

# Exculpation of Armenian terrorism under guise of the 'Armenian martyr'

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Mexican social anthropologist and international relations analyst of Armenian descent, Carlos Antaramian Salas, has long focused on studying inter-ethnic issues, with an emphasis mostly on Armenian issues. This commentary explores the article by Carlos Antaramian Salas "The Armenian martyr: The political construction of an exemplary figure after the Genocide (1915-1918)" ("El mártir armenio: la construcción política de una figura ejemplar después del Genocidio (1915-1918)") and focuses on the notion of the "Armenian martyr" that the author connects to Armenian history and culture to justify the assassinations and attacks committed by Armenian terrorist groups from the 1970s to the 1990s. The analysis of the history of the Armenian nation and of the activity of the diaspora starting from the beginning of the 20th century presented by the author is at the foundation of this commentary. The commentary argues that the role of the nationalist narrative plays a key role in the activities of Armenian diaspora in order to keep its dispersed community united. This commentary, in turn, posits that the same activities of the diaspora have had a strong influence on the emergence of Armenian radicalized groups.

**Keywords:** Armenian diaspora, terrorism, martyr, nationalism, genocide, narrative



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### ***History of formation of the figure of the “Armenian martyr”***

In order to understand the arguments introduced by Antaramian Salas, it is worth scrutinizing the background events to which he refers while posing his arguments. He starts to build his argument by stating that the figure of the “martyr” has always been present in Armenian culture, particularly since the time of the battle of Avarair (451 BC) against the Persian Empire, when they had to fight for Christianity. He argues that, in the Armenian case, the “martyr” is the one ready to sacrifice themselves for a duality: homeland and religion. Further developing this notion, Antaramian Salas continues by mentioning the 19<sup>th</sup> century process of the secularization of this figure, who gained a political–patriotic status with the guerrilla warriors called *fedayin*. In Persian, this means “the one who is committed” or “the one who is sacrificed.” The person he describes is an armed man fighting against the unjust Ottoman regime that keeps the Armenian people subjugated; according to the narrative, he dedicates his life to the people and wants to “wake them up” with his patriotic deeds and, above all, with his readiness to die for his nation’s cause.<sup>1</sup> The *fedayin* is a revolutionary figure mainly emanating from *Tashnaksutiun*, also known as Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaksutyun (ARFD), a leftist ultranationalist party that was one of several secret political parties founded in the period from 1885 to 1908.

### ***First World War period***

The event contributing most to the argument of Antaramian Salas is the so-called “Armenian genocide,” which has been a topic of debate between Armenia and Turkey for more than a century. Armenians claim that the events of 1915 were part of a “deliberate and inhumane extermination” plan of the Ottoman government during World War I on the basis of ethnic and religious identity, and that the deportations orchestrated by the Ottoman government in order to alienate Armenians from the enemy powers was just an instrument to accomplish that plan.<sup>2</sup> The Turkish side counter argues that Armenians were relocated to other parts of the Empire because of their political and military alliance with Russia, Turkey’s adversary in World War I, and assaults on Turkish villages in Eastern Anatolia, where Armenians were residing as a minority. The atrocities of this process are considered to be a result of the general lawlessness of a collapsing state apparatus unable to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 86

<sup>2</sup> Euronews.com, *Armenian massacres of 1915: The Armenian viewpoint*, April 24, 2016, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2016/04/24/armenian-massacres-of-1915-the-armenian-viewpoint> (accessed: 23 August 2020)

properly control the relocation, together with the internal strife, banditry, famine, and epidemics that were present during the war.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the figure of the “martyr” used in the article is the result of the construction of post-genocidal narratives, especially among the descendants of those who fled the Empire. These almost “1.5 million victims” (the unfounded number claimed by the Armenian side) that died during the period from 1915 to 1923 have come to be considered as “martyrs” by Armenians.<sup>4</sup> A clear connection is seen to be made between ancient history and 20<sup>th</sup> century events through the notion of a “heroic Armenian nation,” constantly fighting against oppression throughout history.

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### *Armenian diaspora and commemorations of ‘martyrs’*

Carlos Antaramian Salas mentions in the abstract of the article the importance of the figure of the martyr in “the remembrance policy” structured by Armenian communities living abroad. He also underlines the transformations that figure has undergone since 1921 during the commemorations, every April 24, of the “genocide” by Armenian communities all around the world. The focus of his paper is thus to analyse the “remembrance policy” conducted by the Armenian diaspora in order to understand the use of the figure of the “martyr” as a strategy to qualify or distinguish not only “victims,” but also those young people that “sacrifice” themselves in terrorist practices.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a question arises here of whether the author is trying to justify those terrorist acts by analysing them through the prism of the figure of the “martyr” that, he claims, has been part of Armenian culture for centuries and has been used for keeping this dispersed nation united—first by the church and then by the diaspora, especially after the 1915 event.

Antaramian Salas categorizes the critical stages in the development of the “genocide” commemorations: the silent commemorations (1921–1964), the demonstrations for the fiftieth anniversary and the struggle for recognition (1965–1975), and the “executions” conducted by the terrorist martyrs (1975–1988); he focuses particularly on the first and third periods as turning points in the commemorations. He also highlights “milestone events” in Armenian history. These are the “genocide” (1915), the creation of the first Armenian Republic (1921),

3 Bayraktar B., “Armenian massacres of 1915: the Turkish viewpoint”, *Euronews.com*, April 24, 2016, <https://www.euronews.com/2016/04/24/armenian-massacres-of-1915-the-turkish-viewpoint> (accessed: 23 August 2020)

4 Antaramián Salas, op. cit., p. 85

5 Ibid., p. 83

and the immediately subsequent period of Sovietization (1921–1991). According to the author, his main objective is to identify what role these commemoration periods and historical events have in the construction of the “martyr” figure that helps to depict a national identity under threat. The identified threats involve the fear of facing a situation of being an exile, assimilation as a result of displacement, loss of identity, and a sense of political impotency caused by the absence of a state that would protect and represent its people. Thus, Antaramian Salas, in constructing the figure of the “martyr,” emphasizes the connections among the critical moments in Armenian history, commemorations of the 1915 event, and these fears.<sup>6</sup>

One of the decisive events described as part of the period of silent commemorations is “Operation Nemesis,” which was directed clandestinely by *Tashnaksutiún*. The aim of the operation was “vengeance” for the 1915 event, and it resulted in killing those officials of Turkish origin whom *Tashnaksutiún* considered “responsible” for the

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“genocide.” Antaramian Salas highlights the purpose of the operation as not only revenge, but also the enacting of “strict justice.”<sup>7</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the author, by categorizing the assassinations as part of the attempt to serve justice, seeks to justify the acts of terror.

The event of 1915, which today probably unites all political groups across the Armenian diaspora worldwide, was not such a unifying factor in the pre-World War II period. In 1933, the Armenian Archbishop of New York Levón Tourián was killed by members of *Tashnaksutiún* owing to his opposition to the politicization of the issue of 1915 by a particular political party. The ideological factor was one reason behind the divisions inside the diaspora, especially in the United States. One set of political parties was pro-Soviet, while the others were on the side of the *Tashnaksutiún*, and hence anti-Soviet. Another issue dividing these two camps was the flag; the tricolour used during the First Republic versus the flag of the Soviet Republic of Armenia. Archbishop Tourián was killed as a result of the series of events that followed his intention to separate the church’s activities on April 24 (a requiem mass) from those of the political parties, mainly led by the *Tashnaksutiún* party, as well as his refusal to make public appearance in front of the flag of the First Republic of Armenia.<sup>8</sup> The archbishop was killed during the Christmas

6 Ibid., pp. 88-89

7 Ibid., p.90

8 Ibid., p.93

mass in New York and two *Tashnaksutiún* members, out of nine present during the ceremony, were accused of the murder. These two were praised and presented as heroes by the party, which the author highlights as the event that had an influential role in shaping the political culture in the diaspora on the basis of the patriotic ideals of “victims-heroes.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, an Armenian source also emphasizes “terrorism becoming an act of courage to clandestine organizations”—especially on the agenda of the *Tashnaksutiún* party.<sup>10</sup> The party still has offices in all the countries where the Armenian diaspora resides and is known for radical views when it comes to their homeland and a political ideology that justifies killing and intimidating Armenians who have opposing political views. These cases were documented by Congressman Frank E. Hook in 1945, as has recently been revealed from the archives of the Congress of the United States. This fact is also mentioned by Antaramian Salas himself in reference to Armenian diaspora studies scholar Khachig Tölölyan and is further proved by the historical events described in his article.<sup>11</sup> The enumerated facts might serve as proof of the truth that the community itself, with its values deeply rooted in the church and in the notion of the motherland, can easily become fragmented and hostile towards one other because of political views.

Moreover, describing the diaspora activities in the second period, from 1965 until 1975, Antaramian Salas underlines the diaspora’s activity in achieving recognition of the “genocide” in host countries, which was finally accomplished through somehow overcoming these internal divisions.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the author analyses the third-generation diaspora activities and the terrorist attacks mainly targeting Turkish officials and diplomats in Europe as well as in Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey that were committed by various Armenian terrorist groups. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, these organizations committed over 235 terror acts in over 22 countries, killing around 70 people. The terrorists were revered by the Armenian public.<sup>13</sup> “Operation Nemesis,” with its message of martyrdom, served as an ideological trigger for the terrorist attacks of the 1970–80s.<sup>14</sup> The assassination of Turkish officials who had no direct connection to the events of 1915, more than 50 years later, as well as the deaths of many innocent people killed in various terrorist attacks during these years,

9 Ibid., p.92

10 Atamian, S., “The Armenian Community: The Historical Development of a Social and Ideological Conflict,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1956, pp. 284-285, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2574056> (accessed: August 23, 2020)

11 Ibid., p.91

12 Ibid., p.95

13 Ibid., p.99

14 Ibid., p.91

cannot be justified in any way. However, Antaramian Salas attempts to prove the contrary. According to the author, the violent turn of events in the commemoration of the genocide had its origins in Beirut, where a vast Armenian population resides, and with the Lebanese war, during which similar attacks became a way to fight for people's rights. Combative ways of making declarations about the "genocide" to the international community started in 1973 with the murder of two Turkish embassy workers by Kurkén Yanikián in Santa Barbara, California. The author regards the Armenian terrorists as *fedayín* and links them to "Operation Nemesis" in the 1920s. The same is the case with many others, including the so-called "Lisbon Five" that blew up the Turkish embassy in Lisbon in 1983—they were glorified for "falling at the altar of liberty." The author also mentions that participants in both Operation Nemesis and the terrorist attacks of the 1970s and 1980s were *Tashnaksutiún* affiliates linked to the figure of the "martyr" who was revered for dying for the cause promoted by the party.<sup>15</sup> This factor is not a coincidence, as even authors of Armenian descent such as Mikayel Varandian have described *Tashnaksutiún* as a unique revolutionary party in terms of having rich experience in terrorism with the most fanatical of terrorists.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Conclusion: The true purpose of the figure and its consequences***

Having analysed the developments in the activities of the Armenian diaspora, especially those directed to remembrance of the events of April 24<sup>th</sup>, and the transformations they have undergone through the influence of the mentioned milestone historical events in the history of the Armenian nation, the argument that Antaramian Salas repeatedly states throughout the article is this: This admiration towards the figure of the "martyr" is politically constructed to help in conserving the identity of the nation.<sup>17</sup>

According to the author, after 1988, the glorification of the terrorists stopped because of the loss of "sympathy" owing to the numerous terrorist attacks committed all over Europe, including the bloodiest one at Orly airport in France in 1983. The period of the first Karabakh War with Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1994 is also covered and mentioned as a reason for the cessation of terrorist activities. Antaramian Salas states that, after the war, terrorists were not labelled as heroes anymore. Contradicting himself one more time, he concludes, by the end of the same paragraph, that some of those who died during the first Karabakh War (self-proclaimed *fedayíns*) are considered as "martyrs" for dying for their religion, as they were

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp.97-98

<sup>16</sup> K. Papazian, *Patriotism Perverted*, (Boston: Baikar Press, 1934) , pp. 1-79

<sup>17</sup> Antaramián Salas, op.cit., p. 100

fighting against a Muslim state and for their nation as well.<sup>18</sup> What he omits is that, this time, the atrocities committed were the result of military aggression led by the state of Armenia that resulted in the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan, which was condemned by the UN Security Council resolutions (822, 853, 874, 884) issued in 1993. The occupation objective of the state of Armenia had no connection to the religious cause, nor to the “genocide.”

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However, after the first Karabakh war ended, there were some other terrorist acts committed against Azerbaijan and Turkey. After the ceasefire agreement was signed in May 1994 in Bishkek between Armenia and Azerbaijan, there was an explosion on a Baku subway train in July 1994. The responsibility for the act was taken by armed separatist group the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh defense army.”<sup>19</sup> The group was first assembled in 1988–1990 as part of a special regiment of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Armenian S.S.R. Volunteer militants from illegal militarized cells comprising it were active participants during the active phase of the First Karabakh War (1988–1994).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, four days later, on July 7, Haluk Sipahioglu, Counsellor of the Embassy of the Republic of Turkey to Greece in Athens, was assassinated by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), which was one of the most extreme of the extremist terrorist groups formed in the 1970s.

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Armenia itself suffered from domestic terrorism as well. In 1999, a terror act in the National Assembly (NA) of the Republic of Armenia in Yerevan resulted in the assassination of the NA Speaker, Karen Demirchian, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Vazgen Sargsyan, and other officials. This fact contradicts the notion, frequently presented by Antaramian and many other Armenian experts, that the “Armenian cause” is a unifying factor for all Armenians around the world. It might be a unifying one, but it is also a divisive one, and the community, by its nature, is quick to radicalize and become aggressive - even against its own members.<sup>21</sup>

18 Ibid., p. 101

19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, “Armenian Terrorism”, Available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/files/shares/Armenian%20terrorism.pdf> (Accessed: August 23, 2020)

20 O. Kuznetsov, *The History of Transnational Armenian Terrorism in the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Verlag Dr. Koster, 2016), p. 209.

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, op. cit., p. 7.

Radical sentiments have always been present in the Armenian diaspora and continue to feature in its activities, even in the open and democratic environments of Western countries. For example, in July 2020, after the military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, organized gangs from the Armenian diaspora attacked the peaceful demonstrations of Azerbaijanis in many European countries and in the United States. In Los Angeles, some of a group of 3,000 Armenian protesters attacked a group of some two dozen Azerbaijanis, causing injuries that required urgent medical care. A Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officer was hurt as well. The LAPD has since launched a hate-crime investigation.<sup>22</sup> A similar scene was witnessed when an Azerbaijani journalist was stoned in the head in Brussels.<sup>23</sup>

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In the conclusion of the article, Antaramian Salas posits his idea that the concept of the “martyr” is used to make a connection between “old heroes” and “new stories.”<sup>24</sup> This means that, despite acknowledging the radically oriented actions that such “martyrs” have carried out during the past centuries, they are still, on the whole, praised by the Armenian communities.<sup>25</sup> The argument that, despite having a common motivation of fighting and defending the “Armenian cause,” each community will “present” its commemoration of the “genocide” according to the “tendencies” present in the host community is also a debatable one,<sup>26</sup> as most

of the democratic societies where the July silent demonstrations turned violent, for example, Los Angeles and Brussels, reject the justification of terrorism and aggression on any grounds. The consequences of this glorification are seen nowadays, too. This kind of nationalistic and radicalized mindset, promoted by the diaspora for decades for the sake of keeping its dispersed members “united,” is spreading more hatred to future generations, thereby impeding the resolution of the conflict, and should not be encouraged.

22 Nurullayeva, K, “Azerbaijani MP condemns violent attacks on diplomatic missions and embassies in the US and Belgium by members of Armenian Diaspora,” *The Parliament Magazine*, August 4, 2020, available at: <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/azerbaijan-mp-condemns-violent-attacks-by-members-of-armenian-diaspora>.

23 The Embassy of Azerbaijan in the Kingdom of Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, “Statement of the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Kingdom of Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, Mission to the European Union dated 23.07.2020,” July 23, 2020, available at: <https://brussels.mfa.gov.az/news/28/3430> (accessed: August 23, 2020).

24 Antaramián Salas, op. cit., p. 101.

25 Ibid., p. 102.

26 Ibid., p. 102.