

**#FreeArmenianHostages**

## **HOSTAGES OF INJUSTICE**

In 2025, a series of court trials are set to take place in Baku, Azerbaijan, targeting Armenians detained by the regime following the 2020 war and the forced deportation of 120,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. For nine months, the Azerbaijani government imposed a blockade, depriving Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh of basic human rights. The blockade culminated in bombardments, the forced displacement of the entire Armenian population, and the incarceration of their leaders and civilians—tactics chillingly reminiscent of the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

### **The Advocacy Report**

The report argues that the ongoing and upcoming “show trials” are designed to criminalize Armenians and legitimize their persecution. It further contends that Azerbaijan’s judiciary is deeply compromised, functioning as an instrument of the regime in Baku to suppress political opposition and minority groups. These trials starkly undermine the rule of law and flagrantly violate international human rights standards and Azerbaijan’s international obligations.

This report is a call to action for the unconditional release of Armenian hostages. It provides evidence for activists to mobilize grassroots campaigns, for journalists to expose these abuses, and for politicians and diplomats to pressure Azerbaijan through international forums.

### **Show Trials**

The trials of Armenian hostages in Azerbaijan, both past and upcoming, bear a strong resemblance to Stalin-era show trials, where courts were weaponized to eliminate dissent and consolidate autocratic power. President Ilham Aliyev appears to be adopting similar methods, using the judiciary as a political tool to suppress dissent, target Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, and even persecute Azerbaijani citizens and foreign nationals who oppose his regime. This strategy not only erodes domestic freedoms but also contributes to the broader violation of international norms and justice.

Unlike the Stalinist show trials of the past, today’s world offers institutional mechanisms to expose and counter such abuses. Independent journalism, human rights organizations, and international courts provide tools to challenge Azerbaijan’s politically motivated judicial practices.

### **Victims, Not Perpetrators**

The 23 Armenian hostages currently held in Azerbaijani jails are victims of an ongoing genocide, not terrorists. Their detention stems from the systematic persecution and forced displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, actions that meet the legal definition of

genocide as outlined in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Méndez, 2023).

On October 30, 2023, Juan Méndez, the first UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, stated: “The decision to leave—caused by the attack but also by the nine months of deprivation of food and medicine—exposed the serious mental harm produced in all ethnic Armenians by the official policy and practice of Azerbaijan, which fits the definition of the genocidal act contemplated in Article 2(b) of the [Genocide] Convention: causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” (Méndez, 2023).

These individuals have been falsely accused and labelled as terrorists in an effort to delegitimize their suffering and deflect international scrutiny from Azerbaijan’s calculated policy of erasing Armenian presence and heritage in the region. Far from being combatants or threats, the detained are civilians, including democratically elected leaders, specifically targeted because of their Armenian identity.

By criminalizing these individuals, Azerbaijan seeks to obscure its genocidal actions and justify its broader campaign of ethnic cleansing and cultural erasure. Such tactics aim to shift the narrative, portraying the victims as perpetrators while systematically dismantling the historical and cultural fabric of the Armenian two millennia long presence in Nagorno-Karabakh.

### **Weaponizing Azerbaijan’s Judiciary**

Azerbaijan’s judiciary is mired in political interference, systemic corruption, and persistent violations of international legal norms. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing judicial independence, the system operates under significant influence from the executive branch. This has led to politically motivated prosecutions and widespread corruption, as documented by Human Rights Watch (2024). Judges are often compelled to align their rulings with government interests, and numerous cases involving political opposition, journalists, and activists illustrate how the judiciary is weaponized to protect the ruling elite (Amnesty International, 2022). Furthermore, Azerbaijan’s judiciary has been used to suppress ethnic minorities, including Lezgins, Talysh, and Armenians, often through fabricated charges (Duty to Prevent, 2021).

Azerbaijan’s judiciary compromised state undermines the rule of law and flagrantly violates fundamental human rights. It is routinely exploited to further the regime’s objectives, disregarding Azerbaijan’s obligations under international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Geneva Conventions. The 2023 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report highlights severe abuses within Azerbaijan’s justice system, including:

- Harsh and sometimes life-threatening prison conditions.
- Arbitrary detention.
- Serious concerns about judicial independence (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

This report identifies systemic issues within Azerbaijan’s judiciary, focusing on the following critical concerns:

- **Lack of Judicial Independence:** Judges are pressured to align rulings with the government's political agenda.
- **Corruption and Nepotism:** Widespread corruption and a lack of transparency erode public trust.
- **Political Prosecutions:** Opposition leaders, journalists, activists, and ethnic minority figures are frequently targeted.
- **Violations of Due Process:** Defendants are often denied fair trials and basic legal protections.
  - o **Coerced Confessions:** Torture and abuse, including beatings and electrocution, are widely reported.
  - o **Lack of Transparency:** Trials are held behind closed doors, excluding international observers.
  - o **Denial of Legal Representation:** Independent legal counsel is prohibited; court-appointed lawyers fail to provide adequate defences.
  - o **Expedited Verdicts:** Trials are conducted in a language inaccessible to defendants, with outcomes predetermined.
  - o **Systematic Torture:** Physical and mental abuse are routine, violating international standards.

Azerbaijan's judiciary consistently fails to meet its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These failings are particularly evident in its treatment of ethnic minorities, including Armenians.

## Global Attention

In recent months, the plight of 23 Armenian hostages held by Azerbaijan has garnered significant international attention, becoming a critical issue for Armenia and its global diaspora in the wake of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Advocacy groups, human rights organizations, and officials worldwide have mobilized to demand their release. Social media has played a pivotal role in these efforts, with hashtags such as #FreeArmenianHostages and #StopGreenwashGenocide emerging as rallying cries across platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook.

A Global Witness investigation, reported by The Guardian, revealed that Azerbaijan has allegedly used networks of fake social media accounts to undermine advocacy efforts of Free Armenian Hostages campaign. These accounts have been accused of spreading misinformation, flooding hashtags with irrelevant or hostile content, and amplifying pro-Aliyev narratives, particularly in the lead-up to the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29). Human rights advocates have condemned these tactics, arguing that such actions obstruct freedom of speech and reveal Azerbaijan's broader efforts to manipulate public discourse. These findings have spurred calls for social media platforms to take stronger measures against

disinformation campaigns to ensure humanitarian issues are not overshadowed by such interferences (The Guardian, 2024).

## **The Role of COP29**

COP29 became a focal point for addressing the issue of Armenian hostages. Many viewed the conference as a platform for advancing a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On November 11, 2024, Armenia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Vahan Kostanyan, remarked: "There is no decision yet [on Armenia attending COP29]. It depends on the current processes." When asked whether the return of prisoners and the peace treaty were interconnected, Kostanyan affirmed: "Yes." (Azatutyun, 2024)

Adding to the tensions, U.S. Congressman Frank Pallone (D-NJ), co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, stated: "Both the United States and Armenia had genuine expectations that COP29 could mark a turning point—that a peace treaty would be signed, and the hostages released. Unfortunately, Azerbaijan's actions have shown a clear unwillingness to meet even the most basic international standards of justice and human rights" (Pallone, n.d.).

Pallone's remarks encapsulated the growing frustration among international stakeholders who had hoped for progress during COP29. However, Azerbaijan's refusal to release the hostages before the conference was widely seen as a strategic move to maintain leverage in ongoing negotiations.

## **A Call to Action**

This report aims to empower its readers by:

- Providing evidence of Azerbaijan's systemic human rights violations.
- Providing context on Azerbaijan's compromised judiciary system.
- Equipping advocates and campaigners with research and analysis.
- Supporting journalists to expose abuses.
- Urging politicians and diplomats to apply pressure on Azerbaijan.

The ultimate goal is the unconditional release of Armenian hostages and over 300 political prisoners of various nationalities, as well as holding those responsible for their mistreatment accountable. Justice for the detainees is critical not only to their freedom but also to exposing the broader implications of Azerbaijan's actions for international law and human rights.

Achieving sustainable peace in the South Caucasus will require sustained global pressure, the enforcement of international mechanisms, and an unwavering commitment to justice.

## **References**

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