

# Crisis in Nagorno Karabakh and Dhimmitude – Dr. John Eibner

Dhimmi Watch Webinar

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Thank you for the invitation to speak at this Dhimmi Watch event. I have great admiration for Bat Ye'or's groundbreaking scholarship, prophetic insights and moral courage. I also value enormously her friendship and that of her late husband and inspirational collaborator David Littman. We miss him sorely

I have been asked to speak on the current existential crisis facing the 120,000 Armenian Christians of Nagorno Karabakh in the context of Dhimmitude. It is a fascinating subject. I first began to probe it over thirty years ago when my CSI colleagues and I broke a blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and travelled to Nagorno Karabakh in 1991. The first post-Cold-War Karabakh War was then intensifying. Out of those frontline wartime visits and time spent in libraries a publication was produced entitled *Ethnic Cleansing in Progress: War in Nagorno Karabakh*. It was co-authored by the Baroness Cox. In those days, it was the norm for statesmen, think tank scholars, human rights activists and journalists in both Russia and the West to speak about the Karabakh problem as one arising from Soviet Communism. But it soon became clear to me that it was far more connected with the dynamics of the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Caliphate in the course of its First World War jihad against the infidel. It also became clear that the Armenian Genocide did not happen in a vacuum but was part of a long historic process involving violent *jihad*, *Dhimmitude* and mass migration.

Due to the constraints of time and the limits of my own academic expertise in this complex field, with a history covering well over a millennium and a multitude of peoples, languages, and political entities, I will certainly not offer the last word on the subject. But I hope my remarks and observations will shed some light on some poorly understood dynamics of the issue and encourage further research and discussion.

## The BBC Version

The subject of my talk is timely. It is now beginning to make mainstream news headlines. Just a few days ago a BBC News headline and lead paragraph read: "Nagorno-Karabakh: People

are Fainting Queuing Up for Bread... For nearly nine months the Lachin Corridor has been blocked by Azerbaijani authorities, resulting in severe shortages of food, medication, hygiene products and fuel in the breakaway region.” (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66646677>).

This article was the first such substantial coverage that I have seen published by the BBC over the past nine months. In fact, it gave great encouragement to many human rights defenders in the English-speaking world. In many ways it is typical of the officially inspired news reports about the Nagorno Karabakh crisis that are becoming commonplace in the western, mainstream media. I would therefore like to use it as a point of reference in today’s discussion, not for the purpose of bashing the BBC but as an aid to help frame a credible narrative, one that does not skate over the grisly reality of Dhimmitude.

The BBC did a credible job exposing the enormous suffering Azerbaijan’s cruel blockade is imposing on the 120,000 Armenians of the self-declared, but unrecognized Republic of Nagorno Karabakh. It also explained in easy-to-understand terms that Karabakh is surrounded by Azerbaijan and has had in recent decades only one transportation link to the outside world – the Lachin Corridor. This road connects the self-declared, but internationally unrecognized Republic of Karabakh with the Republic of Armenia, only a few miles away as the crow flies. The BBC also explained that free movement along the Lachin Corridor is supposed to be guaranteed by Russian military peacekeepers according to an agreement signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020. But Russia has failed to use military force to keep the Corridor open, while Azerbaijan has gradually militarized its presence after first blocking it with demonstrators claiming to be environmentalists.

The only traffic allowed by Azerbaijan is the periodic evacuation by the Red Cross of seriously ill patients and limited supplies of food and medicines brought in by the Red Cross and the Russian peacekeepers. The last shipment of food reached Karabakh in June and the last consignment of medicines arrived in July. Some of the evacuees have been abducted by Azerbaijani security officials as they have been accompanied by the Red Cross.

So far so good from the BBC. The humanitarian aspect of the crisis was reported fairly and clearly. But when it comes to understanding the politics of the humanitarian crisis, in other

words why there is a crisis, readers of the BBC report will be none the wiser. The only explanation given by the BBC was the following sentence:

“Despite having so much in common culturally, the two South Caucasus states of Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought for control of this land for decades in wars that have cost tens of thousands of lives.”

This, of course, is not an explanation, but a diversion of attention away from the key facts of the matter. It is constructed in these terms to shift the conflict into the realm of mindless irrational ethnic strife, portraying the two communal protagonists - the Armenians and Azerbaijanis - as ready to resort to barbaric acts of warfare despite “having so much in common culturally”. Not a word is said about cultural differences, be they religious or political.

The BBC did not believe it important to inform readers that the Armenians are Christians. In fact, Armenia has a special place in church history as the first nation to accept the Christian faith. They did so in 301 A.D., nearly a century before the Emperor Constantine followed suit and set in motion the Christianization of the entire Roman/Byzantine world. Also left out of the BBC’s report is the salient fact that the Azerbaijanis are Shiite Muslims. The rather important religious dimension of the conflict is obfuscated.

While the BBC did not mention religion at all, many such news reports portray Azerbaijan misleadingly as a “secular” state. They do so mainly because Azerbaijan’s constitution is explicitly “secular”. But just as Islamist Turkey’s constitution is secular on the Kemalist model, the Islamic political tradition and culture runs deep in constitutionally “secular” Azerbaijan.

If in doubt, listen to the words of Azerbaijan’s dynastic dictator, Ilham Aliyev, as he places conditions for peace with the Karabakhi Armenian Christians:

“Either they will bend their necks [in humility] and present themselves or things will develop differently now’. ‘If I say that amnesty can be an option, they should not miss this opportunity. They have missed many opportunities, a number of opportunities, and each time, as they say, we had to knock them over to bring them to their senses.”

Peace is dependent, in Aliyev's view, on the complete submission of the Karabakhi Christians, and he is entitled, as Azerbaijan's Muslim ruler, to smite their bent necks with the sword of Islam as he chooses. (By the way, the US State Department publicly expressed satisfaction with Aliyev's Islamic demand for total submission, stating: "We welcome President Aliyev's recent remarks on consideration of amnesty.")

When thanking the fellow members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation for their support in the Karabakh conflict, the allegedly secular Aliyev speaks in the following way about Islamic relations with Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia:

"In the name of Allah, most Gracious, most Merciful ... Azerbaijan is making a tremendous contribution to the cause of Islamic solidarity... Armenia wants to build friendly relations with various Muslim countries. This is the greatest hypocrisy ever. Muslims of the world should know that Armenia, which has destroyed our sacred mosques, cannot be a friend of Muslim countries."

The "hypocrite" that Aliyev has identified within the ranks of the Muslim states is Iran, with which Azerbaijan is in competition for regional Islamic ascendancy.

The Islamic imagery of the defeated bending the neck below the sword of Islam and the political use of the term "hypocrite" needs no explanation within the Muslim world. Aliyev takes pains to project himself to the Muslim world as its true defender. The framing of the Karabakh conflict in a manner that conforms to the secular ideology that increasingly dominates the western world and therefore deletes such uncomfortable truths from media narratives - à la the BBC - leads to confused perceptions at all levels of society.

Even at the level of ethnicity, readers of the BBC report are not told that the Azeris are Turks and have a self-understanding of their state as forming one culture and nation with Turkey and the other Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Pan-Turkism is one of the ideological pillars of Azerbaijan's statehood. The older academic literature that predates Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 normally refers to the dominant ethnic group in Azerbaijan as "Azeri Turks" or as "Tartars". The name Azerbaijan is an ancient geographical term of Persian origins. It covers much of the northwest of Iran, which is heavily populated by Azeri Turks. In fact, more Azeri Turks are believed to live in the Islamic Republic of Iran than in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

## “Habits ... the Governing Principle of Mankind”

So, let us return to the immediate crisis. Why don't the Karabakhi Armenians save themselves by bending their necks in humility and asking for mercy? The short answer is they refuse to submit to Dhimmitude and are willing to endure great sacrifice to avoid that fate. Of all Armenians, the Karabakhis have a long tradition over many centuries of resisting submission, and they have achieved considerable success, as opposed to most other Armenians in Anatolia and the South Caucasus.

The Karabakhis, especially their political leadership, know the long history of Christian Armenia's relations with more powerful Muslim neighbors. They understand instinctively the simple political truth articulated by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume when he wrote: “Habits ... we find in everything to be the governing principle of mankind.” Memory of the historical habits of political Islam are deeply engrained in the psyche of the Karabakhis. I would like to highlight just a few of the historical habitual acts of which the Karabakhis are mindful, but which are largely forgotten in the West, and by most western commentators.

Armenia's first political encounter with Islam came in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The South Caucasus was then attacked by Arab jihadist warriors. According to ancient Armenian sources 35,000 slaves were taken away by the jihadists. The non-enslaved population was reduced to a state of Dhimmitude. There were many more such encounters over the centuries with Muslim empires or empires-in-the-making to come over the centuries. Another form of encounter with Islam came in the shape of migration. First came Arab and Kurdish nomads. In the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries a mass migration of Turkic Muslim nomads got underway. The historic combination of violent jihad, subjection to Dhimmitude and mass migration change began to weaken further the foundations of Armenian political entities and contributed greatly to political fragmentation. Time does not allow us to recount the long violent history of Christian Armenia's political encounters with Islam. But it must be recorded that this process of jihad, Dhimmitude and mass migration culminated in Anatolian Turkey in the great Armenian Genocide of 1915 – 1918. Virtually the whole of the Armenian and Aramaic speaking population of Syriacs and Assyrians was eradicated. It was, in fact, not just an

Armenian ethnic genocide, but a broader genocide of Christians that took place in the context of a declared jihad against the infidel. The only way that many thousands of the Christian victims could survive was through conversion to Islam.

The policy of eradication was embarked on because the Ottoman authorities feared that the Armenian population would take advantage of the wartime situation and the prospect of liberation by Christian Russia, to break the bonds of Dhimmitude. Those who take comfort in Azerbaijan's superficial "secular" appearance should keep in mind that the masterminds of that Armenian Genocide were the leaders of the modern, secular, ultranationalist Committee of Union and Progress, and that their deeds were given a veneer of Islamic legitimacy by the Ottoman Caliph's wartime proclamation of jihad against the infidel.

We tend to fix the place and time of the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey between 1915 and 1918. It is convenient to do so since that is where and when the genocidal orgy of anti-Armenian violence reached its peak. But we should keep in mind that especially brutal climax of violence was part of a process involving armed jihad, Dhimmitude and mass migration that began as far back as the onslaught of the first Arab Muslim empire against Armenia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. We also need to keep in mind that the process did not terminate in 1918 with the end of the First World War, but continued in fits and starts in the South Caucasus.

Hitherto, the Armenian Christians of Nagorno Karabakh had been spared the worst of this genocidal process. They were never conquered by the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate. Instead, they fell under the suzerainty of the Shiite Muslim Persian Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Karabakhi Armenians were able to retain a measure of self-government, not only through Church institutions, which was the norm for Dhimmis, but also through great Armenian landowners, the so-called Meliks. The position of the mountainous Karabakhis has some similarities with the mountainous Maronites of Lebanon who historically were able to resist Dhimmitude by a combination of geographic isolation and the will to retain as much independence as possible. Russia's military triumph over Persia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and Nagorno Karabakh's incorporation into the Russian empire freed the Armenians of Karabakh and the whole of the South Caucasus from the immediate threat of violent jihad and Dhimmitude.

## Aftershocks of Genocide

The protection offered by Russia came to an end with the collapse of the Russian empire in 1917. Several years of political chaos followed. They were characterized by competition, often violent, between Armenians and Azeri Turks for maximum control of the region as each group sought to establish national states based on ethnicity. Instances of mutual ethnic and religious cleansing were a part of this process. The imposition of Soviet control in the early 1920s suspended these conflicts. Nagorno Karabakh, with its Armenian Christian majority, was assigned to the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic as an autonomous Oblast. Even under Soviet rule nationalism was never completely extinguished. Under communist rule the demographics in Nagorno Karabakh shifted further in favor of the Azeri Turks.

As the Soviet empire collapsed so too did Russian protection. Political chaos again ensued. A Karabakhi political movement got underway demanding the implementation of Karabakh's right to self-determination according to the Soviet constitution. This was met in the habitual way with violence. Armenian villages in Karabakh were deported by the Soviet/Azerbaijani authorities. Armenians were massacred in a pogrom in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait in 1988. This violence triggered a chain reaction of intercommunal violence and intimidation. Both Armenians and Azeri Turks were victimized. The intercommunal violence morphed into a war between the newly independent republics of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan on the other.

In 1994, Karabakh and Armenia, with the quiet backing of Russia, emerged from the war victorious. Again, the threat of Dhimmitude was temporarily lifted. Karabakh's Muslim Azeri-Turk population had been forced to flee. The Karabakhis also established an Azeri-Turk-free buffer zone around Nagorno Karabakh. Connected with the Republic of Armenia by the Lachin Corridor, the Armenians of Karabakh were able to rebuild, to establish their own institutions of self-government and to prosper in relative terms as free, non-Dhimmis for a quarter of a century. But the balance of power in the region was meanwhile shifting in favor of Azerbaijan as it became a global economic power by developing its enormous Caspian Sea oil and natural gas resources. Armenia and Karabakh have lagged far behind economically. The republics of Armenia and Karabakh lagged behind economically and therefore also militarily and diplomatically.

In 2020 Azerbaijan took advantage of the relative weakness of Armenia and Karabakh to attack Karabakh. After 44 days Azerbaijan emerged victorious. Decisive factors were the military support of Turkey, including Turkish-backed jihadists from Syria and sophisticated weaponry from Israel. Russian and NATO-related intelligence must have picked up in advance what Azerbaijan was preparing. But there were no interventions. The Karabakhis lost all of their buffer zone and one third of their own territory. The whole Republic of Nagorno Karabakh would have been lost had Russia not intervened with peacekeepers and had Iran not mobilized its military out of fear of further Azerbaijani aggression in its direction. The remnant of the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh and the whole of its civilian population of Armenian Christians are now again under threat on account of Azerbaijan's blockade. So far, the Armenian leadership of Karabakh continues to reject Dhimmitude under Azerbaijan, and is backed by the population, notwithstanding their enormous suffering. Armed resistance and an organized mass exodus are the two possibilities that are currently under discussion by the Karabakhi leadership.

### “We are alone”

In his resignation speech only a few days ago, the president of Nagorno Karabakh stated “we are alone”. Washington, Brussels, Moscow, and Israel each for their own reasons are backing Azerbaijan. These powers signal support for Azerbaijan's offer to open its own so-called “humanitarian corridor” through its own territory, while simultaneously opening the Lachin Corridor to Armenia. The result of this is likely to be the mass exodus of Armenians out of Karabakh, thereby completing the ethnic/religious cleansing of Armenian Christians from their historic homeland.

The overwhelming majority show no inclination to submit to Dhimmitude, believing, with good reason, they will have no future in their own land. Even the government of the enfeebled Republic of Armenia appears to be prepared to sacrifice the Karabakhis for peace in a dubious land for peace deal with Azerbaijan. It is now under great pressure by all the Great Powers to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan that will open transportation corridors to provide better links between Turkey and Central Asia, and Iran and Russia. Armenia itself is under periodic shelling from Azerbaijan. The Armenian authorities appear to be shaky because the Armenian Republic is also alone. The interests of its traditional protector, Russia, have shifted in the



direction of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Only Iran, which can hardly be described as an “ally” of Armenia, has an interest in restraining Azerbaijani aggression. Not only does Azerbaijan’s president claim Nagorno Karabakh as Azeri-Turk land. The Azerbaijani authorities publicly do the same regarding both Armenia and Iran. They speak openly of the Republic of Armenia as “West Azerbaijan” and the northwest of Iran and “South Azerbaijan”. No secret of is made in official circles of the aspiration for the establishment of a “Greater Azerbaijan”.

The stakes are highest for the hard-pressed Armenians of Karabakh, who reject Dhimmitude and take a clear stand on their right to self-determination. It appears to be a David vs. Goliath battle with a strange coalition of the USA, the EU, Russia, Israel, Turkey and associated Syrian jihadist groups, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation ranged against the 120,000 Armenian Christians of Karabakh. They have little to offer the world materially or politically. Therefore, their lives, liberty, and human dignity count for little in the calculations of the Great Powers of the world. But this conflict is not merely a local one. The outcome will have broader implications for the region, for global geopolitics and for humanity. The Armenian Genocide lives on.