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# For The Ethnic Armenian Leadership In Nagorno-Karabakh, The Walls Are Closing In

Sunday 24 September 2023, by [KUCERA Joshua](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2023).

**Ruben Vardanian was struggling to find a good mobile connection for his iPad as he spoke over Zoom from his dark residence in Nagorno-Karabakh.**

“Sorry, we have no electricity,” he said. “It’s a challenge.”

Rolling blackouts in Azerbaijan’s breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh mean regular cuts to the power supply and, as a result, WiFi. That is on top of regular interruptions in the natural gas supply and a blockade on traffic in and out of the territory, imposed by Azerbaijan.

With negotiations advancing between Armenia and Azerbaijan — the United States opened three days of peace talks between the foreign ministers on June 27 — and indications that Armenia is prepared to cede control of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, there is a growing sense of doom in the region: not only from its ethnic Armenian population fearful of the future but from the self-proclaimed authorities that govern the region, who are finding themselves increasingly politically isolated.

Armenia’s government, which has propped up the de facto Karabakh government for the last three decades, has signaled its intention to end that support, while insisting that the rights and security of the local Armenians be protected under international supervision. On May 22, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian for the first time said explicitly that Karabakh was Azerbaijani territory.

While the de facto Karabakh authorities have remained relatively silent, Vardanian — a billionaire who had a short, tumultuous tenure as Karabakh’s state minister (a position akin to prime minister) before he was dismissed in February — has stepped up and is now presenting himself as a leader of Armenian resistance to Azerbaijani control of Karabakh.

It is the latest of many reinventions for Vardanian, who is of Armenian descent and was born in Yerevan but spent most of his adult life in Russia. He made his fortune via a banking firm he founded in 1991, which was later implicated in a massive money-laundering scheme. To Armenians, he is better known for his philanthropic work in Armenia and Karabakh.

Pashinian “has no right, legally or morally,” to give up Karabakh, Vardanian told RFE/RL over Zoom.

In late May — the day after Pashinian’s controversial statement that Karabakh was Azerbaijani territory — Vardanian [announced](#) the founding of a new organization, Front For The Security And Development Of Artsakh. Using the Armenian word for Karabakh, he said the organization had the “sacred goal of keeping Artsakh Armenian.”

In his social media posts, Vardanian has regularly called on Armenians to “fight” for Karabakh to remain Armenian. Speaking to RFE/RL, he said that “fighting is not only taking up weapons, it is

explaining our position, explaining that we will not be a part of Azerbaijan.”

Armenians have controlled Karabakh since winning the First Karabakh War in the 1990s. But as a result of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan retook more than half of the territory it had lost in the first war. Now, as it is seeking to reassert full control over the remainder of Karabakh and reintegrate the Armenian population into Azerbaijani state structures, the government in Baku insists that it will treat the territory’s tens of thousands of ethnic Armenians as equal citizens.

Few Armenians, however, believe that.

While Karabakh Armenians will supposedly have the same rights as Azerbaijanis, Baku has refused to offer them any sort of special rights or security guarantees. On June 21, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov [reiterated](#) that position, arguing that its policy toward Armenians is solely an internal matter.

Many ethnic Armenians fear that the real aim is to ethnically cleanse them from the territory. In land Azerbaijan retook in 2020, researchers have documented the destruction of several Armenian cultural heritage sites, accusations Azerbaijan denies. The authorities in Baku [have also used historical interpretations](#) not accepted outside Azerbaijani state circles to deny the Armenian origin of many of these sites. They have also pointed to the [widespread destruction](#) of Azerbaijani cultural sites during more than two decades of Armenian occupation.

Baku has taken a strong stance toward the ethnic Armenian leadership that has ruled the territory since the 1990s. From Azerbaijan’s perspective, the authorities — who have never been formally recognized by any other country, including Armenia — are illegal occupants who built their would-be state on the foundation of the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of its former Azerbaijani residents during the first war.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev recently offered an amnesty to officials in the de facto government, but only on condition that they step down from their positions.

“There is only one option left — to abide by the laws of Azerbaijan, be a loyal and decent citizen of Azerbaijan, throw the false state attributes in the trash, and dissolve the ‘parliament,’” Aliyev said in a May 28 speech, which was posted as a [transcript](#) on his website. “The ‘parliament’ should be dissolved, the element calling himself ‘president’ should surrender, and all ministers, deputies, and others should give up their positions. Only in that case can a concession be made to them. Only in that case can we talk of an amnesty.”

Aliyev’s speech gained praise from the United States. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller [said](#) in a statement that “we welcome President Aliyev’s recent remarks on consideration of [an] amnesty.” That, in turn, drew criticism from the de facto Foreign Ministry in Karabakh, which said that Washington’s endorsement caused “deep disappointment and bewilderment.”

“It is inexplicable how in this statement of the president of Azerbaijan, entirely built on open blackmail and coercion, one could find something positive that deserves encouragement,” the de facto ministry’s statement [continued](#).

The U.S. State Department has repeatedly called on Armenia and Azerbaijan to come to an agreement on ensuring the “rights and security” of the Karabakh Armenians, a formulation that implies Azerbaijani sovereignty over Karabakh, but that the issue [should be regulated](#) by a treaty with Armenia. The closed-door talks currently under way in Washington, D.C., are the second negotiations involving the South Caucasus adversaries in two months.

Aliyev's ultimatum to the de facto authorities came amid an ongoing effort to strengthen Azerbaijani control over Karabakh.

In mid-December 2022, Azerbaijani government-backed environmental protesters began obstructing the Lachin Corridor, the only road connecting Karabakh to Armenia and the outside world. At the end of April, Azerbaijan established a border checkpoint on the corridor and, just as Karabakh Armenians were beginning to overcome their misgivings about using the checkpoint to travel to and from Armenia, Azerbaijan abruptly closed it on June 15. It thus transformed a partial blockade into a complete blockade in which nothing was entering or leaving the territory. Since December, Karabakh Armenians have been saying the restrictions are causing a critical shortage of food and medicines.

Azerbaijan's stated reason for the closure was that Armenian troops fired at the border checkpoint. In recent weeks, Baku has repeatedly accused ethnic Armenian armed forces, known as the Defense Army, of firing on Azerbaijani troops, which the authorities in the de facto capital, Stepanakert — a city known as Xankendi by the Azerbaijanis — have consistently denied.

In the most recent incident, Nagorno-Karabakh authorities say four ethnic Armenian soldiers were killed on June 28 by Azerbaijani fire. Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry did not comment on the alleged deaths and said that its positions were fired upon from Nagorno Karabakh and that one of its soldiers was wounded.

Despite the sporadic exchanges of fire, the closure of the border checkpoint "is more likely being done to force the de facto authorities into accepting Baku's demands," said Shujaat Ahmadzada, a researcher at the Baku-based Topchubashov Center, which focuses on international relations and security. Those demands are primarily accepting reintegration into Azerbaijan and the dismantling of the Defense Army, Ahmadzada said.

The negotiating position that Armenia has adopted — its acknowledgement that Karabakh is Azerbaijani territory and its tacit acceptance of the new border checkpoint — has encouraged Baku's pressure on the Defense Army and other Karabakh institutions, wrote Benjamin Poghosyan, head of the Yerevan-based Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies, in a recent [analysis](#) in The Armenian Weekly.

"Azerbaijan has perceived these steps as a de facto green light for a military operation against the Artsakh defense army," Poghosyan wrote.

Amid this pressure, the local authorities in Karabakh have been keeping a low profile, with senior officials saying little about the diplomatic process unfolding around them. The de facto Foreign Ministry in Stepanakert declined to respond to RFE/RL's questions about the negotiations and just pointed to a May 30 [statement](#) calling Aliyev's ultimatum to disband "open threats and outright blackmail."

With the Karabakh authorities receding into the background, Vardanian has helped to fill the political vacuum. He is taking aim at what he sees as the resignation among some Armenians to accept an Azerbaijani takeover of Karabakh.

"First, we are trying to consolidate the people [in Karabakh], who have three options: to leave, to accept Azerbaijani rule, or who say, 'No, we will raise our voices together.' So, the first key target is people who live here, the second is the Armenian people" outside Karabakh, he said. "Before you ask anyone for help, you need to raise your own willingness to defend your own future."

Under the cease-fire agreement that ended the 2020 war, Russia has committed to maintaining a

peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh until 2025. At that point, Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Russia could veto the extension of the mission. Azerbaijan has not hidden its impatience with the Russian forces on the ground; without fail, Baku's official statements refer to the peacekeepers' presence as "temporary."

Speaking to RFE/RL, analyst Poghosyan said that perhaps the best bet for Karabakh Armenians to retain control of the region — at least in the medium-term — could be to maintain the status quo until 2025 and then hope something changes in the international arena that would allow the Russian peacekeepers to stay.

"Then we will see what will happen with Russia/Ukraine, with Azerbaijan itself, with Armenia," he said. If Azerbaijan believes Russia will not withdraw its troops even if Azerbaijan vetoes the extension, then Baku may not risk an open confrontation with Moscow, he added.

Vardanian has publicly broken with the de facto authorities in Karabakh on some issues, most prominently on the government's decision to allow travel through the Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor, [saying](#) the decision amounted to crossing a "red line."

Days later, though, Vardanian met with the region's ethnic Armenian leader and de facto president, Arayik Harutiunian.

"We have a good — not good, but constructive — working relationship and a dialogue with them," Vardanian said. "All people here understand the danger we are facing. There can be some tactical disagreements about how to proceed, but I don't see fundamental disagreements."

In Azerbaijan, though, Vardanian is seen as "Moscow's main man on the ground," according to Baku-based analyst Ahmadzada. Harutiunian, among others, is seen as being more cooperative with Armenian President Pashinian and more amenable to working with Baku, he added.

The Azerbaijani government fears that Russia may be trying to block Karabakh's reintegration against the will of the Armenian government.

"Many pro-government and government-affiliated experts are raising the possibility of conducting what they call 'counterterrorism operations' in Nagorno-Karabakh as a show of force to Moscow and its aliases in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is Vardanian," Ahmadzada said. "The scope and scale of the operations are still unanswered questions, but most probably it [would mean] high-precision strikes to the military infrastructure of the Defense Army."

Vardanian declined to comment to RFE/RL on the future of the Defense Army.

"I am not a specialist in this, [but] I know just one thing," he said. "In the situation when you are in a blockade, everyone becomes a soldier. Everyone, from the kids to old men, needs to become a soldier to defend the homeland."

Baku has been encouraged, meanwhile, by efforts from the European Union and the United States to foster negotiations between the Azerbaijani government and representatives of the Karabakh Armenians, Ahmadzada said. Those efforts seem to have borne little fruit thus far, but they did elicit a [much-discussed report](#) in the Russian news agency RIA Novosti claiming that the United States was "forcing" representatives from Karabakh to negotiate with Baku, and was threatening that if they didn't cooperate, Azerbaijan would conduct a "counterterror" operation.

Asked about the RIA Novosti report and U.S. efforts more generally to mediate between Baku and Stepanakert, a spokesperson from the U.S. Embassy in Baku offered a statement: "As we know,

Russia has a history of pushing out disinformation. We have consistently maintained that peace in the region must include protections for the rights and securities of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. We would welcome any dialogue that furthers this.”

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan continues to press for reintegration. After more than a week of a full blockade, on June 24, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Bayramov [said](#) that supplies of food and other goods could be restored to Nagorno-Karabakh — but this time via Azerbaijan.

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