



Statement in Response to the Open Letter sent by the Rabbinical Center of Europe to the President and Prime Minister of Armenia

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention has taken note of the Open Letter sent by the Rabbinical Center of Europe to the President and Prime Minister of Armenia, signed by 50 leading European rabbis, which states that “[e]xpressions such as ‘ghetto’, ‘genocide’, ‘holocaust’ and others are (...) inappropriate to be part of the jargon used in any kind of political disagreement” and call on the Armenian government to “explicitly and unequivocally clarify that the Armenian people recognizes and honors the terrible human suffering undergone by the Jewish people” and to stop “belittling the extent of the Jewish people’s suffering to further any political interest through incessantly using phrases associated with the holocaust suffered by the Jewish people”.

The Lemkin Institute has been raising the alarm about the numerous and growing red flags for genocide against Armenians in the South Caucasus since 2021. An increasing number of NGOs and organizations dedicated to the study and prevention of genocide have also spoken out about this threat, as evidenced by numerous reports and statements.

We believe that the Armenian people are facing a Second Armenian Genocide for the reasons outlined in our 126-page [*Report on the 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*](#), published on 5 September 2023. This genocide may already be taking place in the territory of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh, as a consequence of the over nine month blockade by Azerbaijan. It may also be planned against Armenians in the Republic of Armenia. We invite the signatories of the Open Letter to read parts of the report to better understand why we, and others, are using the term “genocide.”

Our report documents the viciously genocidal language of Azerbaijani government officials (President Ilham Aliyev regularly refers to Armenians as “rats,” “dogs,” “wild beasts,” “predators,” “jackals,” and “terrorists,” among other dehumanizing terms) as well as the horrific atrocities committed by the Azerbaijan military against captured Armenian civilians and POWs. The *UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes*, upon which the report is based, is the best and most widely accepted early warning mechanism the world currently has. Azerbaijan exhibits all of the indicators of the two risk factors specific to genocide, among others. The report further

demonstrates the sophisticated propaganda techniques employed by Azerbaijan in Europe and elsewhere to deny what it is doing now just as it actively denies the 1915-1923 genocide against Armenians.

In calling the threatened genocide a “political disagreement,” the Open Letter suggests that the drafters’ framing of the facts on the ground may have been inadvertently influenced by the well-funded and skillful propaganda of the Azerbaijani government. Azerbaijan is daily threatening Armenians in Artsakh as well as in the Republic of Armenia, both in word and in deed. The people of Artsakh are starving. President Ilham Aliyev is threatening to attack Armenia and Artsakh to “return” lands to Azerbaijan based on false historical claims. President Aliyev has made very clear, on more than one occasion, that his goal is to rid the territory of Artsakh of any trace of autonomous Armenian existence.

In our opinion, rather than “belittling” the term genocide, Armenian officials have in fact been very cautious and precise in using the terms “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide” with reference to the language and behavior of Azerbaijani officials. Their use of these terms now is indicative of the extremity of the situation on the ground.

As for the use of more narrow terms such as “ghetto,” as well as references to the National Socialist regime in Germany and the Holocaust: These are clearly efforts to use a well-known historical analogy to enlighten a world that is willfully blind to the threat of genocide that Armenians face from Azerbaijan. The signatories of the Open Letter dispute the analogies, and that is their right. We hope that the letter will lead to a productive conversation between the signatories and Armenian officials about shared concerns. Solidarity between threatened peoples is one of the greatest tools we have to prevent genocide.

More broadly, as in all cases of genocide, the Armenian people face a dilemma in trying to get the word out about the very dire nature of their predicament. What words do threatened communities use to focus the attention of a busy, preoccupied, and very political world on eliminationist rhetoric and behavior directed at them, so that there is a chance to save lives that only a few days or months from now may be lost forever? How can threatened communities push through the walls of propaganda and influence that the more powerful aggressors build to guarantee their own impunity, as Azerbaijan most certainly has done? Sometimes shifting the framework requires appealing to the world’s existing knowledge base. And even that often does not work, because human beings often prefer to ignore looming catastrophes rather than address them head on. Since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Lemkin Institute has watched with increasing dismay how European countries and the United States (in addition to Azerbaijan’s strong supporters, such as Turkey, Russia, and Israel) have willfully ignored the threat of genocide from Azerbaijan and have blindly treated the “conflict” as one between equal partners with similar aims. That view is inaccurate and dangerous.

We fear that the broader issue is being lost: Armenia – far from using the term “genocide” to describe a “political disagreement” and thereby cheapening the word “genocide” – is attempting to prevent a genocide against its own people, something it cannot do alone, given its small size,

limited resources, and geopolitical place on the world map. It is asking the world for help. Unfortunately, at this point, the Open Letter from the Rabbinical Center of Europe has served not only to embolden the aggressor state but also risks muting the response of the states that stand the best chance of coming to the aid of Armenians.

As a genocide prevention organization, we must further note that the word “genocide” cannot be limited to one case. The *Shoah* must be honored as a catastrophic historical caesura that is almost inconceivable in its size and horror. It was the catalyst for the adoption of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. We understand the need to protect the memory of its victims and survivors through many different means, including the precise use of language. But not applying the term “genocide” in the current case of Armenians in the South Caucasus would violate the rule of precision. Using the legal definition as well as the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, there is a very strong evidentiary base to claim what we are seeing is genocide in progress.

Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide, began his quest for a term and for an international law against genocide not with the Holocaust but with the Armenian Genocide. In the years between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, in which would 49 members of Lemkin’s family were murdered, he was influenced by many cases, including the 1933 Simele massacres and the Holodomor. Those cases are written into the language of the Genocide Convention. If we ignore his insights into the crime, and the many genocidal patterns his work identified, including the use of man-made starvation, we can never expect to prevent genocide.

At the Lemkin Institute, we sincerely wish the world had paid closer attention to Raphael Lemkin’s proposal in 1933 for an international law against “vandalism” and “barbarism” (the terms that later became his word “genocide”). We also wish the world had taken Adolf Hitler’s manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, more seriously before the outbreak of the world war in 1939. We wish the voices of Jewish communities across Europe had been listened to with greater interest and commitment and imagination after the war began. We wish that all the red flags that exhibited themselves in Rwanda between 1991 and 1994 were appreciated more deeply for what they were telling us, so that efforts could have been made to respond forcefully, intelligently, and quickly when it was necessary to do so in the early months of 1994. How many voices then claimed that victim communities were being alarmist?

All we can do now is try to be better by using the mechanisms at our disposal to present evidence as early as possible. Most of these mechanisms were developed in the wake of disaster: *after* the Holocaust and, again, *after* the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and *after* the start of genocide in Darfur, Sudan. So many people died, so many communities were completely extinguished, before we as a species were able to come up with the tools that might stop this crime.

In the case of Armenians in the South Caucasus, the Lemkin Institute and many other organizations are attempting to use these mechanisms *before* catastrophe. Artsakh is a

genocide that can be prevented. We sincerely hope you will join the effort to prevent a Second Armenian Genocide before it is too late.