

The Making of a *De Facto* State

Warlords and Militarized Society in Nagorno-Karabakh

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 103

Nona Shahnazarian

Kuban Social and Economic Institute (Krasnodar)

June 2010

“Warlordism” is sometimes seen as a self-repairing strategy for weak states. This memo assesses the rise of the twin phenomena of warlordism and militarism in the *de facto* state of Nagorno-Karabakh and the ways in which authorities have coped with their complex social effects in the aftermath of the 1992-94 Armenian-Azerbaijani war.

Rocky Times

After the break up of the USSR, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan fielded a regular army. When the newly established states found themselves in a state of war over Nagorno-Karabakh, volunteer armies were hastily formed. The Armenians were in a more advantageous position because of their deeper experience in the Soviet military, which had structurally discriminated against Azerbaijanis. Nonetheless, after the withdrawal of Soviet military forces from Armenia in 1992, it was difficult for authorities to organize troops, especially considering the overall social and economic disintegration of the times. For Armenia, the war was unexpected, there was no unified command structure, and there was a lack of military discipline and weaponry. Fear and outrage among the population grew as the wealthiest members of the population found ways to save their possessions and leave while the rest remained in a stifling blockade. In Nagorno-Karabakh, a group of local activists, later joined by volunteers from Armenia, the Soviet army, and the Armenian diaspora, continued to provide civic defense and to fight for secession from Azerbaijan.

Black Markets

One consequence of the war was a rise in black market trade, stimulated by an influx of humanitarian assistance. According to numerous Armenian diaspora aid workers, significant amounts of supplies never reached their destinations. It became clear that aid and supplies were routinely placed into the pockets of influential clans or sold for profit. Volunteers sent to inspect were fooled by all kinds of techniques used by local authorities (many learned from Soviet times). Humanitarian aid profiteering was notably disappointing and revealed the extent of lawlessness.

There were a number of reasons for this economic behavior, which can be found in the social and economic context of the region. For instance, one of the most criminal places in Soviet Azerbaijan where black markets flourished was the town of Agdam bordering Nagorno-Karabakh. Rumors and jokes ran unrestrained, for example: "They say the hydrogen bomb hasn't yet been invented because otherwise it'd be for sale from a kiosk in the Agdam market!" This infamous market was so close to people on both sides of the conflict that it could not but influence regional economic behavior. As well, Nagorno-Karabakh was a depressed agrarian area, and local authorities invented every possible subterfuge to secure financial grants from Baku.

Black markets were thus not a new phenomena in Nagorno-Karabakh, though the actors of these markets changed. Players became more barefaced and defiant as the economies transitioned from Soviet centralization to local independence.

Warlords, Rogues, or National Heroes?

Out of the conflict two significant figures rose to power in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh: Vazgen Sarkisyan, Armenia's first defense minister, and Samvel Babayan, the "golden hero of Artsakh" (the Armenian term for Nagorno-Karabakh).

Vazgen Sarkisyan (born 1959) was an indisputably charismatic leader. His sincere and passionate addresses on television created a sense of nationalism and he inspired the so-called "battalion of kamikazes." Known for serving at the forefront of numerous battles for Karabakh, Sarkisyan was able to hone his authority and popularity. In 1993, he founded the Yerkrapah veterans' movement, which, according to Thomas de Waal, author of *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, "became the most powerful organization in the country" and "took over large areas of the economy." By the end of the 1990s, the army became the most influential institution in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Sarkisyan became the most powerful political actor in Armenia, directly influencing political decisions and, when necessary, even election results.

In the last years of President Levon Ter-Petrosian's administration, a split appeared among Armenia's ruling elite between the so-called "intellectuals" who stood for economic development (including Ter-Petrosian) and the politician-veterans of the Karabakh war. The interests of these two groups did not always coincide, particularly concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. This ideological split was a source of great contention and was one of the key reasons for the stagnation, poverty, and isolation of post-Soviet Armenia. The internal conflict was ultimately won by the veterans. In 1998, Ter-Petrosian was forced to resign, and Sarkisyan was appointed prime minister. However,

in October of the next year, Sarkisyan along with seven others were shot dead by a group of homegrown terrorists.

Paralleling Sarkisyan's rise and tragic fall was the career of Samvel Babayan (born 1965), one of the brightest and most talented commanders of the Karabakh war. Writing in the newspaper *Golos Armenii*, one observer noted that Babayan "made courageous and uncommon decisions without any academic and military knowledge." Despite his young age, Babayan became the commander of Nagorno-Karabakh's army (1992) and later *de facto* minister of defense (1995). In the late 1990s, he founded the political party "Right and Accord" and competed in Armenia's 1999 parliamentary elections. For his merit in organizing the protection of Nagorno-Karabakh and for his courage and personal bravery, Babayan was awarded "The Gold Eagle" and "The Hero of Artsakh," Nagorno-Karabakh's highest rank.

Babayan epitomized the coming together of black markets and war. As de Waal explains, "Babayan and his family...made money out of both war and peace. In wartime, the wealth came from 'occupied territories,' when everything...was stripped... and sold, generally to Iran." Trading hostages during the war also became a business. Later, Babayan established a monopoly over all cigarettes and gasoline imported to the isolated region. Together with his brothers and other relatives, Babayan also oversaw most local job appointments, all the way down to the most insignificant (including nurses, teachers, and prison inspectors). Babayan's family members extorted bribes to release from prison those they themselves took into custody. Extremely suspicious of all around him, Babayan eliminated all his opponents, many of whom also combined politics with business, through intimidation, shootings, and grenade attacks.

In 1999, Babayan was dismissed from his posts. The following year he was arrested and charged with organizing an attempt on the life of Nagorno-Karabakh's *de facto* president Arkady Ghukasyan. Sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment, he served four years before receiving a presidential pardon. After his release, Babayan moved to Yerevan where he continued his career as a minor politician. He founded the "Dashink" (Alliance) party, which later merged with three other parties.

In film, his memoirs, and media interviews, Babayan's comments depict a man with extreme confidence in the virtue of his position. In remarks to a journalist who asked if he took money belonging to the army, he replied, "The only thing I wish to note is that when I was leaving, the ministry's auditors uttered only 'thank you!' and 'Ketstses!' [Well done!]. This is because we did work that cost twice the amount of money that was allocated to the army budget." He also observed that "if there is a single sign of mistrust towards me, I will leave. I am the very Samvel Babayan on whose shoulders the destiny of the nation was laid down in 1992. Thanks to God, I have managed with honor." His "main mistake," he concluded, "was continuing to work with people who did not accept my views after the cessation of military action."

Such an attitude was not an obstacle to his enjoying considerable popularity. This was especially so at the start of the war, when he distinguished himself through bravery and talent at a time when such qualities were in high demand. In later years, Babayan's popularity remained high among veterans and villagers, nowhere more so than in his native mountain village of Mysmyna. When in 2000 Babayan's family house was

confiscated and converted into a rural school, parents refused to send their child to the school on September 1 as a sign of honor and appreciation for the “glorious family.” The same type of honor was displayed when the orchards of Babayan’s clan were confiscated for public use. “Not a single fruit or berry was picked from the trees. No human foot stepped into those gardens. This belongs to him only, and to no one else,” said one of the locals. This kind of obstinance in the face of official edict speaks of a kind of primordial loyalty to a patron.

Many consider the overcoming of Babayan’s personality cult to be a turning point in the political history of the *de facto* state, a unique check of its durability. This test seems to have been successful. Despite Babayan’s warlordish behavior, which in a short period of time managed to offend a large number of people, he was treated quite softly in light of his infinite popularity stemming from his wartime leadership. Ghukasian later argued that “Babayan’s trial was an ‘exam’ that proved how ‘Karabakh is developing as a society’” (de Waal, *Black Garden*).

Coping With Militarism

Between 1992-94, the military emergency was so severe that 15-year old boys were given weapons as though it were a great honor to be sent into combat and probable death. Fighters have later claimed that they made a free choice to take the extreme risks associated with military service in a combat zone. Nonetheless, they undoubtedly experienced pressure from their elders, specifically in the form of strong expectations that they were supposed to seek to avenge their family members’ deaths.

In retrospect, it is difficult to say whether this was a reflection of longstanding socio-cultural rules or an ideology produced by the conditions of the time. In either case, as I learned in interviews with veterans, the actual effect of the aggression and anger produced by their military experiences had the opposite effect of what was intended. It undermined and distorted the young people’s own identity. Many of them embarked on risky and practically hopeless missions, yet these experiences inexorably led to an exaggerated sense of pride. Once peace was restored, this hyper-masculine aggression was turned against local authorities in the form of disobedience, sabotage, and crime. The veterans also expected moral and financial compensation. Although veterans experienced grief, sadness, trauma, and even suicidal tendencies, not a single respondent ever spoke about feelings of guilt for participating in combat, or doubts about the motivation for conflict. They did, however, express misgivings about what they called “manipulation” or cheating by authorities.

The government of Nagorno-Karabakh made every effort to create a normal civil society as soon as possible. The capital of Stepanakert was rapidly rebuilt. Pensions were provided to invalids and widows. Houses were rebuilt and there was a redistribution of unused apartments, often to veterans and widows. Nonetheless, age-old habits of patrimonialism, nepotism, and patron-client relations could not be eliminated overnight and, on the contrary, became more extreme. Honors, positions, and pensions were handed out. Where possible, the authorities tried to reach agreement and avoid confrontation with veterans. At the least, they figured that in the event of a

new outbreak of war the loyalty and experiences of the veterans would be in very high demand.

Aside from the challenge of dealing with veteran issues, the authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh faced the difficult problem of civilian disarmament. Almost every young man in Nagorno-Karabakh had a cherished weapon. The authorities also faced widespread marijuana use and abuse. In such an atmosphere, truly incredible efforts were required to carry out disarmament. At times, officials had to resort to extreme measures, including searches, beatings, intimidation, and blackmail. In some cases, the authoritarian measures actually drove veterans out of the very polity they helped create. Some moved abroad, especially to Russia. There, some veterans felt free from their wartime “baggage” and began to lead new, normal lives, while others used their fighting skills to prosper in Russia’s underground markets.

Conclusion

A militarized consciousness remains in Nagorno-Karabakh. A ten-year armistice expired in 2004, and residents feel that war may break out again at any time. State media still broadcasts patriotic programs. Dance, song, and poetry continue to glorify and justify feats of war. In such a sociopolitical context, the attitude toward warlords (and, in general, warriors) remains supportive.

One might say that Nagorno-Karabakh became a model of legitimized and institutionalized warlordism, where some warlords gained high political office and enjoyed great social renown. Many people still perceive their abuses of power to be “deserved.” But the fact that Babayan could “joke that if he did not like what the Armenian government was up to, he would move his tanks on Yerevan” (de Waal, *Black Garden*) speaks to the continued gangsterish and usurper-type character of this authority, which is based on intimidation and force.

Unlike many, the Karabakh war transcended class divisions. Indeed, those higher up the hierarchy were forced to justify their own social position by participation in the war. Moreover, because of the war, the criteria for gaining access to political power were radically refashioned. Did a person fight or not, and how did he fight? In the presidential election of 2007, this was articulated quite clearly. “Tough guy” Bako Sahakyan harshly attacked his opponent, the intellectual Masis Mailyan, even though the latter had also participated in military operations. Their war experiences were an important part of the national discussion. Though less poignant than a decade ago, complex social, economic, and political effects of militarization and warlordism remain in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.