

# [***Will Iran Sabotage South Caucasus Peace Through the Armenian Church? | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C2S-2BF1-DY68-10S6-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Armenia is facing a showdown between its church and state, and Iran and Russia are siding with the church.

**Body**

Armenia is facing a showdown between its church and state, and Iran and Russia are siding with the church.

Hundreds of angry villagers, led by an archbishop, marched about 100 miles to Armenia's capital, Yerevan on May 9. [*Tens of thousands*](https://www.asbarez.com/tens-of-thousands-join-tavush-for-the-homeland-protest-in-yerevan-demand-pashinyans-resignation/) met them in the main square to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. [*Over 170*](https://asbarez.com/over-170-arrested-as-tavush-for-the-homeland-protests-continue/) protestors have been arrested since.

Shirak Province Archbishop Mikael Ajaphyan [*called*](https://news.am/rus/news/818571.html) the current government "traitors" who "deserve to be shot." The leader of the protest, Tavush Province Archbishop Bagrat Galstyan, said the government, "must be removed as soon as possible."

Since Azerbaijan took over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region last September, it has sought to finalize border demarcation with Armenia in a new peace accord. In March, Baku [*demanded*](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/azerbaijan-demands-return-of-4-villages-under-occupation-of-armenia/3160285) the return of four villages still held by Armenia in the nation's Tavush Province.

According to the 1991 Almaty Declaration, which required post-Soviet republics to respect Soviet borders, these villages should belong to Azerbaijan. Last month, Pashinyan agreed to honor the treaty and return those villages in exchange for peace and a demarcation agreement.

Iran and Russia see such political turmoil as an opportunity to reignite the conflict and stop Armenia and Azerbaijan's moves toward the West. Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia is a direct threat to Russian and Iranian interests. A peace deal would boost both Yerevan and Baku's independence and could lead to the establishment of a trade route through the so-called Middle Corridor. Such a route would connect China to Europe while bypassing both Moscow and Tehran.

Currently, the only Middle Corridor route used for trade passes through Georgia, traversing the country's East-West highway. This road is just a mere kilometer from the Russian-backed separatist state of South Ossetia, which has in the past [*moved the border*](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/russia-georgia-border-south-ossetia-move-hundreds-yards-occupied-nato-putin-west-ukraine-a7835756.html) fence further and further into Georgian territory. Moreover, Georgia's current government has become increasingly close to Moscow and is near passing a similar law used by Russia to stifle media freedom and endanger the nation's [*European Union*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/european-union?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) membership trajectory. Setting up a corridor seeking to bypass Russia through a Russian vassal is pointless.

Russia has historically been the security guardian of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. For more than three decades, Moscow played peacemaker while [*selling weapons to both sides*](https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh) and preventing true settlement to keep both countries beholden to it. But Russia's influence in the region has diminished in recent years.

Meanwhile, Iran is seeking to fill the vacuum left by Russia by using one of Moscow's favorite political tools—the church.

A week before the start of the border villagers' march, Ehsan Movahedian, the head of the International Relations Office in the Tehran International Studies and Research Institute and one of Iran's foremost experts on the Caucasus region, [*called on*](http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2025796/%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B4-%D8%AD%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%81%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%DB%8C) Iran to "synergize" with the Armenian church to achieve its foreign policy goals, much like it does in Azerbaijan with the Iran-backed proxy group, Husseiniyyun, known as the "[*Hezbollah of the Caucasus*](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hezbollah-caucasus-207971)." Movahedian [*called*](https://twitter.com/ultra_ehsan/status/1784538951199375801?t=nAjYfgVZJ4GOSBu4dcDesA&s=35) the Armenian church and Husseiniyyun "two wings" of Iranian influence in the region.

For Iran, the main concern is Azerbaijan. Tehran has watched as Baku has stepped up its military and trade relations with Israel, partnered closely with Iran's regional competitor, Turkey and [*stood up*](https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/ilham-aliyevs-message-to-iran-40-million-azerbaijanis-living-outside-azerbaijan-deprived-of-studying-in-azerbaijani-language.html) for the rights of Iran's sizeable and [*oppressed*](https://www.newsweek.com/disappearing-lake-leads-dangerous-protests-iran-opinion-1821621?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) Azerbaijani minority.

Traditionally, Iran had exerted pressure on Azerbaijan by supporting Armenia in the Karabakh conflict and by sponsoring Husseiniyyun's [*incitement of protests*](https://t.me/Fikrat_Shabanov/16072), [*attempted assassinations*](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hezbollah-caucasus-207971) of key officials and [*terrorist attacks*](https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-behind-failed-attack-on-israeli-embassy-in-azerbaijan-foreign-minister-says/) against Western, Israeli, and Jewish targets.

But such tactics pale in comparison to leveraging the conflict with Armenia. For more than three decades, taking back the Karabakh region has been the top priority of any sitting Azerbaijani leader. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the area's Armenian population seceded in a bloody war, leading to the forceful expulsion of an [*estimated 700,000*](https://apnews.com/article/azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh-separatist-f86ea6a53d24f73351e9ca3f0c9e5b12) Azerbaijanis from the region.

Consequently, Iran appears to be stealing a page from the Russian playbook. During the Soviet era, Joseph Stalin filled religious institutions with undercover [*KGB*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/kgb?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) agents. Today, Russian President [*Vladimir Putin*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/vladimir-putin?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) maintains close relations with churches throughout the post-Soviet Space, using them to further his political agenda.

Some church dissidents have even [*claimed*](https://ru.aravot.am/2018/06/07/275754/) that the head of the Armenian church, Karekin II, was chosen in 1999 under pressure from Russian intelligence. Two years ago, Putin [*awarded*](https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16248955) Karekin II with the Order of Honor for his contribution to Russo-Armenian relations. Karekin II has [*called*](https://noev-kovcheg.ru/mag/2011-16/2753.html) Russia the "second homeland" of Armenians.

Indeed, Russia is also likely involved in the current unrest.

According to Armenian Parliamentarian Gagik Melkoyan, [*more than half*](https://news.am/rus/news/821744.html) of Armenian priests sent abroad during the Soviet era were KGB agents and many today are still connected to Russian intelligence. Earlier this month, Pashinyan [*said*](https://www.dw.com/ru/protesty-v-armenii-izza-ustupok-baku-vpervye-cerkov-protiv-vlasti/a-69040068) Robert Kocharyan, the second president of Armenia largely seen as a Russian patsy, was behind the protests.

In 2022, Robert Kocharyan, [*called*](https://www.interfax.ru/world/822658) for a new leader of Armenia to be chosen from the church. Kocharyan previously advocated for Armenia to "totally integrate" with Russia. By blaming a Russian puppet, Pashinyan was really placing the blame on Russia. It is no coincidence that the same day, Pashinyan also [*threatened to ban*](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/07/armenian-pm-threatens-to-ban-russian-tv-channels-a85057) Russian TV channels due to their anti-government messaging.

Before Pashinyan, the Armenian church largely kept out of ***politics***. It had no reason to get involved as all of Armenia's leaders were pro-Russian autocrats.

The church [*mistrusted*](https://eurasianet.org/rift-widens-between-armenian-church-government) Pashinyan from the beginning. Pashinyan came to power in a popular revolution in 2018 on promises to dismantle the corrupt establishment and some church officials [*worried*](https://eurasianet.org/rift-widens-between-armenian-church-government) his reforms would take on the church. The church had reason to fear. The revolution inspired a group of disaffected priests to [*call*](https://eurasianet.org/armenias-uprising-spreads-to-its-church) for the removal of Karekin II and other senior bishops for alleged corruption.

But the government's spat with the church only became public after Pashinyan signed a cease-fire with Azerbaijan and recognized the Karabakh enclave as part of Azerbaijan. That caused Karekin II to [*meet*](https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10198471) with opposition parties, voice his criticism and call for Pashinyan's resignation.

More recently, the church seems more open to cooperation with the Islamic Republic. Earlier this month, the Head of Iran's Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, Mohammad-Mehdi Imanipour, [*met with Karekin II*](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/498110/Iran-Armenia-to-bolster-interfaith-cooperation) to discuss improving relations between the two nations. In the past year, Karekin II has also [*met*](https://am.sputniknews.ru/20230622/katolikos-garegin-ii-obsudil-s-poslom-iri-ukreplenie-otnosheniy-mezhdu-stranami-61577697.html) with the Iranian ambassador and even [*called*](https://am.sputniknews.ru/20230130/garegin-ii-vyrazil-soboleznovaniya-raisi-v-svyazi-s-zemletryaseniem-v-irane-54541163.html) the late-Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi after an earthquake struck northwest Iran.

Such access for a regional religious leader is unprecedented. There is no documentation of either Grand Mufti of the Caucasus Allahshukur Pashazadeh or Patriarch Ilya II of Georgia meeting with Iranian ambassadors or calling Raisi.

To be sure, the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh humiliated Armenians, causing mass protests. While the region is internationally recognized as Azerbaijani territory, most Armenians see it as a crucial part of their ancient homeland, the [*"cradle of Armenian civilization."*](https://armenianweekly.com/2020/11/24/the-ancient-armenian-land-of-artsakh/) During the 2023 Azerbaijani takeover, an [*estimated 120,000*](https://apnews.com/article/azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh-separatist-f86ea6a53d24f73351e9ca3f0c9e5b12) Armenians fled their homes. Feeling betrayed by Russia—their supposed guarantor of security—and angry at their government for signing a peace treaty, many Armenians have turned to the church as they feel it is the only institution they can trust.

If Iran and Russia succeed in using the Armenian church to overthrow the Pashinyan administration, the consequences would be devastating for the region. It would end the chances of a stable trade route through the Middle Corridor and would make the two nations more dependent on Russia and Iran. Armenia would be plunged back into pre-revolution times—mired by rampant corruption, lawlessness, and a complete lack of independence.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2396340/calling-change.jpg)

**Graphic**

Calling for change

KAREN MINASYAN/AFP via Getty Images

Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan addresses demonstrators during a protest against a land transfer to neighboring Azerbaijan, in Yerevan on May 15, 2024.

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