



TRIALS OF ARMENIAN HOSTAGES IN BAKU

April 2026

- In September 2023, after nearly ten months of a total blockade, Azerbaijan unleashed a lightning offensive against the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh).

Azerbaijan attacked civilian communities in Artsakh, including the capital city of Stepanakert. The 2023 assault, marred with numerous cases of war crimes, became the culmination of [Azerbaijan's genocidal campaign](#) against the Armenian people in Artsakh.¹ The 2023 attack forced the entire indigenous Armenian population of Artsakh out of their homes. Within days, the entire population of 120,000 people fled to Armenia, fearing mass killings and repressions by the authoritarian regime of Azerbaijan.²

- During the blockade and military offensive, the Aliyev regime captured the former political leadership of Artsakh and Armenian civilians.

Currently, Azerbaijan continues to officially hold under farcical charges 19 Armenian prisoners and unofficially scores more.³

- On January 17, 2025, Azerbaijan's military court began politically motivated sham trials of the hostages.
- Nearly all Armenian hostages have been handed lifelong sentences.

On August 8, 2025, during US President Donald Trump's meeting with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the signing in the White House of a peace framework between the two countries,

¹ The Ethnic Cleansing and Destruction of Nagorno-Karabakh; Armenian National Institute; available online at: <https://www.armenian-genocide.org/nagorno-karabakh.html>

² Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?; Report, The Freedom House; 6/27/2024; available online at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2024/why-are-there-no-armenians-nagorno-karabakh>

³ House Foreign Affairs Committee Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission: Hearing on Human Rights in Azerbaijan Since the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh; Testimony of Van Z. Krikorian, Co-Chair Armenian Assembly of America; 9/19/2024; available online at: https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/VK%209-19-24%20Lantos%20Com%20Statement_Hearing.pdf

President Trump promised to raise the release of the Armenian hostages with Azerbaijan's President. Speaking with Armenia's Prime Minister, President Trump made note of the fact that Baku was holding Armenian hostages: "So you said there's 23 Christians that you'd like to get out, right? 23? Because I'm going to ask him to do that. I think he'll do it for me too."⁴

Among the Armenian hostages are the former democratic leaders of Artsakh, including three Presidents, former State Minister Ruben Vardanyan, and other high-profile officials as well as civilians.

Armenian officials on trial included:

Ruben Vardanyan, 57, State Minister (November 2022-February 2023), businessman and philanthropist, father of four.

Arkady Ghukasyan, 68, President of the Artsakh Republic (1997-2007), Foreign Minister (1993-1997), former journalist and newspaper editor, father of two.

Bako Sahakyan, 65, President of the Artsakh Republic (2007-2020), Minister of Interior (1999-2001), Head of Department of National Security (2001-2007), father of two.

Arayik Harutyunyan, 52, President of the Artsakh Republic (2020-2023), State Minister (September 2017-June 2018), Prime Minister (September 2007-September 2017), economist and businessman, father of three.

David Ishkhanyan, 57, Speaker of the Artsakh Republic National Assembly (August-September 2023), Member of Parliament (2015-2023), father of three.

Davit Babayan, 52, Minister of Foreign Affairs (2021-2023), Head of Central Information Department (2013-2021), father of two.

Levon Mnatsakanyan, 60, Chief of the Artsakh Republic Police (2019-2023), Director of the State Service of Emergency Situations (2018-2019), Minister of Defense (2015-2018), father of three.

Davit Manukyan, 54, Deputy Commander of the Artsakh Armed Forces (2019-2021).

Civilians and Prisoners of War on trial included: Garik Martirosyan (53), Melikset Pashayan (54), Davit Allahverdyan (37), Gurgen Stepanyan (38), Levon Balayan (47), Madat Babayan (73), Vasili Beglaryan (32) and Erik Ghazaryan (40).

The court proceedings were marred by serious violations of due process, including a lack of transparency and the denial of adequate legal representation for the prisoners. Independent legal observers were barred from accessing the proceedings entirely. Judges frequently restricted access

⁴ With President Trump's Success in Ending the War in Gaza, the Armenian Assembly Urges the President to Secure the Release of Hostages Held in Baku; Press Release, Armenian Assembly of America; October 13, 2025; available online at: <https://www.armenian-assembly.org/post/president-trump-success-ending-gaza-war-urge-release-of-hostages-held-in-baku>

to case materials, relied on falsified records, and conducted what appeared to be a one-sided, predetermined investigation.⁵

Armenian hostages were reportedly subjected to torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, including prolonged deprivation of sleep and drinking water, being forced to stand for extended periods, placement in solitary confinement, and other abusive practices.⁶ Referring to the case of Ruben Vardanyan, Amnesty International responded to allegations of human rights violations by calling on Baku to “uphold and ensure the fair trial rights” of Ruben, adding that “by denying him his fair trial rights, they are doing the exact opposite of justice.”⁷

To avoid international accountability, in 2025, Azerbaijan ordered the closure of the International Committee of the Red Cross office in Baku⁸ and also, in 2025, suspended implementation of the rulings from the European Court of Human Rights.⁹ In 2025, Azerbaijan had already established itself as the leading country in failing to implement ECHR judgments.¹⁰

Seven Armenian prisoners of war have been sentenced to various terms of imprisonment: Vagif Khachatryan, 70 – sentenced in 2023 to 15 years; Rashid Beglaryan, 63 – sentenced in 2024 to 15 years; Alyosha Khosrovyan, 58 – sentenced in 2021 to 20 years; Lyudvig Mkrtchyan, 56 – sentenced in 2021 to 20 years; Vicken Euljekjian, 44 – sentenced in 2021 to 20 years; Gevorg Sujyan, 36 – sentenced in 2021 to 15 years; David Davtyan, 32 – sentenced in 2021 to 15 years.

On January 14, 2026, Azerbaijan handed over four civilian hostages to Armenia: Vagif Khachatryan, Vigen Euljekjian, Gevorg Sujyan and Davit Davtyan. Contemporaneously, Armenia released two

⁵ Attorney reveals gross violations in Ruben Vardanyan’s ongoing trial in Baku; Public Radio of Armenia; 7/11/2025; available online at: <https://en.armradio.am/2025/07/11/attorney-reveals-gross-violations-in-ruben-vardanyans-ongoing-trial-in-baku/>

⁶ Request for Urgent Appeal: Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – Ruben Vardanyan, Political Prisoner Detained in Azerbaijan; Appeal letter to UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; 6/13/2023; available online at: <https://perseus-strategies.com/wp-content/uploads/Urgent-Appeal-SRT--June-13-2024.pdf>

⁷ Azerbaijan: Authorities must ensure fair trial rights of Ruben Vardanyan and investigate claims of rights violations; Amnesty International, 01/17/2025; available online: Azerbaijan: Authorities must ensure fair trial rights of Ruben Vardanyan and investigate claims of rights violations; available online at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/azerbaijan-authorities-must-ensure-fair-trial-rights-of-ruben-vardanyan-and-investigate-claims-of-rights-violations/>

⁸ Red Cross says Azerbaijan ordered it to leave the country; Reuters; 3/5/2025; available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/red-cross-says-azerbaijan-ordered-it-leave-country-2025-03-05/>

⁹ Azerbaijan suspends compliance with ECHR decisions; PanArmenian.net; 3/27/2026; available online at: <https://panarmenian.net/m/eng/news/331930>

¹⁰ Azerbaijan has failed to implement 64% of the European Court’s judgments; MeydanTV; 4/28/2025; available online at: <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/azerbaijan-has-failed-to-implement-64-of-the-european-courts-judgments/>

Syrian mercenaries¹¹, Yousef Alaabet al-Hajji and Muhrab Muhammad al-Shkhari. These and other radical Islamic mercenaries were recruited by Turkey to fight for Azerbaijan.¹²

On February 5, 2026, Arayik Harutyunyan, David Ishkhanyan, Levon Mnatsakanyan, Davit Manukyan and Davit Babayan were sentenced to life imprisonment. Former Presidents – Arkady Ghukasyan and Bako Sahakyan received 20-year jail terms due to being above the age of 65.

Madat Babayan was sentenced to 19 years of imprisonment, Melikset Pashayan – to 19 years; Garik Martirosyan – 18 years; Davit Allahverdyan – 16 years; Levon Balayan – 16 years; Vasili Beglaryan – 15 years; Gurgen Stepanyan – 15 years and Erik Ghazaryan – to 15 years of imprisonment.

On February 17, 2026, former State Minister of Artsakh Ruben Vardanyan was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Amnesty International characterized the trials in Baku and convictions of Armenian hostages “nothing short of a travesty” and “an affront to all victims of crimes under international law”.¹³

The inhuman treatment of Armenian hostages, sham trials, and the imposition of lengthy and unlawful prison sentences come as little surprise given Azerbaijan’s authoritarian regime and its deteriorating human rights record. At present, Aliyev’s regime reportedly holds 288 Azerbaijani political prisoners, including journalists, bloggers, opposition leaders, and human rights defenders.¹⁴ In 2024, Freedom House assigned the country its lowest rating, citing “persisting authoritarianism” and “little interest in democratic change.”¹⁵ Human Rights Watch consistently characterizes Azerbaijan as a repressive regime that “severely restricts the freedoms of expression and assembly,” while also documenting ongoing “cases of torture and ill-treatment in police custody and places of detention.”¹⁶ Similarly, the U.S. Department of State’s 2024 Country Reports

¹¹ Armenia swaps two Syrian mercenaries for four Armenians held in Azerbaijan; CivilNet; 1/14/2026; available online at: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/996575/armenia-swaps-two-syrian-mercenaries-for-four-armenians-held-in-azerbaijan/>

¹² Mercenaries in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone must be withdrawn – UN experts; The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN; 11/11/2020; available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/11/mercenaries-and-around-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-zone-must-be-withdrawn-un>

¹³ Azerbaijan: Ruben Vardanyan’s 20-year prison term culminates “travesty” of a trial against ethnic Armenian leaders; Statement, Amnesty International; 2/17/2026; available online at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/02/azerbaijan-ruben-vardanyans-20-year-prison-term-culminates-travesty-of-a-trial-against-ethnic-armenian-leaders/>

¹⁴ List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan; Report, Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan; 3/18/2024; available online at: <https://www.ipd-az.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/List-of-political-prisoners-in-Azerb-18-03-24.pdf>

¹⁵ Azerbaijan: Consolidated Authoritarian Regime; Report, Freedom House; available online at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2023>

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch; Azerbaijan - Events of 2023; available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/azerbaijan#22ee4c>

on Human Rights Practices highlights significant human rights concerns in Azerbaijan, including credible reports of arbitrary or unlawful killings, torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, arbitrary arrests, and other serious abuses.¹⁷

President Aliyev's recent remarks likening the former democratic leadership of Nagorno Karabakh to Nazis¹⁸ represent yet another hideous example of anti-Armenian hatred. Such rhetoric is not only deeply offensive but also an affront to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and World War II.

¹⁷ The US Department of State; 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Azerbaijan; available online at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/>

¹⁸ Aliyev's Nazi comparison of Armenian leaders is outrageous and dangerous - opinion; Article, The Jerusalem Post; 2/25/2026; available online at: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-887748>