

# NO ESCAPE

The Growing Persecution of Armenian Christians in America

An International Christian Concern Investigative Report

March 2022

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INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

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*THE GROWING PERSECUTION OF ARMENIAN CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA*



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# NO ESCAPE

## THE GROWING PERSECUTION OF ARMENIAN CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA

Armenians have a long history as targets of persecution, hatred, and genocide. Unfortunately, this history continues to repeat itself around the world. Armenia is unique in many ways, though one particularly representative characteristic is the fact that more ethnic Armenians currently reside outside of the current borders of Armenia than inside. Ottoman conquests and the genocide of 1915 have driven many Armenian families to flee, leaving a robust diaspora of resettled families throughout the world. One popular destination for these displaced families has been California, which is currently home to the largest Armenian population in the United States.

Although it seemed as though the United States would provide a safe haven for these populations, Turkey and Azerbaijan continue to export their anti-Armenian ideology around the world. In 2020, there were three major hate crimes perpetrated against the Armenian community in San Francisco. The crimes, which will be discussed in more detail in this report, correspond directly with the increased anti-Armenian rhetoric used by Turkish leaders in the leadup to and during the 44-day Karabakh War of 2020.

To investigate the effects of this rhetoric on the San Francisco Armenian community and the recent crimes, ICC sent staff to meet with local community members and leaders there. During this trip, it became clear that there is a real threat to the community within the United States. Despite the long history of anti-Armenian persecution in other parts of the world, such violence against Armenians in the United States is a new development that seems to contradict the perception that the United States is safe from the influence of Turkish and Azerbaijani rhetoric. Armenians who have lived in the U.S. for their entire life without fear of persecution for their Armenian identity now see increased security measures when attending church.



The Mount Davidson Cross is located at the highest point in San Francisco. The local Armenian Christian community maintains the cross as a remembrance of the Armenian Genocide. The bottom of the structure has been painted over and repaired several times due to repeated vandalism.

# HISTORY

As the first nation to adopt Christianity, which it did around the beginning of the fourth century, Armenia has a rich historical Christian tradition. That Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity has had an important impact on Armenian culture. To this day, Armenian culture is so closely intertwined with Christianity that the two often appear inseparable; Christian symbols are evident throughout Armenian imagery and religious identity is commonly referenced when discussing cultural identity with Armenians.

Armenia's borders throughout the first millennium extended to much of present-day Turkey and the Caucasus, which was comprised predominantly of Christians until the Turkic invasion of the 11th century. Under Turkish rule, the demographics of this land began to shift towards Islam as many Christians were forced to leave the land. In 1915, the Turkish Ottomans began undertaking a systematic genocide against Armenian Christians, killing or displacing nearly 2 million.

Although the Ottoman Empire eventually fell and was



Armenia lies between Turkey and Azerbaijan, two countries united by their Turkic identity. (Source: The Economist)

replaced by the secular Republic of Turkey in 1923, Armenian Christians continued to face severe discrimination. Ottoman ideology has persisted in the minds of many Turkish leaders and citizens, who believe that Turkey is a nation for Turkic Muslims and that Armenian Christians do not belong in this land. Such ideology stretches beyond modern-day Turkey, extending to cover the former Ottoman Empire's borders, which includes present-day Armenia, in the minds of many Turkish leaders. Many Turks see Armenia as an obstacle to uniting Turkey with Azerbaijan, its ally and fellow Islamic Turkic nation.

As a result of this ideology, Armenians have been heavily persecuted in Turkey and Azerbaijan throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, causing waves of Armenians to leave the region and building the expansive Armenian diaspora present today. Such a wave came in the 1980s and 1990s, when several pogroms committed by Azerbaijan killed thousands of Armenians in Armenia and prompted many survivors to flee in search of safety.

Many Armenian Christians sought to rebuild their lives in other countries in the region, while others fled to Western countries hoping to escape the influence of Ottoman ideology altogether.



Cross stones, like the one pictured here outside of St. Gregory's Church in San Francisco, are a prevalent Christian symbol throughout Artsakh and Armenia. During the Karabakh War of 2020, hundreds of these stones were destroyed by Turkish-paid mercenaries and Azerbaijani troops, a destructive campaign that continues to this day.



*Graffiti covered the entire front of the KZV School with hateful anti-Armenian messages, alongside the colors of the Azerbaijani flag. See Appendix for more detailed pictures.*

## ATTACKS OF 2020

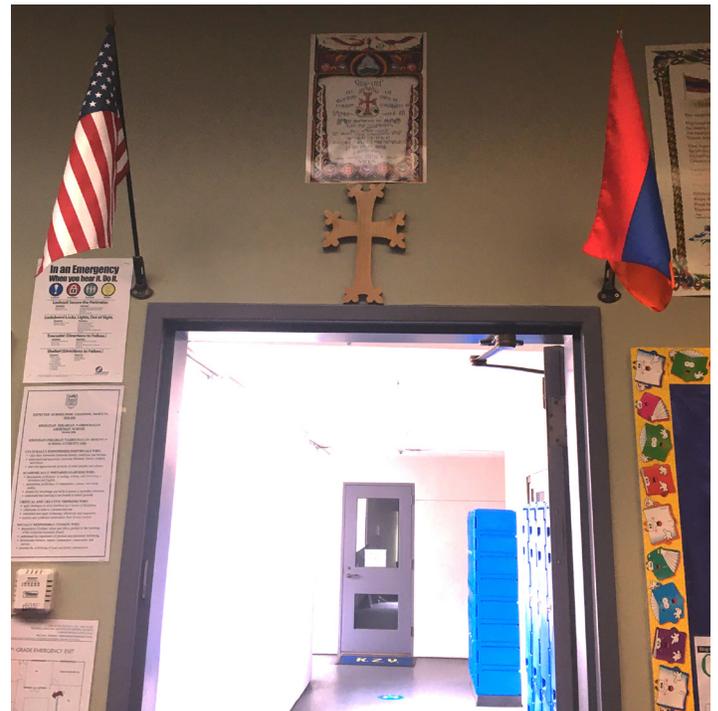
Between July and October 2020, there were three major attacks against the Armenian community in San Francisco. Two of these attacks targeted the Krouzian Zekarian Vasbouragan (KZV) Armenian Christian School, a K-8 school that has deep ties to the Armenian community of San Francisco and provides its students with a bilingual education in English and Armenian. The school was created in 1980 when the Armenian founders of the school saw a need for such an institution in San Francisco. At the time, no Armenian schools existed in northern California. The school also provides students with a Christian education aimed at promoting a faith amongst its students that is deeply rooted in the school's identity and connection with Armenian Christianity. Priests teach Bible classes to the students once a week and the classrooms all have Christian imagery and symbols on the walls.

The third attack targeted St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church, the church associated with the KZV School. St. Gregory's was founded in 1953 to serve the growing Armenian population in the city. Today, the church serves roughly 6,000 parishioners and

fosters a very active church community of Armenian congregants.

### July – KZV School Graffiti

Because the KZV School had enjoyed a relatively peace-



*The identity of the KZV school is closely aligned with Armenian Christianity, as Armenian flags and Christian symbols are prevalent throughout classrooms.*



*The building that housed offices and meeting spaces for St. Gregory's Church was severely damaged after the arson attack.*

ful history since its founding in 1980, the morning of July 24, 2020 came as a shock to Principal Grace Andonian when she received a call from the school custodian early in the morning. He informed her of spray-painted messages plastering the entire front of the school building.

The words sprayed onto the school were quite clear in their messaging, using expletives to insult the Armenian identity and the people inhabiting the school. Some of the messages were quite threatening in nature; the phrase "U will pay" was repeated in multiple places on the school's façade.

An especially troubling part of the vandalism is the naming of specific regions in Artsakh that were eventually taken by Azerbaijan during the 2020 war that would not begin until three months after the crime. Agdam and Shushi, for example, were both written on the front of the school. Both of these regions are part of Artsakh and had been discussed as rightfully Turkic land by Azerbaijani and Turkish leaders before the war. During the war, Azerbaijani took control of both of these plac-

es. After the war, President Erdogan visited the sites and reiterated the claim that these lands belonged to Azerbaijan.

### **September – St. Gregory Arson**

Only a few months later, in the early morning hours of September 17, two assailants broke into the offices of the St. Gregory Armenian Apostolic Church, located just beside the church building itself. They brought two Molotov cocktails into the building with them and set both aflame in two of the offices as they evacuated the building. The resulting blaze destroyed most of the interior of the church office. Luckily, the priest at St. Gregory's, or the Hayr Sourp, was not in the office at the time of the attack. Miraculously, one of the only items from the offices that was not completely destroyed was a cross located in the Hayr Sourp's office, which somehow remained undamaged despite the devastation around it.



*The KZV School is now protected by a fence separating the parking lot from the street, with an electronic gate allowing cars to enter.*

In the days after the attack, the church's congregation of around 6,000 parishioners were devastated by the news of the attack. For many, it was a traumatic reminder of the hatred that so many hold for Armenian Christians and of the violence that had been inflicted upon them throughout the history of the Church. No



*Following the attack on St. Gregory's, staff at St. John's Armenian Apostolic Church, pictured here, reported that they felt the need to increase security surrounding the grounds.*

one had expected this blatant of an attack would ever come to the shores of California. "Nothing like this could happen in San Francisco," commented the Hayr Sourp during an interview.

### **September – KZV School Drive by Shooting**

Just days after the destruction at St. Gregory's, in the early morning hours of September 19, San Francisco police officers patrolling the streets around the KZV School reported hearing gunshots at the school. When they approached the school to investigate the source of the shots, the officers saw that bullets had damaged the school's sign. Luckily, because the incident took place around 2:30am, no one was at the school nor was anyone injured in the incident. The police officers that quickly responded to the attack were tasked with patrolling the school following the vandalism of the summer and the St. Gregory's fire.

These gunshots represented an escalation of violence from the initial vandalization of the school, making the hateful message painfully clear for the Armenian com-

munity in San Francisco.

### **Aftermath of Attacks**

Following the three attacks, the Armenian community was devastated. The threats towards the Armenian community that were prevalent back in the Armenian mainland and Turkey were now abundantly present in the United States, where so many had sought refuge from this hate and violence. For the many immigrants that grew up in Armenia and Azerbaijan at the time of the pogroms in the late 20th century, this was a traumatic reminder of the violence their families had experienced and miraculously survived. For those of Armenian descent who were spared this trauma and grew up in the States, this was a first-hand introduction to the violence that so many other Armenians had experienced and that they never expected to see in their homes.

From a practical standpoint, this meant that Armenian sites in San Francisco needed to ensure that proper security measures were taken at their facilities to protect themselves from attacks. At St. John's Armenian Church, the oldest Armenian Church in the Bay Area, Father Mesrob Ash put up a large fence surrounding the church grounds, installed multiple security cameras around the premises, and had security personnel present for Easter service. However, even with the security improvements, many people are still afraid to attend services. At the KZV School, a large fence was added around the back of the school by the playground (a metal gate already protected the parking lot and front entrance). Kids at the school are rarely out of sight of a security camera and can only enter the classrooms after going through a gate that protects the main grounds from the parking lot.

Despite the fear and uncertainty that consumed many Armenian-Americans' minds following these attacks, there was an outpouring of support throughout the broader community. Priests reported that many in their congregations first responded to news of each attack

by asking how they may help the church. Additionally, many reported that they felt greatly supported by the San Francisco community as a whole. Many non-Armenians stood by the side of their Armenian neighbors at vigils in an attempt to ensure them that the actions of a few do not represent San Francisco. In one instance,

a Turkish resident actually called Principal Andonian at the KZV school to apologize on behalf of the Turkish people, assuring her that these actions do not represent their people. “This is the Erdogan regime,” he told the principal.

## IMPACT OF THE KARABAKH WAR

### 44-Day War

At the crux of Armenian persecution is Nagorno-Karabakh, or Artsakh in Armenian, a small region located at the border of present-day Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite Artsakh’s population being predominantly Armenian Christian, the USSR designated Artsakh as its own republic under Azerbaijani control while it was under Soviet rule during the mid to late 20th century. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the international community continued this recognition as being part of Azerbaijan, though Azerbaijan refuses to embrace the caretaker role of this region, resulting in Artsakh’s citizens forming their own government that is still internationally unrecognized.

On September 27th 2020, Azerbaijani forces, aided by Turkish-paid Syrian mercenaries and Turkish drones, attacked Armenian forces stationed in Artsakh. The two sides fought for forty-four days, until a Russian-brokered peace deal finally brought an official end to the fighting.

Although the fighting had stopped, what had transpired during the war echoed far beyond the battlefield, reminiscent of the Armenian genocide more than 100 years ago. Videos of Armenian soldiers and civilians being beheaded circulated on Turkish and Azeri social media channels. Azeri soldiers, alongside their mercenary counterparts, proudly posed for photo ops with Armenian corpses or for videos of them beating and humiliating Armenian civilians. Many soldiers and mer-



*Azeri combatants flashing the grey wolf sign posing with a captured Armenian soldier. (Picture posted on Telegram)*



*Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan flashing the Grey Wolf sign during a public speech. (Source: IPA News)*

cenaries flashed the Grey Wolf hand sign in photos and videos, the symbol of an anti-Armenian Turkic terrorist group. Despite these blatant war crimes, Turkish and Azeri leaders and the soldiers committing these atrocities have gone unpunished, empowering those around the world who share their hateful ideology to act violently against Armenian Christians.

The fact that 2020 saw both the war and an increase in anti-Armenian hate crimes in the U.S. is not an accident. Through their actions and messaging, the Turkish Erdogan regime and the Azeri Aliyev regime have both been directly and indirectly promoting anti-Armenian and anti-Christian hate throughout the world.

For example, Erdogan has used the phrase, “kılıç artığı” in public, which loosely translates to “leftovers of the sword” in English. Although many Westerners may not be privy to the meaning of this phrase, Erdogan’s Turkic audience around the world knows that this is a common slur used to refer to Armenians, in reference to the survivors of the Armenian genocide by the Ottomans in the early 20th century. Another Ottoman-era term that Erdogan has used to perpetuate anti-Armenian hate is “Kızıl Elma,” translated as “Red Apple.” This term is derived from an Ottoman legend regarding conquest, referring to the Red Apple as the next place that the



*Dadivank Monastery is a centuries-old monastery in Artsakh that is now threatened by Azerbaijani control.*

group sought to conquer. In a video released in 2020 by the Turkish Directorate of Communications under Erdogan’s authority, entitled Kızıl Elma, men dressed as Ottoman warriors are seen walking toward the Hagia Sophia, a Christian cathedral in Istanbul dating back to the sixth century.

This veiled rhetoric, though ignored by much of its Western audience, has a tremendous impact, especially when it is repeated on social media and spread across the world. People who adhere to radical Ottoman ideology see comments such as these as not only a condoning of discrimination and violence against Armenian Christians but as a call to action.

## Continued Threats

Beyond the emotional and personal shock that these attacks should have on Americans, these events have major policy implications for U.S. government stakeholders. Armenians became victims of hate crimes while living in the United States, a country that prides itself on being a safe haven for those escaping oppression, as a direct result of the rhetoric and actions coming from the governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Because their veiled inciting rhetoric against Armenians and their crimes against Christians in Artsakh have gone unchecked, their followers operating far from Turkey and Azerbaijan now feel empowered to imitate the violence

that they have seen.

These attacks are ongoing. Since the three San Francisco attacks in 2020, another Armenian church in the greater Los Angeles area was also vandalized by an assailant who smashed several stained-glass windows with a baseball bat in a clear act of aggression towards the Armenian community there. If the United States is to uphold its own foundational value of religious freedom and serve as a safe haven for those who have faced persecution overseas, U.S. leaders must curb the hateful rhetoric and actions coming from Turkey and Azerbaijan.

## Appendix - KZV School Graffiti



*Name of a region in Artsakh taken by Azerbaijan in 2020 Karabakh War*



*Name of a region in Artsakh taken by Azerbaijan in 2020 Karabakh War*



*Colors of the Azerbaijani flag*



*Name of a region in Artsakh taken by Azerbaijan in 2020 Karabakh War*



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