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The France-Azerbaijan Relationship

Realities and Misunderstandings

Maxime Gauin

The bilateral crises of 2020 and 2022 between Paris and Baku have provoked more emotional reactions than either dispassionate analyses or detailed projects to attempt to lastingly resolve the issue. This is not to say that relations between Azerbaijan and France are anywhere near where they should be—far from it; but supporters of what the relationship has been and could be again, to say nothing of those seeking to understand its present or wanting to shape its future course in a more agreeable direction—in accordance with the national interests of both Baku and Paris—have been done a great disservice by those who, intentionally or not, distort or misinterpret the speeches and deeds

of either state's decisionmakers and influencers.

The main aims of this essay are to explain the origins of the current problems and (this is inextricably linked) to challenge the misunderstandings, misconceptions, and myths accumulated on both sides. This makes it necessary to start by providing the necessary historical background, in part because a misleading version of this past is presented today. And this misdirection itself has become an obstacle for the restoration of mutual understanding, to say nothing of warm and friendly relations. The second part of the essay will examine more recent events (1988-2017). The third and final part is devoted to the

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contemporary period (the Macron era), with its missed opportunities, and to some discussion of possible ways to bring an end to this litany of errors.

Centuries Back

Although this article focuses on France-Azerbaijan bilateral relations, some words of explanation are warranted about the French position on the Armenian issue in general and its Ottoman components in particular. All attempts to create a pro-Armenian movement in France from 1862 to 1895 failed miserably. The “pro-Armenian” speeches in the French parliament in 1896 and the activities of the short-lived France-Armenia Committee (1897) were mostly the result of domestic political attacks by left and right opponents of the centrist cabinet of Prime Minister Jules Méline (a remarkably similar tactic was used in 2020, as discussed below, the main difference being that the Méline cabinet remained unmoved by attempts to use the Armenian issue

against him). Georges Clemenceau, one of the most important pro-Armenian figures during Méline's premiership, never made use of the Armenian question in his dealings with the Ottoman Empire when he served as prime minister in 1906-1909. Back in power from 1917 to 1920, he went so far as to state, in 1919: “We have had enough of the Armenians!”

The main reasons for this exasperative statement were twofold: one, the repeated demands for a Greater Armenia whose territory would stretch from Karabakh to Mersin; and two, the crimes committed by the Armenian Legion in the French occupation zone of Türkiye, which was headquartered in Adana. In particular, Brigadier General Jules Hamelin, who commanded the French troops in the Near East in 1918-1919, reported that the Armenians are “a people not second to the Turks and Kurds in barbarity when they dispose of force, who have provoked century-long hatreds by their spirit of lucre, who dreams of revenge only, who are themselves deeply

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divided by internal rivalries, [and] who count on the inexhaustible resources of France, to which they shows no gratitude, and will never show.”

Hamelin was succeeded by General Henri Gouraud, who was equally hostile to Armenian nationalism and who believed that France “knew during the [world] war [only] one chivalrous enemy”—namely the Turks. Gouraud cumulated his functions with those of High Commissioner in Beirut. In his civilian functions, Gouraud’s second man was Robert de Caix, the theorist of French domination in the Near East. De Caix saw this domination as based on the support of Christian Arabs and consolidated by a Turkish alliance, but as having nothing to do with the Armenians, who “seem to me bypassing the other Orientals in the art to distort, conveniently for them, the sense of the words told to them. So far, I never had, for my part, a conversation with an Armenian, including men living in Europe such as [Archag] Tchobanian or [Boghos] Nubar Pasha, without having seen them distort—with a bad faith so perfect that I wonder if it is not ingenuous—the meaning of my words.” (This is evidently a harsh judgment, but it is representative of what French officers, officials, and journalists

from the 1850s to the 1920s wrote about Armenians—the judgment is so harsh, in fact, that one would be hard-pressed to find anything quite so disparaging in the contemporary pronouncements of even the most extreme anti-Armenian of any nationality or political tint.)

The Armenian Legion was suppressed in 1920, several Armenian criminals were summarily executed by the French army the same year, and then the occupation zone was evacuated from November 1921 to January 1922 as a result of the Ankara agreement signed on 20 October 1921.

Concerning now the Caucasus, the first turning point was January 1920. Indeed, the Clemenceau cabinet had bet against the Bolsheviks, putting their chips, as it were, on White Russian General Anton Denikin, whose army collapsed at the end of 1919. Clemenceau himself resigned in January 1920, with the new French government immediately showing an interest in Azerbaijan. The cabinet endorsed the September 1919 report of a certain Captain Pivier about his mission in the Caucasus—particularly its conclusion that an independent Azerbaijan protected by France would be a choice “of the highest importance,” because of its own resources (oil and man-

ganese primarily) but also because it could open the way to Central Asia and its oil fields, as yet unexploited. Azerbaijan, the conclusion read, is ruled by “men having the sense of realities.” Even after the Soviet conquest of April 1920, Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand refused to sever ties, hoping that the Baku government would keep a certain form of autonomy.

Meanwhile, relations with the Republic of Armenia and its ruling party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF-Dashnak), deteriorated. Damien de Martel, appointed as France’s High Commissioner for the Caucasus (Tbilisi) reported in July 1920 about the destruction of forty “Tatar villages” by the Armenian army, with the expulsion “by cannon shots” of 36,000 civilians to Türkiye and the killing of 4,000 others, “without exception for women and children, drowned by the Armenian soldiers in the Arax River. It did not seem to me unnecessary to report these details, which show that this is not always ‘the same ones who are massacred.’” Such ends de Martel’s

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document (in another, written a month later, he mentions the expulsion of the Muslims from the Lake Sevan region).

The exasperation of the Quai d’Orsay towards the Armenians is visible in at least

two contemporaneous articles appearing in its mouthpiece, *Le Temps*. The first is about the massacres and expulsions of Muslims by Armenia (the estimate given for just the number of killed is “several dozens of thousands”); the second is about the assassination by the ARF of Fatahi Khan Khoyski (a former prime minister of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic) and Hasan-bey Aghayev (a former vice-president of its parliament).

Ultimately, no French weapons were delivered to Armenia in 1920, and only one Parisian daily protested when the Dashnak-ruled Armenian state collapsed. Two years later, the correspondent of *Le Petit Parisien* in Türkiye, Jean Schlickin, published a book in which he described the “systematic plan of extermination of the Muslim populations” of Armenia, which, he said, had been “savagely

carried out” by “the Armenian gangs.” Schlickin added that “fifty villages” in Karabakh were burned and their Azerbaijani inhabitants massacred. The most remarkable thing, in the context of this essay, is that this book was issued by a publishing house that was, at that time, completely controlled by the French general staff.

The foregoing logically leads to an explanation about the difference of treatment accorded to the two delegations after the collapse of their respective states. The Comité France-Orient, established in June 1913 under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry, begins its rapprochement with exiled Azerbaijani leaders (e.g., Alimardan Topchubashov, Jeyhun Hajibeyli) in 1923. In 1927, an alliance is formed between the Comité, the Azerbaijani leaders in exile, and their Georgian and Ukrainian counterparts. Pierre-Abdon Boisson, the most active leader of the Comité, stated that “this moral independence of a truly free—because it intends to remain so— people, even by taking their homes away, is a fine example of courage and

sublime patriotism.” Far from being limited to speeches of praise and admiration, the Comité’s support included the collection of funds for exiled Azerbaijanis in need. The first event of this kind is placed under the chairmanship of General Gouraud (mentioned above) and of Marshal Louis Franchet d’Espèrey—the former Commander of the Allied Army of the Orient that liberated the Balkans from its German, Austro-Hungarian, and Bulgarian occupiers at the end of World War I. This alliance culminated with the establishment of a section of the Comité entirely devoted to Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, the delegation of the exiled Republic of Armenia exasperated the French authorities for a number of reasons, including because they engaged in the illegal sale of “passports” without value and also due to a series of bloody clashes between Dashnaks and communist Armenians on French territory. The ARF also tried to create an Economic Armenian Center as a cover for supporting in various ways some French politicians for

It is oftentimes forgotten that in 1993, France voted in favor of each of the four UN Security Council resolutions, which remains a strong international legal basis for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity.

its claims, but the Quai d’Orsay neutralized the initiative at its beginning.

The More Recent Past

Contrary to what is sometimes believed, the voice of the Azerbaijanis regarding the conflict over Karabakh was heard in France, with fair assessments published in the country’s press as early as 1988. It is true that Armenian nationalists residing in France tried to hide the expulsion of the Azerbaijani population from Armenia with their campaigns on the earthquake in Armenia, but it would be an exaggeration to say that they succeeded completely: *Le Monde* was one of the newspapers that reported on Armenia’s ethnic cleansing campaigns on several occasions. Similarly, although the Armenian nationalists residing in France tried to present a completely distorted narrative of the bloody events that took place in Sumgait in February 1988, this version was not the

only one presented in France, and the Khojaly massacre in February 1992 was reported without understatement.

At a more political level, it is oftentimes forgotten that in 1993, France voted in favor of each of the four UN Security Council resolutions, which remains a strong international legal basis for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. The same year, President Heydar Aliyev went to Paris and signed on 20 December a bilateral treaty of friendship. The treaty was ratified in 1998, a year of

Ilham Aliyev’s first visit abroad after being elected President of Azerbaijan was to Paris, not Moscow. Given the seriousness with which such decisions are taken in Baku (both then and now), it seems highly unlikely that this decision can be attributed to chance.

particularly intense but, in this regard, ultimately unsuccessful Armenian nationalist lobbying in the French Parliament—proving the limits of the effectiveness of such actions. The report of the French Senate on the ratification noted that “it is not surprising that this ‘Black January’ [1990] left a lasting memory for a population traumatized by the violence of the Soviet troops.” The same year, both a Joint Economic Commission and an Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan were established. Four years later (in

2002), the first scholarly book on Azerbaijan since the independence was published. Written by Antoine Constant, it honestly treated all the sensitive issues, including the Baku massacres (March 1918), and the various ethnic cleansing campaigns against Azerbaijanis (committed by independent Armenia in 1918-1920, Garegin Nzhdeh's "Republic of Mountainous Armenia" in 1921, Soviet Armenia in 1987-1991, and those during the First Karabakh War).

This is the favorable backdrop against which the newly-elected President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, undertook his first visit abroad in January 2004—even before traveling to Moscow in February 2004. Given the seriousness with which such decisions are taken in Baku (both then and now), it seems highly unlikely that this decision can be attributed to chance.

There is an interesting anecdote from this period of the bilateral relationship that Aliyev recounted during a recent interview to Azerbaijani television outlets. I reproduce his words, which speak for themselves:

We must remember how France became the co-chair of the Minsk Group. I know this very well because my father [Heydar Aliyev] told me about that. At the time, French President Jacques

Chirac insisted on this. Heydar Aliyev repeatedly objected. Later, even Jacques Chirac told me this story many times. He treated my father with great respect, and quoting my father, Chirac told me that Heydar Aliyev was not against him but against France's co-chairmanship. Because Armenians had an immense influence on Chirac and thus would influence his policies. Chirac told me, "I convinced him that we would always be neutral," and Heydar Aliyev agreed. That was indeed the case. And it was only natural that they remained unbiased. Or they may have been impartial because the issue was left unresolved. I cannot say for sure.

Chirac's term in office (1995-2007) was followed by that of Nicolas Sarkozy. A highlight of that period was the agreement in 2011 to establish the Lycée Français de Bakou—such and similar improvements in bilateral ties were largely driven by networks in the French diplomatic establishment and, more generally, in the high administration in Paris; together with their counterparts (and higher-ups) in Baku, they were the ones who championed the decision to engage in a rapprochement with Azerbaijan. Probably the most fruitful period in the France-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship,

however, was probably the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2017). In spite of his (exaggerated) reputation of having a pro-Armenian bias, Hollande's term in the Élysée Palace was marked by unprecedented agreements and contracts.

Some words of context are indispensable to understand these five years. In 2012, the Armenian nationalists in France suffered a major blow with the decision of the Constitutional Council censoring entirely the Boyer bill on the "denial of genocides recognized by law" in the name of freedom of expression. The next year was even worse for them, by

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every aspect. In April 2013, the Council of State blocked a criminalization draft presented by the cabinet on the "denial of genocides." For reasons that would be too long to elaborate here, it is safe to assume that the cabinet could surmise what the Council of State would end up saying (and that it was not unhappy with the result). Correspondingly, Hollande did not attend any 24 April ceremony that year.

Be that as it may, the most devastating pieces of news for the Armenian nationalists in 2013 were the *Perinçek v. Switzerland* decision of the European Court of Human Rights and the conviction of former Armenian Revolutionary Federation leader Laurent Leylekian for having defamed a French citizen of Turkish origin. And the most direct effects on the relationship with Azerbaijan were produced by the last-minute refusal of Armenia to sign an enhanced Association Agreement with the EU in September 2013 and its decision to pursue membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union instead. Even worse was the subsequent support for Russia provided by the Armenian government concerning the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea.

All that explains the success of Hollande's historic visit to Baku in May 2014 and Aliyev's reciprocal visit to Paris in October of the same year. A decision to establish the Université Franco-Azerbaïdjanaise (UFAZ) was made, and two space satellites were sold—officially for civilian use, but the French side

knew well that they were to be transferred to the military after only a few months: one was for high-resolution observation purposes, the other for secure communication. The protests staged by Armenian associations and others concerning the Paris visit did not have the slightest effect. On the contrary, the satellites contracts were followed in 2015 by the sale of French military material worth for €157 million.

Another visit by Hollande to Baku was made the following year. In the same interview quoted above, Aliyev recalled its significance:

On 24 April 2015, President François Hollande visited Armenia. Only four leaders went to Armenia on that day, and it was Armenia's yet another fiasco and the debacle of its historical forgery. But he went there, and I went to Çanakkale, Türkiye. President Hollande came to Baku from Armenia on the same evening, arriving even earlier than me. Our event in Türkiye took longer than expected. I arrived, President Hollande was already in Baku, and we met the next morning, on 25 April. What does this mean? It shows the conduct of a politician. It showed what France was and that it respected both that capacity and us. Therefore, he came to Azerbaijan to maintain this balance. I highly appreciated it.

The foregoing helps to draw a clear contrast between the two other co-chairs of the (now defunct) OSCE Minsk Group and France. The U.S. Congress adopted in 1992 the infamous Section 907 of the United States Freedom Support Act, which banned any kind of direct United States aid—even of humanitarian kind—to the Azerbaijani government. Since 2001, the U.S. president has been empowered to provide a waiver for the implementation of its provisions, and this has happened on an annual basis ever since. Still, Section 907 continues to hang over the bilateral relationship like a sword of Damocles: the provision has never been formally stricken from the lawbooks, and this inactivation has never resulted in any significant sale of U.S. military material to Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Russia not only sold weapons to Armenia (in addition to Azerbaijan) but provided considerable quantities to Yerevan for free or at a steep discount. France has not sold a single box of arms to Armenia since 1919 and never gave any weapon to Yerevan for free. Last but not least, Bulgaria is the only other EU member state that exported to Azerbaijan a similar number of weapons during the 2010s (for instance, the UK's arms exports to Baku amount to

a paltry €1.8 million. Of course, this is not the entire story, but it is an important element.

The end of Hollande's term as president and the start of the Macron era in 2017 was not marked directly by spectacular events concerning the bilateral relationship. Yet the partisans of Armenian nationalism, including those living in France, suffered two more major blows on the 1915 issue in front of the Constitutional Council, in January 2016 and January 2017—in addition to their crushing defeat in front of the European Court of Human Rights in the form of the *Chiragov and others v. Armenia* judgment.

Bitter Paradoxes

It is simply incorrect to assert that Macron arrived in power with prejudices in favor of Armenian nationalism or against Turkic peoples, including Azerbaijanis. He actually was the first French head of state since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 to be elected without any background of contacts with the

Armenian nationalists residing in France. His business-friendly campaign platform, and his expressed desire to turn the page on the old practices of the old parties, were considerable advantages for both Baku and Ankara.

Although the Armenian nationalists residing in France tried to take advantage of the rapidity of his political party's formation (it took barely a year) to influence and infiltrate its growing ranks and affect the formulation of its policy positions,

but at least according to their own assessments, the short-term effects were negligible. Dashnaks operating in France, for instance, were particularly disappointed by the choice of an obscure MP of Armenian descent to chair the France-Armenia friendship group in the National Assembly (they later attacked him for not being sufficiently anti-Turkish, according to their standards).

More generally, their impression during the first months of the Macron presidency was that the new French government was uninterested in the "Armenian

cause” and was undertaking a “profound disengagement” with Armenia—to quote the words of Harout Mardirossian, the man who runs France’s Dashnak organ, *France-Arménie*.

Even more relevant is the fact that the opposition of the Armenian nationalists residing in France to the negotiations (2017-2019) for the sale of the ASTER-30-SAMP/T (medium/long-range) and Vertical Launch-MICA (short-range) air-defense missile systems, as well as Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) 90, were ineffective. (It must be noted here that this is exactly the set for which Ukraine has asked with insistence for nearly a year—the green light was eventually given by Paris and then Rome at the end of 2022 before Washington accepted to provide its Patriot system.) Meanwhile, Russia’s S-300 and even the S-400 systems were seen as insufficiently effective. An Israeli system was eventually chosen by Baku, at least in part due to *one* unfortunate statement made by Macron concerning an Azerbaijani domestic policy at a particularly sensitive moment in the talks. The timing could not have been worse: it resulted in an Azerbaijani decision to bring the arms sales negotiations with France to an end.

However understandable this may have been—given the circumstances—in retrospect it can be understood to have been erroneous from the standpoint of France-Azerbaijan bilateral relations. Why? Because French diplomacy and its external trade are largely based on big contracts, and such contracts are never without effect on media coverage—something Greece, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (to give only three examples) have understood perfectly. Cancelling the air defense contract and indefinitely postponing the naval contract, instead of, say, asking for a written promise to refrain in the future from any damaging presidential and ministerial statements in exchange for the finalization of the sales, deprived Azerbaijan of the most powerful leverage it could have obtained from France.

By comparison, Türkiye knew how to handle carrot *and* stick in economic terms during the crises provoked by the Armenian nationalists residing in France in both 2006 and 2011-2012. Aided in part by a well-conceived and well-executed communication strategy, the result of this economic diplomacy was that the Masse bill (supposed to criminalize the “denial of the Armenian genocide”) was blocked by suc-

cessive French cabinets for five years, moved procedurally back and forth between the National Assembly and the Senate (2006-2011) before eventually being rejected by the Senate in May 2011. Then, to obtain the vote of the Boyer bill (similar), Sarkozy had to wait until the Christmas season to obtain a vote at the National Assembly (he did not trust his own majority, for excellent reasons), and then there ended up being more MPs to sign the application to the Constitutional Council against this bill in January 2012 than MPs that had voted for it in December 2011.

To make the situation more problematic, the Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan (established in 1998, as noted above) stopped being effective by 2017. The defeat of its chair, Jean-François Mancel, at the June 2017 legislative elections, surprised everybody; but this hardly explains why his successor was only named in October 2021. Meetings on the Karabakh issue with French deputies and senators conducted under its auspices also ended in 2017. The content of the Association’s website still remains the same as it was nearly six years ago, and its Twitter account (it has around 1,200 followers) is notable for its modest output.

Additional structural problems in France-Azerbaijan relations can be highlighted through three examples. First, France is arguably the only country in the world where, in spite of a strong Jewish population and an important interest in both Azerbaijan’s Jewish community and the country’s ties with Israel, links between Azerbaijani and Jewish organizations in France are minimal, ineffective, and uncertain. Relatedly, the decision to name journalist Jean-Pierre Allali as vice-chair of the Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan was sub-optimal. “He never introduced us to a single Jewish leader,” Ayten Mouradova—a former member—told me. Allali’s very modest actions on behalf of Azerbaijan pale in comparison to his tireless campaign for the “recognition of the Armenian genocide.”

In addition, after 2013 no French-language book that could remotely be defined as being sympathetic to Azerbaijan has been released. The sole exception being the translation of an expanded version of Rahman Mustafayev’s doctoral dissertation in 2019—he was at the time Azerbaijan’s ambassador to France—but the lack of ties to academic circles (and the choice of publisher) diminished both its visibility and impact.

Lastly, the lack of an active and organized Azerbaijani diaspora in France has made it easier for officials to ignore Azerbaijani issues. One can estimate that there are about 50,000 Azerbaijanis residing in France (in addition to ethnic Azerbaijanis from Iran, many of whom came to France in earlier waves of immigration; they are said to have been largely neglected by their ethnic kin from Azerbaijan since around 2010). And yet, a protest organized in front of the National Assembly in November 2022 against its latest resolution in support of the Armenian position was attended by less than 50 persons in total, at least some of which were non-Azerbaijani in origin (i.e., were of Turkish descent).

Such outcomes and results can hardly be expected to be seen as an effective counterweight to Armenian diaspora activities. Whatever influence they may still have on French public life has virtually gone unopposed by the Azerbaijani diaspora community during the Macron era (at least until very recently)—if not ear-

lier. Naturally, this domestic situation has had an impact on French government policies.

But simply pointing an accusatory finger at Macron and his officials represents a failure to acknowledge that he bears no responsibility in this absence of the active involvement of Azerbaijanis residing in France. The situation is entirely different, for instance, in Canada, where, in spite of much stronger prejudices (as exemplified by the 2020 ban on exporting Canadian-made electronic components to Baykar), ethnic-Azerbaijanis—whatever their country of origin—are united, active, and closely connected to the Ukrainian and Jewish associations.

The symbolism of one-sided resolutions by a legislative branch that has little oversight, much less any effectual control over the conduct of French foreign policy, can be contrasted with concrete actions in the domestic arena undertaken by the govern-

The symbolism of one-sided resolutions by a legislative branch that has little oversight, much less any effectual control over the conduct of French foreign policy, can be contrasted with concrete actions in the domestic arena undertaken by the government in the Macron era.

ment in the Macron era. For instance, all “charters of friendship” signed by various French municipalities with their counterparts operating within the framework of the ethnic-Armenian secessionist entity in Karabakh (“Artsakh”) have been canceled at the request of the government by the French administrative tribunal system. The legal argument made by official Paris was always the same: a municipality cannot pursue its own diplomacy and since France has never recognized “Artsakh,” then no formal ties at any level can be legally established.

The campaign to gain some sort of recognition of “Artsakh” through the basement, as it were, was almost certainly an orchestrated one, which involved coopting local French municipal authorities. The first case involved the town of Alfortville, a suburb of Paris located just to the south of the city zoo that is populated by a sizeable ethnic-Armenian community. Its authorities had signed such a document with Lachin’s occupation administrators in 2017-2018—i.e., during the bilateral talks on the sale of missiles and ships. In 2019—i.e., after the talks were canceled—this became systematic, but ultimately unsuccessful. Some of the coopted French municipalities abandoned

their efforts right after the French administrative tribunal system delivered its first-instance judgments; others appealed and lost in 2021; and one filed a further appellate application to the Council of State, which was also rejected (in March 2022).

In this affair, the Azerbaijani embassy wisely chose to engage the services of the law firm of Olivier Pardo, whose record of success was reported in both French and Azerbaijani media outlets. All protests by Armenian nationalists residing in France were in vain and found, until 2020, no echo in the mainstream media.

It is only against such a background that we can appropriately turn to an examination of the most sensitive issues, namely the crises of 2020 and 2022. The first one was open by utterly wrong statements made by Macron on 1 and 2 October 2020. In his first statement on this matter, he said that France

today possesses information that indicate with certitude that Syrian combatants have left the theater of operations, that jihadist combatants have transited through Gaziantep to enter the Nagorno-Karabakh theater of operations. This is a very grave, new fact that changes the equation.

The next day, Macron said that France

has established, on the basis of our own information, that I can confirm, that 300 combatants have left Syria to reach Baku through Gaziantep. These combatants are known, traced, identified, [and] they come from jihadist groups operating in the Aleppo region. This is an established fact and other intelligence agencies are preparing similar reports. I will not tell you today that this is a red line, because it has been crossed. It is crossed. And when I give a red line, [...] I bring to bear a response. I say, 'it is unacceptable.'

These two statements, which he explicitly indicted were pronounced on the basis of information acquired by the French intelligence community, should deservedly come to be categorized by historians as an analytic error equal in magnitude only to the type made by several Western intelligence agencies in late 2021 that Russia was not preparing its invasion of Ukraine.

In any event, Macron never repeated the absurdities he uttered only on those two occasions. But several French parliamentarians did. One was Danièle Cazarian, who until her 2017 election to

parliament was president of the National Center of Armenian Memory (she did not run for reelection in 2022). One instance took place in the French parliament on 13 October 2020, as part of a question she posed to Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. On that occasion, she also indicated her belief that France's "position of strict neutrality is no longer tenable."

Le Drian's response was clear, the substance of which went a long way to mitigate Macron erroneous statement, cited above. Refuting Cazarian, the French foreign minister also defended, as he put it,

the exigency of impartiality of France in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. We would no longer be legitimate if we were to take the side of one or the other country. And I think that we would do a disservice to the quality of our bilateral relationship with Armenia if we were to hold an unbalanced posture, as this would call into question the role we play.

A contemporaneous initiative by France at the UN, which involved the circulation of a draft resolution that Azerbaijan saw as one-sided, was also unhelpful. It failed thanks to the support Azerbaijan enjoyed amongst the

member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, which it chaired (and still does, until the end of 2023).

On the other hand, in that same year (2020), France also issued licenses to French companies to export €117.5 million worth of guidance systems equipment to Azerbaijan, ignoring calls to cancel the contracts. In 2020, Macron's political opponents in the Senate (they constituted then, as now, a vast majority) orchestrated a campaign to embarrass the government by asking for what they knew to be impossible—i.e., the "recognition of Artsakh"—as a capstone to that year's anti-Turkish crisis. The electoral defeats of 2017, the debacle at the EU Parliament elections in 2019 and, in the case of the conservatives, the emerging scandal of the illegal funding of Nicolas Sarkozy's 2012 presidential campaign, all resulted in the traditional parties entering into a vicious circle of failure and bitterness, which was detrimental to the articulation of a clear vision of French national interests. The Armenian nationalists residing in France did not manufacture these domestic disturbances, but they certainly did exploit them for their own ends.

By the second half of 2021, anti-Turkish hostility had become much less fashionable. France's

ambassador to Azerbaijan, Zacharie Gross, was given permission by the Quai d'Orsay to visit the liberated city of Aghdam, which he did in November 2021. The trip pleased Baku. Somewhat less symbolic was the sale of French electronic components to the Azerbaijani navy, worth €880,000.

Various attempts were made to provoke a new bilateral crisis between France and Azerbaijan in the spring and summer of 2022. In some cases, these were enflamed by known pro-Russia agitators. A typical example of the latter was the publication of a book edited by Éric Denécé and Tigrane Yegavian titled *The Black Book of Karabakh*. But success was not forthcoming—at least not immediately. The *Le Monde* newspaper, which had considerably softened its tone concerning Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War came to an end, continued to avoid the publication of provocatively pro-Armenian articles, retaining a more or less neutral editorial line.

As summer transitioned into autumn, the voices and machinations of Armenians nationalists residing in France grew stronger and more assertive, with no effective response coming from the Azerbaijani side. Admittedly, I cannot here provide a detailed description of all the moves

and maneuverings that ultimately produced the most recent crisis in bilateral ties, which is still ongoing. But two incidents that took place in November 2022 stand out. The first involved a draft of the outcome document of a Francophonie ministerial meeting that was, by all accounts, in violation of the rules and concocted by Armenian and French diplomats—and only watered down after intense behind-the-scenes negotiations.

The second was more substantive and weightier, in that it involved Macron personally. No one would seriously contest that the French president's attempt to insert himself into what had been, by all accounts, a fruitful trilateral negotiation process, led by President of the EU Council Charles Michel, was an evident misstep. The EU was in some ways in the driver's seat, somewhat displacing the Kremlin—at least on some aspects of the negotiation process. This much is clear. Uncovering the explanation for what stood behind Macron's misstep, which took place in November 2022, is another matter altogether. But looking at the outcome suggests

this was neither in the French national interest nor the interest of the European Union. Certainly, the goal shared by the Dashnaks and the Kremlin (each for their own distinct reasons) was achieved as a result: the suspension of the EU's facilitation of the talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. What is equally clear is that the crisis could have been avoided.

And it will not be as hard as one might imagine at first blush to avoid the next one—even to put an end to all future crises. To understand this, one must begin by crushing a longstanding myth once and for all: the Armenian nationalists residing in France are neither strong enough by themselves nor particularly united to do lasting damage to Azerbaijan's standing in that country. For much of the twentieth century, they were bitterly and deeply divided until a laborious process of unification took place in the 1990s. But even this did not last. Again, they are divided, and they have been especially so since the “velvet revolution” brought Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to power in Yerevan in

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2018 and, of course, the loss of the Second Karabakh War in 2020.

And again, some detail is needed. Pashinyan openly supports an Armenian diaspora alternative in France to the traditional Armenian nationalist establishment, grouped in the Coordination Council of France's Armenian Associations (CCAF). This is one element of the disunity. Another is the factionalism inside the CCAF itself. There, the Hunchak party is in conflict with the ARF and former spokesman for the terrorist Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), Jean-Marc “Ara” Toranian, who is now a Co-chair of the CCAF. In spite of his tactical alliance with the ARF, since at least 2003, Toranian has had severe disputes with his cousin Franck “Mourad” Papazian (the ARF's leader and another Co-chair of the CCAF)—the latest concerns the attitude the CCAF should adopt towards Pashinyan.

After their failures in 2011 (the Masse bill) and 2012 (the Boyer bill), the established Armenian nationalist groups based in France often complained that the majority of French elites at best perceive their ethnic group as being composed of rug merchants and the like. Since then, they have lost prominent ethnic-Armenian

public figures, including Charles Aznavour (their main pillar of support in show business, deceased in 2018), Anahide Ter Minassian (their main pillar of support in academic circles, deceased in 2019) and Patrick Devedjian (the only high-profile French politician of Armenian descent, who died after contracting COVID-19 in 2020). This is one reason to emphasize that the inflammatory statements made in the 2020-2022 period should not be taken at face value. They are largely due to electoral calculations. Ethnic-Armenian citizens of France who serve as staffers, or pro-Armenian “friends,” prepare a text for an MP to read, which is calibrated to be provocative; and then, the MP reads it. This has been the most common scenario.

The core of Armenian and pro-Armenian activism in French media is made of a small group of persons. One is Gäidz Minassian who works at Lemonde.fr. A former Dashnak who was arrested in 1986 for illegally protesting in support of Armenian terrorism, he later broke ties with the ARF and reversed his approval of their violent methods—but without renouncing his overt hostility toward Ankara and Baku; he may have more recently returned to the ideas of his youth, at least

partially. A second is Valérie Toranian, who works at *Le Point* and who in the past helped her then-husband, the aforementioned Jean-Marc “Ara” Toranian, to publish ASALA’s newspaper, *Hay Baykar*. A third is Jean-Christophe Buisson at *Le Figaro*; and a fourth is award-winning travel writer Sylvain Tesson.

Marginalizing the influence these activists and their fellow travelers have in the French media may not be easy or straightforward, but it is not rocket science, either. States with objectively much more serious, deep-seated challenges and disagreements with the Élysée, the Quai d’Orsay, and the two houses of Parliament than Azerbaijan have been able to overcome them. An integral part of the answer lies in devising and then executing a truly effective public relations and communication strategy, which includes hiring the right sort of agency. The obvious example is what Türkiye has been able to accomplish, but there are other success stories as well.

As important as the cultural dimension may be for changing French hearts and minds, more

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of the same will not overcome the broader challenge. In other words, simply intensifying Azerbaijan’s cultural diplomacy will not produce the expected result. Rather, a much more targeted approach is needed—one that focuses directly on Armenia’s nefarious alliances with both Iran and Russia, but also on longstanding Armenian antisemitism and the fierce anti-Catholicism of the Armenian Apostolic Church. If Armenian nationalism can be exposed for what it is, public and, in turn, political support for the “Armenian cause” in France would decrease significantly.

The pragmatic presentation and contextualization by Azerbaijani media of the recent (and unnecessary) visit by the President of the National Assembly, Yael Braun-Pivet, to Armenia—particularly her negative reply concerning the “recognition of Artsakh”—is an encouraging sign. But more important than anything else in this regard is the choice to appoint the Foreign Ministry’s former Spokesperson, Leyla Abdullayeva, as Azerbaijan’s ambassador to France. In just the first few weeks since she assumed her post in November 2022, she

helped put together a friendship group in the National Assembly and has both deepened and multiplied Azerbaijan’s contacts.

I can think of no better conclusion—no better expression of what the French posture has been and could be again—than to refer to a sentence written by Charles Escande, General Secretary of the French administration in Adana, in March 1921: “We had to do Armenophilia from a humanitarian point of view, but we had to be careful not to fall into political Armenophilia.” Extricating itself

from “political Armenophilia” will require France to restore its fidelity to what we can call the Le Drian posture: the “exigency of impartiality.” Otherwise, the country’s role and influence risks being more than simply being called into question, as Le Drian rightly foresaw.

It is high time to put an end to the litany of errors, and France will need to make the first move. As Ilham Aliyev stated on 10 January 2023, “if there is an idea to normalize this situation [with France], we will not be the ones initiating it.” We should take him at his word. **BD**

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