



ARF Youth's Towards Syunik
Strategy & Comprehensive Initiative Program

«AZAD SYUNIK»



Armenia & Artsakh



THIS BOOKLET IS PREPARED BY

The Educational Committee of the
ARF Bureau Office of Youth Affairs

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The Endangered Syunik: ARF Youth Focus

Besides being an inseparable part of the homeland, Syunik Province, which is the backbone of the Armenian Republic, has a very important geographical position as well as a strategic significance. Syunik is the only piece of bone stuck in the throat of the Turkish-Azerbaijani treaty, thus thwarting their centenarian dream: the realization of their Pan-Turkism plan.

Evidently, Syunik is the only obstacle to the unity of the Turkish peoples. Therefore, the fortification of Syunik must be a priority for all of us, particularly given the fact that the fall of Syunik would lead to the collapse of the Armenian Republic and the deprivation of the Armenian Nation of their motherland.

The ARF youth have always kept their attention focused on the Motherland as one entity, without excluding any part of it. Therefore, considering the current situation and conditions, Syunik has become a focal point for the ARF youth body worldwide.

The ARF youth are making use of all their capabilities to enhance the defense of Syunik, particularly by organizing and training the youth

of the area so that they will be able to confront all the difficulties and challenges.

The Zangezur self-defense battles, fought under the command of Karekin Nejteh, had enormous significance. They were fought inspired by the Commander's following conviction:

“Right is an understanding of power, not logic.”

As a result of the self-defense battles inspired by the above conviction, Zangezur (today's Syunik) is a part of today's Armenia. Today, the Armenian youth must adopt the same conviction, ensure the security of Syunik, and defend it.

ARF Bureau Office of Youth Affairs

The Armenian Youth for Strengthening of Syunik

One of the important characteristics of a state is its territory, the geographical area over which the state spreads its sovereignty.

Territorially, states can be likened to the human body; just as every cell is essential to the body, in the same way, every centimeter is vital to the state.

However, just like in the body, there are organs of vital importance, without which it is impossible for the human body to function. In the same way, in a state there are territories of strategic significance, without which not only the territorial integrity of the state is put at risk but also the state is deprived of development opportunities and is doomed to destruction.

In the case of the third Republic of Armenia, the territory of strategic importance, of course, is Syunik, which not only has had a unique historical role in the life of the Armenian people all throughout history but also today it represents one of the guarantees for preservation and development.

Without Syunik the existence and perseverance of the Armenian Republic is impossible.

This simple article in itself makes it apparent how significant Syunik is for all Armenians.

In the matter of the existence and perseverance of a given state or nation, the most zealous section of the population is always the youth of that nation. The reason for that is because it is only when the state perseveres that it is possible for the youth of that nation to function normally and prosper.

The significance of Syunik in the life of contemporary Armenian youth must be evaluated in that context.

As a body working in the circles of Armenian youth in Armenia and having the purpose of serving the motherland through patriotic young people, the ARF Youth Union of Armenia has always had its focus on the problems that Armenia faces in all areas.

After the catastrophic war of 2020, the ARF Youth Union of Armenia realized the necessity of overcoming the increasing challenges faced by the Armenian people as well as its vital role in that respect. In these historic times it also comprehends the importance of empowering Syunik, which has become the focus of hostile interests, and, therefore, has focused all its capabilities on carrying out empowerment programs for the youth of Syunik Province, with the purpose of fortifying that significantly strategic section of the motherland.

ARF Youth Union of Armenia

Republic of Armenia

GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SYUNIK PROVINCE

Area	4506 km2
The province's proportion of the territory of the Armenian Republic	15.1%
Communities, as of the beginning of the year 2019	8
Cities	7
Villages	131
Population, as of the beginning of the year 2019	137.6 thousand
Urban	93.4 thousand
Rural	44.2 thousand
The province's proportion of the total population of the Armenian Republic	4.6%
The proportion of the province's population that is urban, 2018	67.9%
Agricultural lands	306,378.5 hectares

Syunik Province is located in the south of the Armenian Republic. On the north side it borders Vayots Dzor Province, on the south it shares national borders with Iran (the length of the border is 42 km.), on the west it borders Nakhichevan, and on the east Artsakh.



Vahanavank



Datev Monastery

One of the most popular sights of the region is the 9th century monastery complex of Datev, a unique example of medieval Armenian architecture. Between 1390 and 1434 the famous university of Datev was located there.

Datever Aerial Tramway

In 2010, the world's longest aerial tramway, "Datever", 5.7 km. long, started functioning in Datev. Its highest point is 380 m. from the ground. It crosses over the Vorotan gorge, stretches over the mountains, and crossing over Halitsor village, reaches the Datev monastery complex.



The Khntsoresk Bridge

The bridge links the two sides of the Old Khndzoresk village, the Ghantounts Novn and Nerkin Tagh. It is a suspension bridge, unique in its kind and length. It is 160 m. long, stretching from one side of the huge valley to the other. It is 63 m. at its highest point. The part of the



bridge that is used by visitors is supported by firm, tight cables so it swings while walking over it. Hence its popular name "the swinging bridge".

The Shaki Waterfall

The Shaki Waterfall is found at a distance of 6 km. from the town of Sisian. It is the largest waterfall in the mountains of Caucasus Minor, its height being 18 m.



Zorats Karer (The Stones of the Mighty)

Among the histo-cultural monuments of the province, the most famous are: the group of monuments known as "Zorats Karer", the Baghaberd, Halidzor and Vorohtnavank fortresses, the monastery complexes of Datev, Pghen, Vahan and Yeritsavank, the Aghidou mausoleum, the burial mound of Sisian from the Neolithic period, the small neighbourhood church of the town of Meghri as well as the towers of the city, which had a defensive significance.



The "Zorats Karer" monuments are found 3.2 km. to the north of the town of Sisian. They are also known by the name "Karahounch". They are from the Megalithic period, i.e. the second millennium before Christ. The "Zorats Karer" monuments are among the most well-known ancient Megalithic period complexes and observatories in the world. They are a Stone Age shrine of an Indo-European civilization, whose secrets have not been revealed or discovered yet by science. "Zorats Karer" is also known as the "Armenian Stonehenge" since, according to researchers, it is also home of a Megalithic observatory.

Cities and Towns

Kapan (population 42.3 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at the foot of Khusdoup Mountain (3,201 m.), 301 km. away from Yerevan. Its economy is mainly based on industry, mining being the most important component.

Kajaran (population 7 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at a distance of 326 km. from Yerevan. It is the center for non-ferrous metallurgy, based on the fact that it is home to huge reserves of raw materials like copper and molybdenum. Its economy is mainly based on mining.

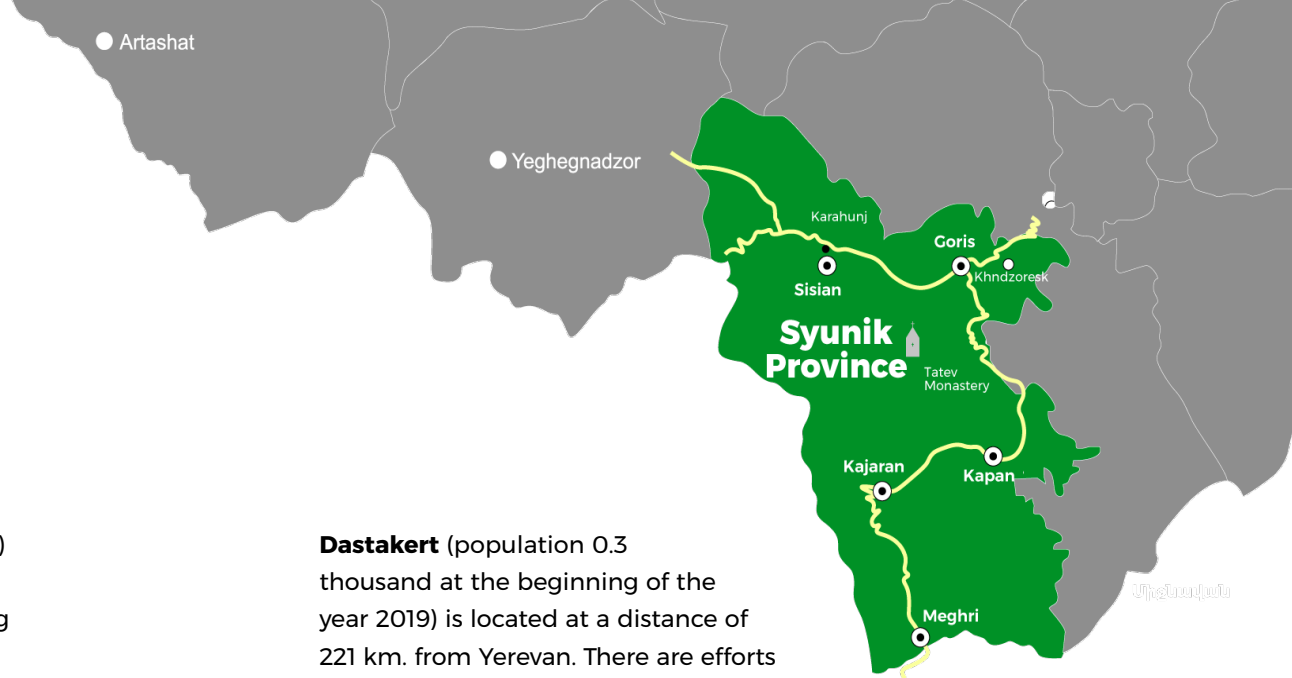
Goris (population 20.3 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at a distance of 236 km. from Yerevan. Its economy is mainly based on industry. It is mainly known for its production of electricity, the production of food, textiles, aluminum products, composite material (plastic metal) products, electrical appliances, and wooden products as well as natural wood processing.

Sisian (population 14.8 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at a distance of 201 km. from Yerevan. The main component of its economy is the production of electricity. Non-metallic mining is also a major part of the economy, as well as production of food.

Dastakert (population 0.3 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at a distance of 221 km. from Yerevan. There are efforts to resume copper and molybdenum mining there.

Meghri (population 4.5 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at a distance of 376 km. from Yerevan. The main component of its economy is agriculture. It is also known for its production of electricity. But it is mainly known for its production of fruits, canned products and juices.

Agarak (population 4.2 thousand at the beginning of the year 2019) is located at a distance of 388 km. from Yerevan. The main component of its economy is mining, and particularly the mining of non-ferrous metals. The economic prosperity of the city is related to its production of copper and molybdenum. The Armenia-Iran border and customs points are found in Akarag.



The Heroic Battle of Mountainous Armenia

After the declaration of the independence of the Republic of Armenia, at the end of 1918, Nejteh was assigned as governor of Nakhichevan by the government of the Armenian Republic. In August 1919, he was assigned as general commander of Kapan, Arevik and Koghtan (Gabarkoght).

Without outside help, relying on the mountains of their homeland and the power of their personal zeal, under the leadership of Nejteh the Armenian population of Syunik victoriously conducted its heroic battles.

It was during those difficult days that Nejteh came up with the “Davit Bek Oaths” union. On August 25, 1920, in the church of the Gavard village, Nejteh’s soldiers pledged in the name of Davit Bek “to stay loyal to the freedom of the homeland, their commander, Nejteh, and to fight until the last breath”. That is how the “Davit Bek Oaths”, whose motto was: “For the sake of the country, in the spirit of Davit Bek,” was born. It was with the example of the “Davit Bek Oaths” that Nejteh later established the “Tribal Covenants”. Exposing the Turkish-Bolshevik joint conspiracy against the Armenians, Syunik continued to fight, and after the Sovietization of Armenia, on December 25, 1920, during the first pan-Zangezur congress held in the Datev monastery, announced its autonomy.

Even the failure of the February Uprising and, as a consequence, the retreat of 12 thousand refugees (4 thousand of whom were troops), which evidently had an impact on the morale and the psychology of the Armenians of those mountainous regions, Syunik was not crushed, and it continued to fight and achieve victories. On April 26,

1921, the Republic of Mountainous Armenia was announced, under the leadership of Nejteh as its prime minister.

On June 1, the government of the Armenian Republic declared Mountainous Armenia to be part of Armenia, and Simon Vratsian was appointed as prime minister (Nejteh serving as the commander).

At that time, Georgia and Armenia were bolshevized, and the refugees from Ararat region retreated towards Syunik, which had a demoralizing effect and a bad influence on the Armenians of the Mountainous regions. On the other hand, there was a lack of supplies and wheat, the administrative leadership and military leadership had disagreements, and at the same time they were trying to avoid additional persecutions which could be visited on the Armenians of Soviet Armenia. Moreover, considering the fact that the Bolshevik leadership of Armenia in its July 1921 declaration had declared Syunik to be a part of Armenia, in July Mountainous Armenia yielded to Sovietization. Before leaving Zangezur, Nejteh assured the Armenians of the mountainous regions that he was not going to be gone for good and that he would return.

During the two-years’ fighting, the enemy had 15 thousand casualties while Syunik only had 28 martyrs. In addition, 200 villages were cleansed of Turks and returned to Armenian control.

Due to the heroic battles of Mountainous Armenia, it was possible to:

- Save the Armenians of the mountainous regions from massacres,
- Join Syunik to the motherland, saving Armenia from the consequences of such a deadly amputation, and
- Secure the retreat of Armenian intellectuals and military forces and their crossing over to Iran.

Karekin Nejteh

Karekin Nejteh was a military figure, politician and statesman during the first republic of Armenia. He was the founder of the “Tribal Covenants” national organization, and a member of the ARF, as well as the leader of the Republic of Mountainous Armenia. Hence, he was an active participant in a series of wars waged against the Turkish and Russian forces.

His original name being Karekin DerHaroutunian, Karekin Nejteh was born on January 1, 1881 in the Geznoud village of the Nakhichevan Province (presently within Azerbaijani territory).

His father, Yeghishe, was the son of the priest of Geznoud, Father Sahag DerHaroutunian. His mother, Dirouhi Keulnazarian, was from the same village. She gave birth to four children, two daughters, Anig and Tsolineh, and two sons, Levon and Karekin.

In 1888, when the eldest child, Anig, was 11, and the youngest, Karekin, was 2, their father died. The children were brought up by their mother.

Karekin received his elementary education in the Armenian school of his village. After its closure, he continued his education in the Russian school of Nakhichevan city, after which he attended the Russian education institute in Tbilisi. It was there that he joined the Armenian liberation movement, at the age of 17. He then left for St. Petersburg and after two years of studying law, left the university to devote himself completely to the Armenian revolutionary movement. In 1906, he left for Bulgaria, where he enrolled in the military school of Sofia with the support of Rosdom and with the help of the leaders of the Macedonian liberation movement. In 1907, he returned to Armenia.

With the aim of transporting weapons and ammunition, in 1909 Nejteh returned to the Caucasus and was arrested there by the tsarist authorities. After spending more than three years in prison, he left for Bulgaria.

In 1912, at the start of the first Balkan war, the Armenians formed troops of volunteers in order to fight with the Bulgarian army against Turkey. Those troops were led by Nejteh and Antranig Ozanian. Nejteh was wounded during those battles. Prior to World War I, being pardoned by the tsarist government, he returned to the Caucasus with the condition that he would participate in the battles against Turkey. In the beginning, he was deputy commander of the Armenian volunteer troops, and later he became commander of the separate Armenian-Yezidi detachment.

In 1915, by military order number 563, Karekin DerHaroutunian, i.e. Nejteh, received the rank of commander in the tsarist army.

In 1917, with a handful of troops he arrived at Koghpa and rescued the local Armenians from the massacres. During the years of World War I, being the assistant of commander Tro, in the spring of 1918 he led the battles of Alacha around Ani and made it possible for the retreating Armenian troops to reach Alexandropol without any loss, at the same time securing the transport from Ani of the valuable antiques obtained as a result of excavations in Mar.

In May 1918, when the fate of the Armenian people was being determined, Nejteh was caught up in a battle against Turkish troops in Alexandropol, so he retreated to Vanatsor (Gharakilise) with his troops. Thousands of Armenian refugees had retreated there and were in a state of panic. The locals were also in a crisis. However, due to the heroic three-days of battles at Gharakilise led by Nejteh, the Armenians asserted their will to survive. Nejteh's role in empowering

and reinforcing the will of the people was, of course, undeniable. For the battles of Gharakilise (where Nejteh was wounded), he was honored with a medal for bravery of the highest rank. After the declaration of independence of the Republic of Armenia at the end of 1918, Nejteh was appointed as the governor of Nakhichevan by the government of the Armenian Republic and, in August 1919, as the general commander of Kapan, Arevik and Koghtan.

In the 1920s, when Karekin was already living abroad and the Bolsheviks had come to power in Armenia, his mother and brother were exiled to Siberia. Three years later they were allowed to return to Vladikavkaz.

At the end of October 1944, Nejteh was arrested under the suspicion that he had secret ties with Germany. He was transported to Bucharest, then Moscow, where he was imprisoned in the Lubyanka prison.

In November of 1946, they sent Nejteh from Moscow to Yerevan, where his trial ended in 1948 and he was sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment.

After Nejteh's arrest, his family (his wife and son) was exiled from Sofia to the city of Pavlikeni in Bulgaria.

Nejteh's son, Sukyas-Vrej Nejteh, lived in the Bulgarian capital Sofia. He had no children. His father had named him Vrej; however, after his father's arrest, his mother added the name Nejteh to his name, being worried about Vrej's fate.

On December 21, 1955, Karekin Nejteh died in the Vladimir central prison.

“Ah! If I Could Only See My Country One More Time!”

Dro and the Battle for Existence

“We want the Armenians to decide their fate, to be the lord of themselves, the lord of their land, not the Russians, not the Turks, not the French, not the English, not the Americans, no one except for the Armenians.”

—DRO

Drastamat Kanayan was the first army commander of the First Republic of Armenia. He was an active participant in the liberation movement and was the defence minister of the First Republic (1920). He was one of the founders of the First Republic. By the vengeful hand of this brave hero, many giant butchers fell. His sword led armies into battles, and he was the one who led the glorious battle of Pash-Aparan. Dro also played a significant role in the Zangezur Battle for existence.

In 1920, different regions in Zangezur (Shournoukh, Mazra, etc.) were populated by Turks. Therefore, it was expected of them to show fierce resistance against the Armenian troops who were to invade and liberate those areas.

Dro's detachment was to participate in the Zangezur operations. First, it was commissioned to cleanse the southern and eastern regions of Zangezur, the Kapan region and the zone between Zangezur and Karabakh of their Tatar population.

Before launching the military operations, the Armenian side proposed that the Turkish villages disarm themselves and surrender

to the Armenian authorities of the province. The Turks responded by announcing, "We not only refuse to accept the Goris authorities, but also we will occupy all of Armenian Zangezur, which belongs to Azerbaijan."

On January 6, the Zangezur military forces, under the command of Dro, began the attacks.

The Armenian troops strategically carried out their attacks on the villages populated by Turks in an unexpected way and all at the same time. Due to that tactic, the enemy was not only unable to relocate its population from one area to the other and to regroup, but also they were unable to help each other.

A day prior to the attacks, Dro received a letter from Nejteh which read, "As a revolutionary, it is my moral duty to warn you for the last time of the fact that the operation on Shournoukh is going to have severe consequences for Gharapagh and Koghtan...."

The government of the Armenian Republic and Nejteh himself, as the commander of the Gabarkoght military forces, were obliged to ensure the security of the Armenians of Koghtan. That was an urgent necessity. However, unfortunately, in late December of the same year the massacre of Koghtan Armenians, particularly the majority of the Armenians of Akoulis, occurred. As for Artsakh, there was no doubt that if Zangezur was not going to be cleansed of the Turkish armed guerillas, the roads for communication between Armenia and Artsakh would be closed, hence making it very difficult for the Armenian Republic to send assistance, i.e. troops, weapons and ammunition, to Artsakh at the right time.

Undoubtedly, the strategy of the government of the Armenian Republic in that matter was justified and necessary given the fact that it had already received an appeal from the 23 October 1919

joint meeting between the ARF Central Committee of Aparaj and the Secret Self-defense Body of Artsakh, which read, "... Apply to the government of Armenia, ask for monetary and military assistance as well as organize the self-defence of Armenian Artsakh and put it on firm foundations."

It wasn't a coincidence that the command of the operations in Zangezur and Artsakh was trusted to Dro, who had undisputed authority in the Armenian Republic, in general, and in military circles, in particular.

The operation of cleansing the Zangezur of its Muslim population took place very quickly. Simon Vratsian put it this way, "Being well organized, the Zangezur Armenians cleansed the area between main Zangezur and Ghapan, namely the Turkish populated area of Tontarlou-Shournoukh-Asgilyoum, which had around 30 villages, in one attack. In March, the Avtalar-Aleanchou-Mousoulmanlar-Parkushad area, consisting of around 120 Turkish villages, was cleansed."

At the beginning of January 1920, as a result of the well-known and successful operation under Dro's command, not only was Zangezur cleansed of its Muslim population, but also the roads leading to Artsakh were opened.

In this way, Drastamat Kanayan survived all his confrontations with death. The years of his adult life were spent on battlefields. He lived until 72 years of age, and until his last breath, he stayed committed to the national liberation struggle.

In January of 1921, when the Bolshevik Leadership exiled the general staff of the Armenian Army, making them march on foot towards the northern Caucasus, Dro was exiled to Moscow, where he was kept under house arrest for five years until he was allowed to leave

the Soviet Union. He settled in Romania, where, in the 1930s, he travelled to the United States.

In 1933, during the 12th General Assembly of the ARF, Dro was elected as a member of the ARF Bureau. He was re-elected to that position in the following General Assemblies multiple times.

During WWII, for the sake of his people and delegated by the ARF, Dro conducted extremely difficult negotiations with the Nazi Germany authorities, trying to convince Hitler that the Armenians belonged to the Aryan race. By doing that, he tried to protect the Armenians of Soviet Armenia from a possible invasion by the Turkish armies eager to massacre Armenians any time, anywhere, in case of a possible Nazi victory. Also, Dro played an undeniably pivotal role in protecting the Armenians of Europe. Due to the continuous efforts of Dro and a special body formed by ARF activists for that same purpose, it was possible to change the attitude of Nazi Germany towards the Armenians. During the same period and after the end of the world war, Dro played a decisive role in saving the lives of thousands of Armenian military personnel captured by the Soviet Army.

Dro spent the last decade of his life mostly in Europe and the Middle East. Finally, he settled in Lebanon and for five years, he lived in the same house as his lifelong friend, Simon Vratsian. Re-immigration to Armenia became a disappointment for the Armenians who immigrated there, because of the perverted policies of the Soviets. Then came the betrayal of the Armenian Cause by the Soviets, who first demanded Kars and Ardahan; then Stalin played his game and neglected the issue. During that period of despair among the Armenian people who had immigrated, Dro played a significant role in restoring the new generation's confidence in their national identity.

In the last years of his life, Dro suffered from severe joint pain, which was the symptom of quickly spreading cancer. At the end of 1955,

Dro travelled to the United States for treatment, but he died there on March 8, 1956, and was buried in Boston. His will was to find eternal rest in his motherland. His last words were, "Ah! If I could only see my country one more time!" So, on May 19, 2000, he was reburied in the memorial dedicated to the battle of Abaran.

With his political boldness and combative courage, Dro is the personification of a "stormy" Tashnag and the unrepeatable model of a pioneer.

His person and works will remain a source of inspiration for the many generations to come, and as an instructive guide for the future of the Armenians.

The Strategic Significance of Syunik and the Battle of “Corridors”

—YEGHIA TASHJIAN

The Strategic Value of Syunik

Throughout history, the Syunik region has played a key role in Armenia’s history. It was in Syunik where noble Armenian families had the vision to re-establish the Armenian kingdom and fight resistance against the Ottoman and Tatar invasions. It was in Syunik and Karabakh where Davit Bek and his followers took up arms and protected the Armenian kingdoms of Artsakh. Finally, it was in Syunik under Njeh that he and his compatriots took up arms and resisted the Bolshevik-Turkish invasion.

In addition to its important role in the political history of Armenians, Syunik historically has been a bridge between different civilizations and trade routes. Over time Iranians have controlled the Caucasus through noble Syunik families who used to establish trade networks with different regions. After the defeat of Armenia during the second Artsakh war in 2020, the issue of Syunik was once again raised. This time, Baku and Ankara wanted to fulfill their century-old dream by carving up the region and accomplishing their pan-Turkic dream.

Despite the fact that the ninth clause of the November 9, 2020, trilateral statement mentions that Armenia will provide a route to connect Nakhichevan to the Republic of Azerbaijan for commercial reasons, it does not mention the word “corridor,” despite Baku’s claims that this clause justifies the “Zangezur Corridor.” Nowhere in this statement is there any mention of creating a corridor along the border of Armenia with Iran. By pushing the narrative of a “corridor”, Baku not only violates the trilateral statement but clearly violates

the territorial integrity of Armenia, threatening the established Armenian-Iranian border and paving the way for pan-Turkic aspirations in northern Iran.

On May 2021, Azerbaijan launched incursions into Syunik and occupied strategic hills. Basically, what can Azerbaijan achieve with this provocative move? The trilateral statement signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia mentions that Armenia will be providing a “transport link” to Azerbaijan (probably via Syunik) that will be guarded by Russian border troops, and Russia (not Armenia) will exercise control over the transport communications.

Months ago, a junior diplomatic source from Iran (who requested his identity be kept anonymous) highlighted that Azerbaijan’s actions may be related to Armenia’s participation in the “International North-South Corridor.” The source has stated that next month Iran will officially start negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to process its application for full membership. Armenia is the main negotiator in support of Iran’s full membership. The diplomat believes that this conflict is directly related to India’s initiative for the trade corridor, for which New Delhi and Tehran are encouraging Yerevan to become a link connecting India and the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea (through Georgia). Azerbaijan is not pleased with this initiative and may destabilize Syunik, and Armenia in general, to distract Armenia and show Yerevan to be an unreliable partner. Therefore, Syunik—the backbone of Armenia with its geostrategic location along trade routes—may determine the geo-economic future of not just Armenia, but the entire region.

On September 10, 2022, the Defense Minister of Azerbaijan instructed his army to maintain combat readiness to “suppress any Armenian provocations.” Not surprisingly, three days later, Baku launched a full-scale aggression on Armenia’s eastern border, concentrating on Jermuk and using special forces, Israeli and

Turkish-made drones and artillery strikes against military and civilian targets. Consequently, Azerbaijan occupied strategic positions near the border, exerting pressure on Armenia's narrow southern region. The aim of this military operation was to enter Jermuk and force the authorities of Yerevan into another "capitulation." Azerbaijani artillery strikes also targeted Russian border guards and their posts in the region of Gegharkunik. Interestingly, the Russian personnel did not respond militarily and were urgently forced to leave their place of deployment as their military equipment and facilities came under intense fire.

Azerbaijan justified its aggression by accusing Yerevan of refusing to sign a peace treaty that would recognize its "territorial integrity" (that is, recognizing the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh where Russian peacekeepers are currently deployed as part of Azerbaijan) and provide a "corridor" in the south connecting Azerbaijan to its exclave, Nakhichevan. As a result of the escalation, more than 300 Armenian soldiers were killed.

Geo-economic competition and the battle of "corridors"

On December 12, under the pretext of environmentalism, dozens of Azerbaijani state-backed "eco-activists" blocked the only land corridor in the Stepanakert-Shushi section connecting Armenia to Artsakh. As anticipated, the "environmental" slogans were soon politicized, and political demands were raised by enforcing a blockade. A humanitarian disaster was created for the 120,000 Armenians living in Artsakh. The real question is why Azerbaijan went for such a provocation and at what risk. By analyzing the Azerbaijani media, we can argue that the current humanitarian crisis is much deeper than the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, and it is related to the "battle of corridors" and beyond.

The blockade of the Lachin Corridor should not come as a surprise to us as such scenarios were already discussed in the Azerbaijani

media. The only surprise has been Russia's inability to solve the crisis. Weeks ago, Turkey's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, during joint military drills with Azerbaijan near the Iranian border, called on Armenia to "grasp the opportunity and respond positively to Turkey's and Azerbaijan's peace calls." Commenting on the so-called "Zangezur corridor", Akar said, "It is our sincerest wish to re-establish the railway and connections in the region, especially the opening of the Zangezur corridor, to start economic activities and to ensure a comprehensive normalization throughout the region, including the relations between Azerbaijan-Armenia and Turkey-Armenia." The Turkish defense minister said that Turkey would vow to continue supporting Azerbaijan's "righteous cause" against Armenia.

Turkey is pushing for this corridor as it will significantly empower its 'Middle Corridor' project and its role in the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vis-à-vis Iran's 'North-South Corridor', which is designed to break the isolation of Tehran and Moscow and empower Iran's relations with Russia and India.

On the second day of the protests organized by Azerbaijanis and the blockade on Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani media outlets made their intentions clear. Azerbaijani media and protesters started demanding the replacement of the commander of the Russian peacekeeping mission in Artsakh, Andrey Volkov, and also asked to ensure the control of the Lachin Corridor and the "full restoration of Azerbaijani sovereignty in the territories under the control of the peacekeepers." News.am, quoting Azerbaijani website Haqqin.az, mentioned that the "Azerbaijani activists" are "determined to prevent the functioning of the Lachin Corridor in its previous format and will continue the action until the control of the road is ensured by Baku." Interestingly, some Azerbaijani activists also naively asked for the removal of Russian forces and their replacement with UN-mandate forces.

Is Azerbaijan ready to take a risk and ask for the removal of Russian peacekeeping forces and their replacement with international peacekeeping forces? According to several Azerbaijani experts, currently Baku is against the withdrawal of Russian forces by force since the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the ethnic cleansing of Armenians would tarnish President Ilham Aliyev's image in the West. Azerbaijan fears that such an action would force the EU and the US to impose economic sanctions. For now, Baku prefers to see the Russians staying, but under control. For Azerbaijan, as one of the experts claimed, it is much easier to deal with a weak Russia, rather than with Europeans. That's because Baku is familiar with the "Russian mentality". Hinting at the Russians, one Azerbaijani expert said "a microbe when it is in top shape - is highly dangerous, but once you destroy the microbe to half its capacity, it turns into a vaccine." Baku prefers a weak and "good microbe" that can boost Azerbaijan's immunity and consolidate Aliyev's grip over the Azerbaijanis.

Aiming to control the activities of the Russian troops, Baku is not seeking to kick out the Russians or replace them, but rather to control their mission, monitor what transits the Lachin Corridor and use the corridor to pressure Yerevan to open a "corridor" in Syunik that would link Azerbaijan to Turkey. From Baku's perspective, from now on, the destiny of the Lachin Corridor is related to that of the opening and the future status of the "Zangezur corridor."

Encircling Iran and Beyond

After the second Artsakh war, Iran felt isolated from the region, but its absence did not last long. With the election of President Ebrahim Raisi, Tehran adopted a proactive foreign policy in the South Caucasus to secure its geo-economic and geopolitical interests. The so-called Zangezur corridor was a threat to Iran's national security as it was not only going to bypass Iranian territory and prevent Iran from gaining transit fees from Azerbaijani trucks but was also going

to carve out international borders between Iran and Armenia.

The Turkish-Azerbaijani project of carving out the Iran-Armenia border is aimed at depriving Iran of transit income from Turkey's exports to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Iran is concerned that in future Turkey may see this as an opportunity to create obstacles to the export of Iranian goods via Turkey, and with the loss of its border with Armenia, Iran's trading routes with Europe and Eurasia would be at the mercy of Turkish and Azerbaijani trade routes. Hence, Ankara's and Baku's economic and political leverage over Tehran would increase, paving the way for pan-Turkic secessionist movements in northern Iran.

For this reason, Iran had to play its cards well and engage both Azerbaijan and Armenia to secure its interests. On the one hand, Tehran fostered the construction of a railway with Azerbaijan to connect with Russia, and on the other hand started to increase its trade, energy and communication projects with Armenia. Iran's engagement with Azerbaijan over the alternative "corridor" lifted the military and political pressure on Armenia regarding the Azerbaijani threat over Syunik, but at the same time kept Armenia isolated from regional communication and trade projects for the time being.

As Azerbaijan in September 2022 pressed deeper into Armenia and occupied strategic hills in the south, Iran deployed troops and heavy weaponry to its borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Iranian President called Armenia's PM and reiterated that "Iran's connection with Armenia should not be endangered, and the communication channels should be under the sovereignty of the states." After a few days, the head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament), Vahid Jalalzadeh, warned that "Iran will turn the dream of changing the borders of the region into a nightmare."

In addition to hard power, Iran also employed its soft power and opened a consulate in the city of Kapan in Syunik. Economically speaking, according to Iranian Fars News Agency, on May 15, 2022, the Chairman of the Iran-Armenia Joint Chamber of Commerce, Hervik Yarijanian, said that the Meghri free trade zone would be opened soon in the Aras region in northwestern Iran, which could boost the volume of trade between Iran and Armenia up to \$1 billion. Both sides also are negotiating on attracting investments in the “north-south” transport corridor connecting Armenia to the Persian Gulf through Iran.

It was within this context that India joined Iran and sent a harsh diplomatic message to Azerbaijan and started arming Armenia. From the Indian perspective, any military conflict in southern Armenia may threaten the security of the International North-South Transport Corridor where both India and Iran are encouraging Armenia to play a bridging role connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea.

Assessment and Reflection

The Azerbaijani border line encroachment into Syunik and the blockade of the “Lachin corridor” should not surprise us at all. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev’s threats after the war over Artsakh to forcibly open a “corridor” via Syunik, the role of Azerbaijani media in mobilizing its people for the “cause of the Zangezur corridor,” and the spreading of the narrative of Zangezur being “Azerbaijani ancestral land” all fall within the context of the recent escalation.

Remarkably, some Azerbaijani MPs, speaking through unofficial channels, as well as Azerbaijani media outlets have called for the establishment of “security zones” and “buffer zones” within Armenian territory. Such remarks should not be missed. The main

objective behind this narrative is to disarm the Armenian army and facilitate the establishment of a “corridor” in Syunik.

Azerbaijan is pushing to isolate Armenia and enforce a humiliating treaty by playing the “Lachin corridor” card. In addition to military operations and a blockade, Baku is also engaging in psychological and political pressure. On September 19, 2002 a group of Azerbaijani politicians and “intellectuals” in Ankara announced the creation of a new “Goycha-Zangezur Turkish Republic.” A representative office has already been opened in Ankara, and a flag has also been presented. The so-called “Goycha-Zangezur” Turkish Republic covers the Southern and Eastern parts of Armenia.

Hence, Armenia needs a vision for its survival. It has to seek military support to strengthen its deterrent capabilities, rather than moral support and empty promises. Armenia is once again at the crossroads of great power competition, the only natural barrier against the pan-Turkic project. If Aliyev’s and Erdogan’s regional ambitions are not halted now, the fireball will expand in the future to neighboring countries.

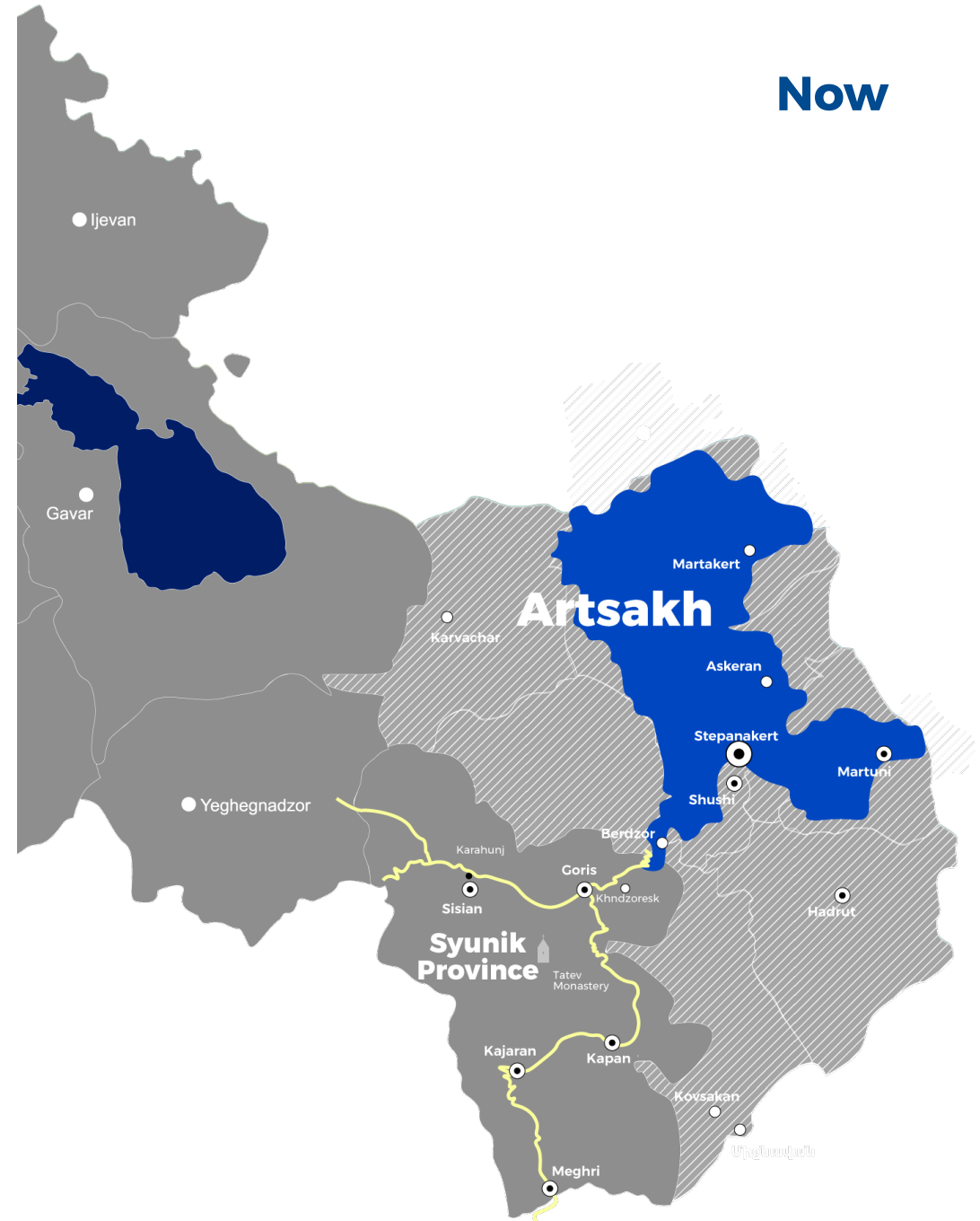
Armenia & Artsakh



Before the 2020 War



Now



QUOTES FROM KAREKIN NEJTEH



Sayings From Karekin Nejteh

—No country without Syunik and Artsakh.
Without that strong backbone, Armenia as a whole cannot exist.

—Sword and pen: the two weapons given by God to man in order to protect justice and holiness in this world... “My sword didn’t fall on the ground...”; it was not defeated.

—What am I to say to you, Armenian youth? Are my words resonating in dead people’s ears?! No! I believe in your inner strength’s renewal as well as in the momentum of your young wings.

—My people, I ask the generations to vow, in the name of your history of all the past centuries, not to forgive the Turks, even if one day you see them in ruins. Yes, I forgive most enemies, but not the enemy who killed its own half and not the one who one day tried to erase you from the book of existence.

—Die in a way that even your death serves your Motherland.

—I am a Tashnag, and alas, my country and my people are closer to me than my breath. [...] I already feel that apart from my personal feelings I also have the Armenia feeling, which wasn’t born with me but which the Tashnag party gave to me.

—Without commitment, there is no high level of creativity, and the concept of commitment was instilled in the psyche of the Armenian people by martyrology and the heroism of the Tashnag party.

—That is why the Tashnag party, as the inner capability of our race, is not broken even in the case of internal defeats. It continues to remain the spiritual core of the Armenians who are idealists and continue to believe in its creative future.

There is nothing so deep as the sorrow of a person who sacrifices for the likes of him and remains misunderstood.

—Syunik is rich with old monasteries and castles, half-ruined sanctuaries, which for centuries served as stables and clinics for the Turks. That reality, which caught my attention from the first days I stepped into Syunik, gave me the opportunity to give my military operations the nature of Crusades. My soldiers looked with sacred awe at Paghapert, which is at the entrance of the fairytale-like Kevhatsor, as their foreheads bowed down and their lips touched the stones of the ruins of the majestic castle. My soldiers were no longer able to pass indifferently by those historic memorials of their country.

**Yerevan
2023**