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ANALYSIS

PKK IN ARMENIA: THE INVOLVEMENT OF PKK TERRORISTS IN THE WAR BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

Bakhdeh romeh tunin eh, or “You cannot trust the Turk”: Armenians believe that this adage of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terrorists perfectly describes the similarity that paved a path for the development of strong Armenia–PKK ties based on a “common enemy” principle. Notwithstanding this, the previously existing networks and contacts with Kurdish nationalists during the period of the Ottoman Empire were just as significant, if not more decisive.¹ As a consequence, Armenia values the PKK as by far one of its most significant partners with influence in the Middle East and beyond. This liaison stretches throughout the South Caucasus and has already been involved in both of the Karabakh Wars. The binder here is Armenia’s Yezidi-Kurdish community, which smooths the overall process, helps with the implementation of joint plans, and makes implicit what Armenian government wishes to keep out of sight.

Today, this partnership embraces training camps, the involvement of PKK militants in operations against Azerbaijan,² arms usage and attack planning, fighters receiving medical treatment in Armenia, and so forth. At the same tie, Armenian attitudes towards Kurds are complicated and must take into account the former accusing the latter of taking action against Armenians in the early twentieth century.³ Ironically, the Armenian government stubbornly overlooks this fact, as well as the presence of the PKK in Armenia, by manifesting ignorance for the sake of its own national interest.

Otherwise, Armenia actively support the PKK in external affairs involving Armenia’s Yezidi and Kurdish communities and diasporas. The Kurdish community in Armenia, headed by the Kurdish member of the Armenian Parliament, Knyaz Hasanov, fulfilled the demands of the Armenian government by holding protests in front of the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan in response to Turkey’s actions in Syria.⁴ Similar actions have been implemented in the U.S.A. by the Armenian diaspora.⁵ According to documents leaked through WikiLeaks, the protests, with up to 150 participants, took place with the help of cash from the

¹ https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/pub/media/resources/9781474462624_Chapter_12.pdf

² <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200930-armenia-transport-hundreds-of-pkk-militants-to-fight-azerbaijan/>

³ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06YEREVAN1484_a.html

⁴ <https://asbarez.com/armenias-kurdish-community-holds-protest-rally-at-u-s-embassy/>

⁵ <https://asbarez.com/armenian-kurdish-groups-protest-turkeys-invasion-of-syria/>

PKK's Yerevan office (the Kurdistan Committee) and, indeed, not without the assistance of the local authorities.⁶

Although serving a life sentence in prison, the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan "recognized" so-called "Armenian genocide" and sent a letter appealing to Turkey to recognize this and "confront ... history."^{7,8} In further remarks, the PKK leader outlined that "We [the PKK] fight for freedom of not only the Kurdish people, but also the Armenian" and "[t]he struggle to heal the suffering of the Armenian people and the struggle to live in these lands as citizens with equal rights are intertwined."^{9,10}

As a consequence of an investigation conducted by Turkish police, the head of the PKK's female branch, Layika Gultekin, conceded that the PKK fought side by side with Armenians against Azerbaijan in Karabakh.¹¹ The presence of the terrorists was also confirmed by Armenian media outlets. At present, Armenia has formed POGA, a new terrorist group that is providing free military courses (military tactics and guidance on using military equipment, marksmanship, first aid and psychological training) and is financially supported (every individual gets \$100) by a collaboration between the PKK and ASALA, as well as the Armenian diaspora.¹² In addition, the Armenian-run and Qamishli-based Nubar Ozanyan Brigade of Syria joined Armenia in the war with Azerbaijan. This terrorist group was formed by the PKK's Syrian wing, the YPG.^{13,14,15}

Thus, Armenia-PKK relations span a range of critical issues, including destabilization of the peaceful lives of Turks and Kurds, as well as exacerbating the situation in the region as whole.

A short history of the Armenia-PKK alliance

Cooperation between the Kurdistan Workers' Party and Armenia had strengthened by the 1960s, though the beginnings of a close alliance between Kurdish nationalists and Armenian Dashnaks dates back to the early 20th century. Declassified CIA documents provide evidence of PKK commando armies operating in Yerevan and the Aghri Mountain region, explicitly organized by Soviet Armenia.¹⁶

Yet, as far back as a joint press conference of ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and the PKK in 1980, the two organizations had made a deal on conducting mutual army actions against Turkey, together with matters regarding the foundation of a federal state. ASALA spokesperson Akop Akopian, for example, stated that they were fighting "side by side with Kurdish revolutionaries."¹⁷ Further, the Kurdistan Workers' Party supported Armenians in planning attacks, while joint camps of ASALA and the PKK were discovered and destroyed by Turkish armed forces.

⁶ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07YEREVAN528_a.html

⁷ <https://armenianweekly.com/2014/01/30/ocalan/>

⁸ <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/77397/ocalandan-ermeni-halkina-mektup>

⁹ <https://arminfo.info/index.cfm?objectid=E71B9EC0-89C0-11E3-BC8E0EB7C0D21663>

¹⁰ <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/77397/ocalandan-ermeni-halkina-mektup>

¹¹ <https://en.azvision.az/news/135777/-pkk-admits-fighting-with-armenians-in-karabakh-.html>

¹² https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/anti-turkey-military-school-provides-free-training-in-armenia/news?gallery_image=undefined#big

¹³ <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/75/625>

¹⁴ <https://www.suriyegundemi.com/nubar-ozanyan-taburu>

¹⁵ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/are-pkk-linked-terrorists-fighting-alongside-armenia-in-occupied-karabakh-40201>

¹⁶ <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp82-00457r007600040006-2>

¹⁷ <https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/RELATIONS-BETWEEN-THE-PKK-AND-ASALA>

ASALA and the PKK trained in the same terrorist camps in the Middle East, and the PKK attended meetings between terrorists and ASALA. The relationship was further consolidated at a meeting held in Sayda on April 8, 1980.¹⁸ At the meeting, it was stated that armed operations would be carried out against Turkey until the Turkish state was overthrown and Armenian and Kurdish demands were met. According to Baki Karer, a former PKK Central Committee member, Abdullah Ocalan had established relations with ASALA abroad. Thus, the organization raised its relations with the PKK to a strategic level and planned a series of joint actions in Turkey and Europe.¹⁹

There are many examples of the relationship between the two organizations. The PKK provided logistical support to the Esenboğa raid carried out by ASALA on August 7, 1982. The PKK provided the weapons for the ASALA militants and also acted as lookouts during the operation. There was also PKK-ASALA cooperation in heroin smuggling. According to the findings of the Swedish secret police (SEPO), Ocalan's wife, Kesire Ocalan, had a business relationship with Gevorg Vartanyan. Vartanyan, meanwhile, was in contact with the "Shoemakers Gang," the heroin operation of ASALA in Sweden.²⁰ Moreover, Abdullah Ocalan personally managed the PKK's relations with Armenia.

Meanwhile, ASALA was assisting the PKK's actions in eastern and southeastern Anatolia. Armenian militants from ASALA also participated in the Eruh and Shemdinli events, the first major actions of the PKK, on August 15, 1984. It is also claimed that ASALA's effectiveness decreased after 1985 and Akop Akopian's murder (1988), when some ASALA militants transferred to the PKK. According to the findings of the Turkish Security General Directorate, PKK and ASALA militants are being trained in camps in Armenia.

Yezidi and Kurdish minority of Armenia: Furtherance of PKK outreach

The 2011 Armenian census put the numbers of Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia at 35,272 and 2,131 respectively. Both groups are represented in four different Armenian assemblies: the National Union of Yezidis, the Kurdistan Committee, the Armenian-Kurdish Friendship Council, and the Kurdish Intellectuals Council.

Usually, Armenian Yezidis become annoyed when identified as Kurds, and in Armenia the two are recognized as separate ethnicities. Curiously, however, most Kurds there practice the Yezidi faith. Every year, the number of practicing Muslim Kurds is decreasing. Although the Yezidis speak the same language as the Kurds (Kurmanji), the former insist they speak the "Yezidi" language (unlike the Kurds, they use the Cyrillic alphabet). When the contradictory sympathies of Yezidis (especially rural ones) towards the PKK are questioned, they refer to the "PKK's non-religious banner," the same territorial struggles, and the feeling of being homeless.²¹ A late underworld boss of Yezidi origin in Moscow, Aslan Usayan (Ded Hasan), for example, was believed to be a supplier for the Kurdistan Workers' Party and hosted Abdullah Ocalan in 1999. It was also suggested that Ded Hasan took \$4 million in cash to Ocalan during his stay in Italy.²²

¹⁸ <https://satemer.sakarya.edu.tr/tr/icerik/19787/101536/ermeni-teror-orgutu-asala-ve-faaliyetleri>

¹⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00283R000400030009-2.pdf>

²⁰ <https://satemer.sakarya.edu.tr/tr/icerik/19787/101536/ermeni-teror-orgutu-asala-ve-faaliyetleri>

²¹ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07YEREVAN1259_a.html

²² <http://www.gazetevatan.com/infazin-ardinda-rus-mafyasi-cikti-978289-yasam/>

Citing a high degree of confluence between Yerevan's and Moscow's interests, some experts believe that Armenia has been courting the Yezidis over the past few years in the hope of making the most of the Yezidi community. The key issue is that the Yezidis tend to be anti-Turkish and are therefore a proper instrument for the implementation of Armenia's goals. From time to time, Armenians have made visits to Yezidi-populated areas in Iraq and Syria as well as Yezidi officials meeting with Armenians. Visits have been followed by news on the opening of consulates. Furthermore, Armenian investment has already been detected in the Yezidi-populated areas of Syria and Iraq: among the investors are Armenian Yezidis. The willingness of Armenia to grant Yezidis refugee status and recognize the "genocide of Yezidis"²³ confirms Yerevan and Moscow's aspiration to get support from this group.²⁴ Perhaps a distinct role is also played by the Yezidis' special bond with and sympathy towards the PKK. In this context, it noteworthy that Turkey clashed with a Yazidi militia known as the Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS), which had close ties to the PKK, in the Yezidi-dominated Sinjar area bordering Syria.²⁵

Through diplomatic documents revealed by WikiLeaks, Armenians and Armenian Yezidis have confirmed the presence of the PKK in Armenia. The Yezidis state they have been offered financial and material assistance by the PKK; this also acknowledges the pro-PKK sympathies of the local people. The Armenian heads of Yezidi schools in the Hakko and Gialto villages of Armenia have confirmed the evidence of the existence of PKK militants here. Separate sources confirm dozens of Armenian Yezidis fighting with the PKK (previously, the PKK made efforts to recruit fighters there).²⁶ As stated in the leaked documents, the Kurdistan Committee that supervised the PKK's activities in Armenia organized protests against Turkey and in support of Ocalan by paying villagers.

Due to the Armenian then-Mayor Ahmad Broyan, hundreds of wounded fighters from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey visited Armenia to receive medical treatment (for example, before departing to Europe). Accordingly, there was a center in Armenia managing the medical treatment process. Moreover, a local journalist discovered and reported on a wedding with the participation of more than 300 Yezidis and "members of the Kurdistan Committee including four members of the PKK from Turkey and Syria."²⁷ Another Armenian expert focusing on Iran and the Kurds, Garnik Asatrian, revealed that Kurdish political organizations in Iran and Sweden make regular payments to more than 20 Yezidis.²⁸ Asatrian believes that the Kurdish-Yezidi National Cultural Center "Kurdistan First" gathers contributions and then pays people for engaging in demonstrations.

In this regard, WikiLeaks reports that a conspiracy theory is circulating within Armenian Yezidi community that the PKK is mapping out Yezidi-populated areas of current Armenia as a segment of "Greater Kurdistan." The logic behind this, according to the Yezidis, is to populate Turkey and Armenia with persecuted Yezidis for broadening "Kurdistan territories"; they say things such as "our people" live there now, meaning the territories in the future would become "our land."²⁹ For successful implementation of its plans, the PKK needs Yezidis educated in the Soviet period for its quite uneducated ranks.

²³ <https://thebulletin.news/newsdesk/armenia-becomes-first-country-to-recognise-yazidi-genocide/>

²⁴ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/590c38464.html>

²⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/turkey-strikes-pkk-targets-iraqs-kurdistan-region#ixzz74qGhj2Yy>

²⁶ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07YEREVAN723_a.html

²⁷ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06YEREVAN1424_a.html

²⁸ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06YEREVAN1424_a.html

²⁹ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07YEREVAN1259_a.html

Simultaneously, Yezidi brethren feel deep pride for being involved in the Karabakh wars with their “brothers-in-arms”—Armenians. In textbooks published in Yezidi they proudly praise 31 Yezidi “heroes” of the early 1990s. In this regard, a monument to the fight against Turkey has been erected on Armenia’s border with Turkey. Yezidis took part in both Karabakh wars as well as the interim conflicts of April 2016 and in Tovuz in 2020.³⁰ Thus, taking into consideration Armenia’s disregard of the PKK in its own interest, the warm ties between the PKK and Yezidis, and Yezidis’ aspiration to fight against Azerbaijan, the potential steadily rose for a positive reception for the PKK in Armenia and for the PKK’s involvement in the Karabakh war via Yezidi–Armenian cooperation.

The PKK in Armenia and the liberated Karabakh region of Azerbaijan

Officially, the PKK, headed by Osman Ocalan, inaugurated its organization in Armenia in 1992. That is to say, history preserves memories of Abdullah Ocalan sending letters to then-President Robert Kocharian with a hope for future cooperation with the Armenian government as well as the Armenian people.³¹

According to Armenia’s *Zhamanak* newspaper, PKK terrorists continue to infiltrate Armenia. Terrorists, avoiding clashes with the Turkish military and “escaping persecution” cross the Armenian–Turkish border and surrender to the Armenian authorities. The same source asserts that Russian border guards on the Armenian–Turkish border do not prevent terrorists from entering Armenia.³² Another Armenian media outlet shares a list of countries supporting the Kurdistan Workers’ Party; Russia stands in first place, whereas Armenia is thirteenth. In a defined sequence, members of the PKK receive a “terrorist education” from the intelligence units of Armenia.³³ An Armenian expert, Hayk Gabrielyan, urged Armenians not to disseminate this information to the press at all, even if PKK fighters flee to Armenia, as this news quickly spreads to the Azerbaijani press and, through it, to the Turkish press and pro-government newspapers.³⁴

Several distinct pieces of evidence revealed by researchers demonstrate that Yezidi villagers enlisted under the Kurdish nationalist banner and went to fight alongside PKK terrorists. This was confirmed by the host of a Yezidi radio show in Armenia, Hasan Tamoyan. According to Tamoyan, there were dozens of cases of Yezidi youths (for example, Yusuf Avdoyan and his sister) being lured out of their homes to fight with the Kurds.³⁵

A well-known Western scholar of the Yezidis of Armenia, Onnik Krikorian, shares personal experience of listening to stories of PKK uniforms and Abdullah Ocalan’s portrait being displayed on the walls of Yezidi homes and “of Yezidi villagers greeting each other with the customary PKK salutation of ‘heval,’ the Kurmanji word for ‘comrade’” in interviews with Yezidi PKK participants.³⁶ According to him, even though the Armenian government prefers to ignore the PKK’s presence in Armenia, it is well aware of the actions of the terrorists. Krikorian continues that a professor of his acquaintance (who attempted to give him a bribe) informed on his friends from the Armenian MFA, stating that “passportless PKK fighters

³⁰ <https://www.evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/yes-beyond-the-mountains-there-was-war>

³¹ http://www.cilicia.com/armo10i_kurdistan.html

³² <https://hayatsk.info/news/46960>

³³ <https://www.ermenihaber.am/am/news/2016/01/06/Sabah-PKK-%D5%80%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%BD%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B6/73511>

³⁴ <https://m.1in.am/am/2304902.html>

³⁵ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06YEREVAN1484_a.html

³⁶ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06YEREVAN1484_a.html

were slipping through unattended pockets of Armenia's western border, implying that there was nothing the MFA could do about it.” Similar evidence has been put forward by another expert, Garnik Asatryan.³⁷

But, in recent decades, Armenia has continued to cooperate with the PKK by altering the demographic situation in the previously occupied territories of Azerbaijan. After the explosion in Beirut, the Pashinyan government settled more than a hundred Lebanese Armenians in Karabakh. Prior to that, Syrian Armenians were moved to Karabakh. Along with the change in the demographic situation, Pashinyan also intensified his military activities in Karabakh. Thus, the so-called “special forces” of the PKK terrorist organization were sent to Karabakh, where they conducted joint exercises with Armenians. The PKK prepared for a new attack in Karabakh, while about 250 Armenian soldiers were sent to Syria to join with PYD/YPG terrorists.³⁸ Turkey has revealed that the latest cooperation between the Armenian military and the PKK was established under the supervision and mediation of France. The former Iranian ambassador to Azerbaijan, Afshar Suleimani, recently stated that the resettlement of Lebanese Armenians to Karabakh is only “the visible part of the iceberg.” The former ambassador said that, in the two months before the Second Karabakh War, hundreds of PKK terrorists from Iraq and Syria had been deployed in Karabakh.

Armenian prisoner Albert Mikaelyan shed further light on this, stating that more than 1,500 PKK terrorists were fighting in the Armenian ranks for a \$600 salary. Meanwhile, Armenians had opted for relocating PKK terrorists to Karabakh via Iranian territory in Azerbaijani uniforms; hence, the former could have claimed, if challenged, that they were mercenaries fighting for Azerbaijan.^{39,40} As stated by the Azerbaijan General Prosecutor’s Office, pictures and videos posted by Armenians themselves revealed that members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, along with young members of ASALA, were among the members of the Armenian special military-patriotic organization VoMA.^{41,42}

Is PKK the only terrorist group Armenians currently are cooperating with?

Experts occasionally assert that ASALA was supported by Soviet Armenia.⁴³ Unlike other Armenian organizations, ASALA simultaneously cooperated with leftist terrorist organizations in different parts of the world, such as the Japanese Red Army, Italian Red Brigades, EOKA-B, Kurdistan Workers Party, Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Marxist-Leninist Turkish organizations, especially TIKKO. ASALA also used pseudonyms for its actions, among them: 3 October; Orly; 9 June; Armenian Secret Army; New Armenian Resistance; French September Organization; 15 Swiss Group; Red Armenian Army; World Punishment Organization; 28 May; Armenian National Committee; and Armenian National Revolution Movement.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the Armenians of Lebanon (a 16,000-strong community) have expressed explicit support for Hezbollah. The main Armenian political bloc of Lebanon, which had a pivotal and decisive swing vote in the parliamentary elections, had to select between supporting Hezbollah or the West. Armenians were already accused of acting in favor of the terrorist group Hezbollah, partly because of the plan Armenians

³⁷ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06YEREVAN1484_a.html

³⁸ <https://haqqin.az/news/189389>

³⁹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan-front-line/armenia-making-pkk-terrorists-wear-azerbaijani-uniforms/2018969>

⁴⁰ <https://www.eureporter.co/frontpage/2020/09/23/pkks-involvement-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-would-jeopardize-european-security/>

⁴¹ <https://www.haberturk.com/erzurum-haberleri/85076617-ermenilerin-yeni-teror-orgutu-vomaasimed-baskani-egilmez-voma-teror-orgutu-su-anda>

⁴² <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/172026.html>

⁴³ Gunter, M. M. (1985). Transnational sources of support for Armenian terrorism. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 5(4).

⁴⁴ <https://satemer.sakarya.edu.tr/tr/icerik/19787/101536/ermeni-teror-orgutu-asala-ve-faaliyetleri>

had mapped out to preserve their presence in Iran and Syria. Moreover, they were promised complete control of the parliamentary seats in Armenian-dominated districts. According to Hovik Mekhitarian, the opposition group had not proposed enough; only one seat in return for support in 15 seats.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Despite adamant denials of renewed PKK–Armenia collaboration and further engagement in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the evidence presented confirms Armenia’s ineptitude in setting forth feasible arguments to refute this. Nonetheless, the PKK is not the only terrorist group that Armenia is cooperating with. Dealings are established between Armenians and Hezbollah and Syria’s YPG, as well as illegal groups such as TIKKO. History reveals further ties with the Japanese Red Army, Italian Red Brigades, EOKA-B, PKK, and IRA.

Having deep roots in Armenia, the PKK mostly regulates its activities by recruiting and using the Yezidi-Kurdish community, which feels strong sympathies for the PKK. Simultaneously, the Armenian government, preferring implicit collaboration, totally ignores the PKK’s presence for its own benefit. The Second Karabakh War witnessed PKK terrorists joining the military-patriotic groups of Armenia, VoMa and ASALA, sometimes dressed in Azerbaijani uniforms for preserving confidentiality. The efforts of the Armenian government to relocate Syrian and Lebanese Armenians to Karabakh and thereby change the demographic situation and help the terrorists to fortify their positions there demonstrates that collaboration has not been framed merely by wars. Unfortunately, some countries still continue to prioritize refusing to acknowledge Armenia’s cooperation with the terrorist groups, thereby putting more people’s lives at risk.

⁴⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/26/world/middleeast/26armenians.html>