

Armenia Overview

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Environment

The Republic of Armenia, formerly the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia, is situated in the South Caucasus, bordering on Iran to the south, Azerbaijan to the east, Turkey to the west and Georgia to the north. Nakhichevan, situated between Armenia and Turkey, is an autonomous republic under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. Armenia provides economic, military and other forms of support to the territory of Nagorny Karabakh, legally part of Azerbaijan. It has direct transport links with Nagorny Karabakh through the so-called Lachin corridor, a strip of de jure Azerbaijani territory currently under occupation.

Peoples

Main languages: Armenian

Main religions: Armenian Apostolic Christianity

Armenia was always the most ethnically homogeneous of the Soviet republics, a trend reinforced since the onset of Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan and the economic hardship following independence. According to the 2001 Census, almost 98 per cent of the total population of 3.2 million is ethnically Armenian. Minority groups in the republic include Yezidi Kurds (40,620 or 1.3% of the total population), Russians (14,660, 0.5%), Assyrians (3,409), Kurds (1,519), Ukrainians (1,633), Greeks (1,176) and others (4,640). Armenia's minorities are scattered across the country, and do not form local majorities in any region or administrative unit.

Prior to the conflict with Azerbaijan, Armenia's largest minority had been Azeris, accounting for some 186,000 people. This population was displaced to Azerbaijan virtually in its entirety as a result of the conflict. Similarly Armenia received an influx of ethnic Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan. The migration of Russians from Armenia is attributable to the severe economic hardship experienced in the republic following independence and war with Azerbaijan, a factor also encouraging ethnic Armenian migration from the republic.

There is a large Armenian diaspora in the USA, and there are also significant communities in Canada, France, the Middle East, Russia, Georgia and in the secessionist region of Nagorny Karabagh, a de facto but unrecognized state legally forming part of Azerbaijan.

History

Contemporary Armenian identity has been shaped by a history of struggle to maintain a cohesive ethnic identity, in the face of domination by powerful neighbours. In the modern period the vast majority of Armenians found themselves living either under imperial rule in the Ottoman Turkish or Russian empires.

The Armenian Genocide

The most important event in modern Armenian history was the series of massacres, forced marches and eradication of Armenian culture in Ottoman Turkey, beginning with the so-called Hamidian massacres in 1895–6 and culminating in the total destruction of the Armenian presence in Anatolia in 1915. Armenians claim that some 1.5 million Armenians died as a result. Controversy rages to this day over whether these events should be defined as genocide. Certain western European countries, notably France, have acknowledged these events to constitute genocide. In October 2006 the French National Assembly approved a draft law making it a crime to deny the Armenian genocide. Turkey refuses to define these events as genocide, instead construing them as a military response to Armenian collaboration with belligerent external powers. Turkish officials and historians suggest much lower figures for the numbers of Armenians killed and claim that equal numbers of non-Armenians were killed during that period. Nonetheless, the evidence remains that there are practically no Armenians in Anatolia today.

There is enormous diversity in the range of claims made by Armenians today relating to the Armenian Genocide. Demands for reparations and even territorial revisions are most likely to be found in the diaspora, many of whom are descendants of survivors. However, it is important to acknowledge that the modern Armenian state has renounced any territorial claims on Turkey.

The Soviet Union era and Nagorny Karabakh

Due to Russia's comparatively benevolent treatment of Armenians, Russia assumed the role of an external protector in the modern Armenian consciousness. On the whole Armenians thrived in the Soviet Union, enjoying high social mobility and occupying prominent positions within leading Soviet political and military institutions. A high proportion of Armenians acquired the Russian language, yet maintained their own extremely rich national culture. However, the onset of political liberalization under Mikhail Gorbachev brought the issue of Armenians beyond Armenia to the forefront in the Nagorny Karabakh region (NKAO), an autonomous unit under formal Azerbaijani jurisdiction. Conflict over the ownership of Nagorny Karabakh had been latent since the establishment of the Soviet Union, when Karabakh was initially given to the Armenians and then awarded to [Azerbaijan](#) for reasons that to this day remain unclear.

In February 1988 the Armenians of Karabakh unilaterally issued a resolution declaring their secession from Azerbaijan and union with Armenia. The conflict quickly escalated into pogroms of Armenians in the Azerbaijani cities of Baku and Sumqayıt. The death toll is disputed but reached into the dozens. A process of mass migration began following cases of physical intimidation and violence towards Azeris from Armenia. There was a corresponding inflow of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan proper as well as the NKAO, totalling some 400,000. By 1991 the conflict had become a full-scale war, with each side availing itself of Soviet military hardware. However, post-Soviet military assistance was tilted in favour of Armenia, particularly when anti-Moscow factions were in power in Baku. The war ended in a decisive Armenian victory in 1994, with the Armenians of Karabakh (supported by Armenia) taking control not only of Nagorny Karabakh itself but also occupying in whole or in part seven regions of

Azerbaijan surrounding the former NKAO.

Post-independence

Until 1994, the political situation in Armenia itself was relatively stable under the leadership of President Ter-Petrosian of the Armenian National Movement, elected on 17 October 1991 following Armenia's declaration of independence. However, the country experienced upheavals as a result of the Karabakh conflict and the aftermath of a devastating earthquake which destroyed Leninakan and Spitak on 7 December 1988. This left an estimated 25,000 dead and 500,000 homeless, sparking off a worldwide relief effort coordinated by diaspora Armenians.

The Karabakh conflict had a serious effect both on the Armenian economy and on the population as a whole. From 1989 Armenia was subjected to an economic blockade, imposed first by Azerbaijan and then by Turkey at the end of 1992, further exacerbating the economic situation in Armenia, which was largely dependent on Azerbaijan for energy supplies. As a result of the conflict Armenia lost most of its ethnic diversity, suffered severe economic hardship and saw the supplanting of Armenian political elites by those with Karabakh origins and connections. Armenia was also initially censured by the international community, although in recent years Armenian politicians have pointed to internationally sanctioned moves towards secession in [Montenegro](#) and [Kosovo](#) and questioned why secession has been deemed acceptable in these cases but not Karabakh.

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Governance

Mainly as a result of the conflict with Azerbaijan, Armenia now finds itself relatively isolated in the South Caucasus. Armenia has been excluded from regional economic development plans ranging from the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the planned Baku–Akhalkalaki–Kars highway. President Ter-Petrosian was eventually compelled to resign in 1998 after conceding the possibility of compromise on the Karabakh issue and following the 1997 elections, which were conducted in a highly disputed manner. Robert Kocharian, an Armenian from Karabakh and former combatant in the war, took his place. Kocharian's position was rooted in the assumption that Armenia, with support from the diaspora, could both survive economic isolation and fulfil its goals in Karabakh. Certainly diaspora contributions to the Armenian economy have increased substantially in recent years – by 2005 they accounted for 15 per cent of Armenia's GDP. But depopulation remains a serious concern in Armenia, with unofficial estimates of the republic's population significantly lower than official figures.

In March 2003, Kocharian was re-elected president in a controversial poll. In response to widespread discontent and protest at the conduct of the elections the constitutional court ruled that Kocharian should submit to a public vote of confidence one year later. The vote never took place and in April 2004 demonstrations in central Yerevan were violently dispersed. In November 2005 a number of constitutional amendments advocated by international organizations in order to improve governance in Armenia were approved in a referendum widely seen as falsified – an example of the paradoxical course of democratization in Armenia.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The constitution affords certain language and cultural rights to minorities, and the 2004 Law on

Administrative Governance allows representatives of minorities, elected to local self-government, the right to present official letters in their first language accompanied by translation in Armenian. The Law on Radio and TV Broadcasting gives minorities the right to transmit information in minority languages and forbids any propaganda against minorities. Since the end of 2003, efforts have also been under way to draft a law on national minorities – also an obligation associated with Council of Europe membership. To date, however, Armenia has not passed such a law, with national minorities expressing dissatisfaction with draft proposals. Minority rights continue to be protected only through the generally liberal, though at times vague, provisions of the constitution and other legislation. Serious concerns remain over the treatment of religious minorities.

The Armenian government included a sum equivalent to US \$100,000 in its 2005 budget for the renovation of the Centre of National and Ethnic Minorities. Virtually all of Armenia's minorities suffer from a lack of resources, educational materials and specialists to teach national minority languages. This is particularly acute with the nomadic [Yezidi Kurds](#) – but is also of concern to the Russian minority, made up of those who settled in Armenia during the Soviet era, and the Molokans, a Russian religious sect which fled to the Caucasus in the early nineteenth century. Russian teaching in state schools has been dramatically curtailed – even though fluency in Russian among Armenians is still high and there is ready availability of textbooks and other cultural materials in Russian.

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