



Statement on the Sentencing of former Artsakh State Minister Ruben Vardanyan in Azerbaijan

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention protests the sentencing of Ruben Vardanyan to four months of “preventive detention” in Azerbaijan, after which he is apparently scheduled to stand trial for a host of invented charges carrying a possible sentence of 14 years in prison. Vardanyan, a well-known philanthropist and former State Minister of the Republic of Artsakh, is a civilian and has committed no crime.

Azerbaijan arrested and detained Vardanyan as he crossed the illegal Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor with tens of thousands of other Armenian refugees who were fleeing Azerbaijan’s genocide in the Armenian enclave of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh. According to [News.am](#), Azerbaijan has accused Vardanyan of “financing terrorism, participating in the creation and activities of armed organizations or groups not provided for by the legislation of Azerbaijan, and organizing the illegal arrival of a foreigner or stateless person to Azerbaijan.”

These outrageous charges are in line with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev’s Armenophobic worldview, which criminalizes all signs of Armenian identity and sovereignty. The charges against Vardanyan echo President Ilham Aliyev’s talking points about the Republic of Artsakh, according to which Artsakh’s government is “illegal” and run by “separatists” and “terrorists.” Vardanyan has demonstrated an elegant and outspoken support for Artsakh’s self-determination, a claim that rests on Artsakh’s status as an historically Armenian majority territory with a 4000 year old history. This territory has never been directly controlled by Azerbaijan.

Artsakh (also called Nagorno Karabakh) was self-governed for a brief period after World War I. It was then given by Stalin to the Azerbaijan SSR in the 1920s, where it became an autonomous oblast. In 1991 Artsakh declared its independence, after which Azerbaijan declared war. That war, which ended in 1994, resulted in a ceasefire, creating the conditions for the indigenous Armenians of Artsakh to build a democratic, representative government that functioned very much like an independent state. Despite this history, Azerbaijan rejects the self-determination claims of Artsakh Armenians and instead insists that Artsakh is an integral part of its territory. It accuses Armenians of being “invaders” of the territory and has invented a history, refuted by all

serious scholarship and historical evidence, according to which Azeris are the indigenous people.

The Lemkin Institute believes that Azerbaijan intends to use Vardanyan as a symbol of its total victory over Armenians, whom President Aliyev regularly vilifies not only as “terrorists” and “separatists,” but also as “rats,” “dogs,” “jackals,” and “wild beasts.” We outlined Aliyev’s genocidal narrative about Armenian identity in detail in our 126-page [report](#) published on September 5, 2023, entitled *Risk Factors and Indicators of the Crime of Genocide in the Republic of Artsakh: Applying the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. Vardanyan has been the principal representative of the Republic of Artsakh to the outside world, appearing on Western television programs to articulate the independence claims of Artsakh Armenians and to chronicle their suffering, their dignity, their heroism, and their fundamental right to live in freedom and democracy. We can only imagine what his capture means to the Azerbaijani state.

[Video footage](#) of Vardanyan being led by two heavily armed and masked Azerbaijani soldiers through hallways with barred doors and into an interrogation room were shown on Azerbaijani television and have circulated on social media. At the time of the release of this statement, we have seen no other news about his treatment.

Azerbaijan is also holding David Babayan, Advisor to the President and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Artsakh, who turned himself in to Artsakh authorities the day after Vardanyan’s arrest. He [wrote on Facebook](#) explaining his decision: ““You all know that I am included in the black list of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani side demanded my arrival in Baku for an appropriate investigation. I decided to head from Stepanakert to Shoushi today. This decision will naturally cause great pain, anxiety and stress, primarily to my loved ones, but I am sure they will understand. My failure to appear, or worse, my escape, will cause serious harm to our long-suffering nation, to many people, and I, as an honest person, hard worker, patriot and Christian, cannot allow this.” Azerbaijan already may be holding other members of the Artsakh government and the Artsakh Defense Army and will most likely arrest and detain more in the coming days. As is the case with Vardanyan, there is no basis for summarily detaining other members of the democratically-elected Artsakh government or its military.

The attempted humiliation of symbols of communal strength and social organization, particularly the humiliation of powerful political leaders and male elites, is a common act of genocide. We expect that, unless the international community puts heavy pressure on Azerbaijan, which it so far has refused to do, the Azerbaijani state will continue to instrumentalize these leaders to humiliate and demoralize the Armenian people. Azerbaijan has already done this with Armenian POWs from the 2020 war, who have been illegally detained, humiliated, tortured, murdered, disappeared, and subjected to show trials for ridiculous charges of “terrorism.” We therefore fear for the treatment of the Artsakh political and military leadership while under Azerbaijani control.

International protest regarding Azerbaijan’s commencement of an unequivocal genocidal process against Armenians, of which Ruben Vardanyan’s four-month “preventive detention”

sentence is an integral part, has been appallingly meager. US State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller [commented](#) on September 27, 2023, "We are aware of the arrest. We are closely monitoring the situation. I have no other comments today." We hope that the deafening silence around Vardanyan's arrest and detention means that there are serious private negotiations ongoing with the Azerbaijani authorities regarding his release.