayayan

