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Biden should sanction perpetrators of war crimes against Armenians



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On Sept. 27, 2020, the Azeri armed forces attacked Nagorno-Karabakh ("Artsakh" in Armenian). They were backed by the Turkish military and jihadist mercenaries with armed drones, heavy artillery, rocket systems and special forces.

At least 3,500 Armenians were killed and over 100,000 civilians were displaced during 44 days of violent conflict. Eye-witnesses describe Azeri soldiers mutilating bodies, beheading civilians, and using banned weapons such as cluster bombs and white phosphorus. Sanctions are needed to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Turkey deployed up to 2,000 Islamist jihadis from Syria and Libya who were promised a bounty for killing Armenians. The identity of jihadis leaders is known.

Sayf Balud (Sayf Abu Bakr) has led the Syrian National Army (SNA)'s Hamza Division since 2016. He participated in Operation Olive Branch, the invasion of Afrin in northern Syria, and the Libyan Civil War, both with Turkish patronage. In 2013, Balud appeared in an ISIS video. He and his mercenary cohorts are responsible for multiple war crimes, including the kidnapping of Kurdish women and brutal repression in Afrin. He is one of Turkey's most trusted and supported mercenary leaders. He and approximately 500 of his men were reportedly flown to Azerbaijan to fight in Artsakh.

Fehim Isa (Isa al-Turkmani) has led the SNA's Sultan Murad Division since at least 2015. He was directly involved in Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria, Operation Olive Branch, and the Libyan Civil War. He and his division have also been accused of war crimes, such as the torturing of Kurdish soldiers and indiscriminate shelling of civilians.

Abu Amsha (Muhammad al-Jassim) is the leader of the Suleyman Shah Brigade, nicknamed the al-Amshat militia, which gained prominence in 2018 as one of the most brutal factions occupying Afrin. Al-Amshat confiscated property and kidnapped individuals for ransom, generating \$12 million per year. He was also accused of rape and murder. Like Isa and Balud, Amsha was an important recruiter for Turkish-backed mercenaries in Libya.

Other jihadi war criminals include Ahmed Osman of the Sultan Murad Division; Abu Jalal, a military leader of the Hamza Division; Mohammad al-Abdullah headed the Hamza Division's so-called Head of Political Bureau; Fadlallah al-Haji heads the Faylaq al-Sham,

an important Turkish proxy fighting in Syria and Libya, with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda in Syria's Idlib province.

These jihadis did not act on their own. The Nagorno-Karabakh operation was orchestrated by Hakan Fidan, head of Turkey's National Intelligence Agency (MIT). Field operations were managed by active-duty Turkish commanders.

Major General Bahtiyar Ersay, Chief of the Operations Directorate of the Land Forces of Turkey, oversaw the Azerbaijani General Staff in Artsakh. He previously led Turkey's 2nd Commando Brigade, which was notoriously cruel to Kurdish civilians in northern Syria. Ultranationalist militias, known as Grey Wolves, joined this brigade.

Major General Göksel Kahya, head of the Turkish Air Force's 1st Supply and Maintenance Centre, managed the deployment of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones in Libya and Artsakh. TB2 drones have killed countless civilians.

Lieutenant General Şeref Öngay is Commander of the Third Army of the Turkish Ground Forces. According to Armenian representatives to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Öngay "took part in planning and conducting" Artsakh operations. He was spotted in Azerbaijan on Sept. 4, planning joint operations with Azerbaijan's military.

In addition, Adnan Tanrıverdi, a retired Turkish general and the founder of private defence contractor SADAT, played an important role recruiting, training, equipping, and transporting Syrian mercenaries to both Libya and Artsakh.

Azerbaijan paid up to \$2,000 per month to jihadi mercenaries. Major General Hikmat Hasanov, Commander of the 1st Army Corps of Azerbaijan, coordinated operations on the northern frontline of

the Artsakh conflict and was instrumental in capturing Suqovuşan and other northern targets.

Major General Mais Barkhudarov, Commander of the 2nd Army Corps of Azerbaijan, was responsible for the southern frontline in Artsakh. He led the occupation of Jabrayil where many civilians were killed.

Lieutenant General Hikmat Mirzayev, head of the Azerbaijani special forces, is the highest-ranking Azeri general involved in the Artsakh operation. He has close ties to MIT and the Turkish General Staff. Many Azerbaijani special forces were trained by Turkey. Mirzayev was recently promoted to Lieutenant General.

For sure, there were other war crimes committed in Artsakh. Columbia University's Artsakh Atrocities project has been documenting war crimes and will augment the list of perpetrators as more information surfaces.

We know who committed these crimes. We do not know, however, if the Biden administration will turn a blind eye to atrocities in Artsakh or hold perpetrators accountable. Unlike the previous administration, U.S. government officials are now taking a harder line towards Turkey and its nefarious regional activities. It should reaffirm its commitment to the OSCE Minsk Group, which includes the United States, Russia and France as official mediators. Nagorno-Karabakh is still a powder keg, that is only stabilised by the presence of Russian peacekeepers.

The United States should sanction perpetrators, imposing a travel ban on them and their families, while freezing their overseas assets. It should also provide case files to the INTERPOL and request red bulletins mandating their arrest.

Holding war criminals accountable is the best way to prevent further crimes against humanity by Azeri and Turkish personnel, as well as their jihadi proxies.

