

# NCSEJ Country Report



## Republic of Armenia



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## Executive Summary

Throughout Armenia's history, Armenia has been under the rule of the Persian, Turkish, and Russian empires, and the Soviet Union. Post-Soviet Armenia has struggled to overcome several challenges, including resolving the frozen dispute with Azerbaijan over the contested enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, complex relationships with its other neighbors, and securing access to global markets and reliable energy supplies.

Armenia has carried out significant structural changes in pursuit of a market economy since the collapse of the Soviet Union with the assistance of international lending organizations. Corruption remains a serious challenge to Armenia's economic growth.

The ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan acutely influences Armenia's relations with its neighbors and the West. Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan's allies, especially Turkey, are strained. Relations with the United States are good and benefit from the significant encouragement offered by America's vibrant ethnic Armenian community. Armenia receives U.S. aid, and the United States has hosted and participated in peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Armenia's Jewish community is small but deeply rooted. Relations with Armenia's Christian majority are generally peaceful, and anti-Semitic incidents are rare. Armenia's relations with Israel are limited but cordial.

## History

Armenia is slightly smaller than the state of Maryland. Located south of the Caucasus Mountains between Europe and Asia, it is completely landlocked, and shares borders with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran.

Armenia is home to one of the world's oldest civilizations and was the first nation to officially embrace Christianity as a state religion in 301 C.E. Over the centuries, Armenia was conquered by Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Mongols, Arabs, Ottomans, Turks, and Russians.

### Statistics:

**Population:** 2,963,000 (2022 est.)

**Size:** 29,743 sq. km

**Jewish Population:** 500

**Capital:** Yerevan

**Major cities:** Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor, Ejmiatsin, Hrazdan

### Head of State:

President Vahagn  
Khachaturyan

### Head of Government:

Prime Minister Nikol  
Pashinyan

### Foreign Minister:

Ararat Mirzoyan

### Ambassador to United

### States:

H.E. Lilit Makunts

### U.S. Ambassador to Armenia:

Kristina Kvein

### Freedom House Rating:

Partly Free

Rising political and ethnic tensions in the declining Ottoman Empire culminated in the wide-spread destruction of Armenian communities at the hands of Turkish authorities during World War I, when Turkish and Russian troops clashed over Armenian territory.

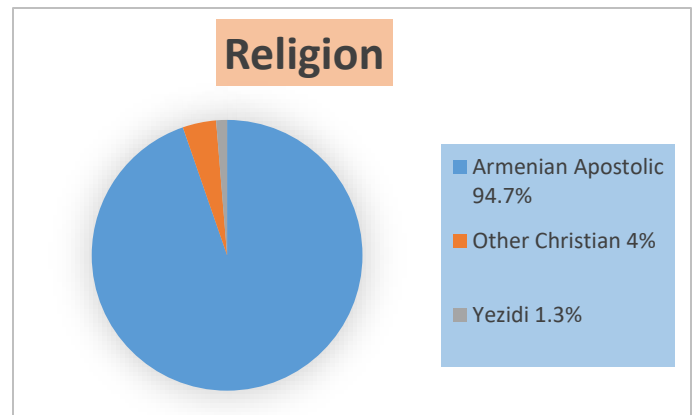
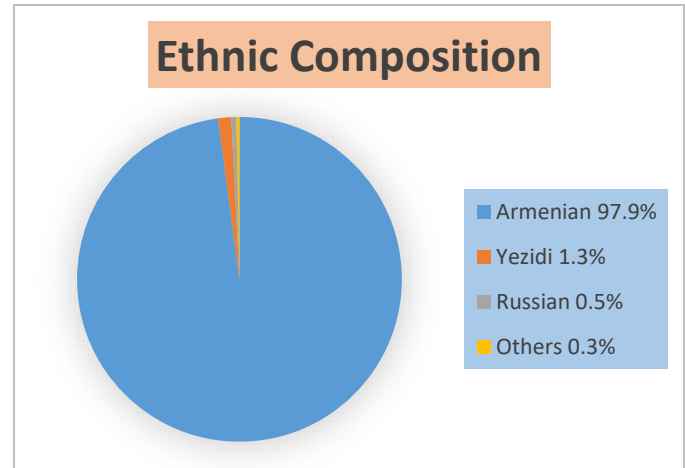
The Ottoman government's systematic extermination of Armenians is officially recognized as "genocide" by 33 countries. Between 600,000 and 1.5 million Armenians were killed as a result of starvation, deportations, and massacres. Many of the survivors emigrated and formed sizable communities throughout the world.

Following Russia's Bolshevik revolution, Armenia declared its independence in May 1918 under a nationalist government (the Dashnaks) but was conquered by the Red Army in 1921 and became a Soviet republic.

In 1988, during the Gorbachev era, Armenians and Azerbaijanis began a war over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. The war resulted in over 17,000 people killed and generated massive refugee flows in Azerbaijan and economic devastation in Armenia.

In September 1991, Armenia became an independent state after centuries of foreign rule.

An estimated 60% of the worldwide total of 8 million ethnic Armenians live outside the country. Russia and the United States are each home to more than one million ethnic Armenians.



## Political Situation

Armenian domestic politics have been turbulent since independence. Levon Ter-Petrosyan won the first presidential elections in 1991, but the elections were marred by accusations of violations. Petrossyan held the presidency from 1991-1998, after being reelected in 1996. In 1998, Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign after being deemed too conciliatory toward Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Ter-Petrosyan was replaced by Prime Minister Robert Kocharian, a former leader of the Nagorno-Karabakh independence movement and a hardline nationalist, who served as president through 2008.

In October 1999, Prime Minister Vazgan Sarkisian, Parliament Chairman Karen Demirchian, and six other Members of Parliament were murdered during a parliamentary session. This attack began a period of political instability in Armenia that gradually led to the increase in political power of President Kocharian, leading to speculations that the president and his inner circle were responsible for the attack.

In October 2000, thousands of people rallied in Yerevan demanding the resignation of President Kocharian, protesting his alleged involvement in the October 1999 attack and his government's failure to revive the country's economy. Kocharian was reelected in March 2003, amid widespread accusations of electoral irregularities and violations, according to the OSCE and other foreign observers.

The popularity of opposition-led street protests peaked in 2004; the protests were frequently and often violently dispersed by the police. In late 2005, constitutional amendments were passed which decreased the power of the executive vis-à-vis the judicial and legislative branches, in line with Council of Europe suggestions, but were also criticized by foreign observers as falling short of international norms.

After a 2013 victory by incumbent President Sarkisian, mass protests began in the following days. The OSCE described the election as generally well-administrated, professional, and transparent with respect for fundamental freedoms, despite some serious election violations.

In 2015, Armenian voters approved a constitutional amendment which would change the country's semi-presidential system to a parliamentary system. Following this vote, allegations of voting irregularities were brought forward.

From April to May 2018, Armenia experienced an anti-government revolution staged by various political and civil groups in response to Serzh Sargsyan's appointment to the post of Prime Minister for a third term by the ruling Republican Party. The opposition parliamentary party Civil Contract led the protests, which succeeded with the ouster of Serzh Sargsyan on April 23. At the beginning of May, Armenia held a new parliamentary election in which the Civil Contract party's Nikol Pashinyan became the new prime minister after the second round on May 8.

In 2021, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was reelected by receiving 54 percent of the vote compared to the runner up's 21 percent.

## Economic Situation

Armenia developed a modern industrial economy under the Soviet rule, but since 1988, its economy has suffered setbacks. A 1988 earthquake damaged 30% of Armenian industrial capacity, killed 25,000, and left 500,000 Armenians homeless. Armenia suffered hyperinflation in its first years of independence, resulting in a catastrophic decline in GDP. Following the 1994 ceasefire, the Armenian economy began to recover, in large part due to successful domestic reforms and liberalization, as well as substantial economic aid from abroad. However, the 1998 financial crisis in Russia harmed Armenian export industries and expatriate remittances. After a period of growth in the 2000s, in 2009 Armenia's GDP dropped by 14%. Economic recovery has been slow.

**Currency:** \$1= 386.08  
Armenian Drams

**GDP:** \$13.86 billion (2021)

**GDP per capita:** \$4,966.5  
(2021)

**GDP Growth:** 5.7% (2021)

Since 2014, Armenia's economy has experienced another decline, due to economic recession in Russia and falling remittances. At the end of 2014, Armenia's currency significantly depreciated.

The level of corruption in Armenia remains high, impeding investment and economic growth. Armenia is ranked 95<sup>th</sup> of 168 countries by the Transparency International 2015 Corruption Perception Index (although only 35<sup>th</sup> out of 189 economies by the World Bank's 2016 "Doing Business" survey). The main barriers for inflow of investments in Armenia is its relatively small population size, geographic isolation due to closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, a low GDP per capita and a high level of corruption. Major sectors of Armenian's economy are controlled by well-connected businessmen, which limits consumer choice and discourages development. Armenia has adopted a law on privatization of state enterprises, but the majority of privatizations have not been transparent and competitive.

The ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh dispute greatly affects the Armenian economy due to economic blockades and closed borders imposed by two of Armenia's four neighbors. As a result, landlocked Armenia has found itself starved for fuel supplies and raw materials and forced to develop new routes through Georgia and Iran.

The European Union accounts for one-third of Armenia's trade; trade with the United States, Russia, Israel, and Iran is also considerable. In June 2005, the European Union donated €100 million to Armenia to develop alternative sources of energy and to shut down Soviet-era Metsamor nuclear power plant. Armenia formally agreed to shut down the plant in 2007 and started developing new energy strategies.

Armenia has pursued closer economic relations with the European Union, but in September 2013 announced it would not sign an Association Agreement. Instead, in January 2015, Armenia acceded to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), joining Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Nevertheless, Armenia and the EU continue their political and trade dialogue and plan to sign a cooperation

agreement in lieu of the Association Agreement. Trade with the European Union is second only to that with Russia and the other post-Soviet states.

In the 2022 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), ranked Armenia 63<sup>rd</sup> of 180 countries.

Armenia ranked 85th out of 191 on the 2022 UNDP Human Development Index.

Armenia is not large trade partners with either Israel or the United States, amassing only 0.23% and 1.5% of Armenia's exports respectively.

## Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Since 1988, Azerbaijan and Armenia have been in conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. In 1994, ethnic Armenian forces conquered almost 20% of Azerbaijan, including all of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A cease-fire was signed in July of the same year, and the captured territory remained under Armenian control. Since 1999, Armenia and Azerbaijan's presidents have held direct talks on the conflict.

On March 14, 2008, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution identifying Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and calling on Armenia to withdraw its troops. The measure was supported by 39 member states and rejected by seven, including Russia, France, and the United States.



*Map detailing the disputed territories in Azerbaijan and Armenia*

International mediators have failed to make progress on negotiations for a final settlement on Nagorno-Karabakh. No country or international organization recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh's self-proclaimed independence.

In 2020, war broke out in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. After six weeks of fighting, a peace deal was signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. In this arrangement, Azerbaijan will keep the parts of Nagorno-Karabakh that it captured under this conflict, and Armenia will withdraw from other neighboring areas in the following weeks.

The peace plan brokered by Russia did not last long, as there was a 2-day conflict in September 2022, killing 100-300 people and forcing the evacuation of over 2,700 citizens. Both sides blamed each other for causing the conflict; however, Russia led negotiations for a truce. Again, this truce was only short-term as there were further border conflicts on September 21, September 23, and September 28. Following the increase in violence, then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Armenia with a Congressional delegation. Speaker Pelosi became the highest-ranking U.S. leader to tour the country since its independence.

In December 2022, Azerbaijani environmental activists were able to block all traffic, with the exception of the Red Cross and Russian convoys in the Lachin corridor, leading to significant food shortages in the region.

In April 2023, Armenia had agreed to give up rights to the Nagorno-Karabakh region as terms in a potential peace agreement. In the same month, Azerbaijan created a checkpoint connecting Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Azerbaijan has wanted control over this road for a long time, and this was an attempt to legitimize that goal. This decision further threatens already fragile peace talks.

In May 2023, the United States, European Union, and Russia held peace talks between the two countries. While they did not reach a deal to end the conflict, Blinken said that one was “within sight, within reach.” However, there were no new advances to resolve border conflicts or the return of prisoners.

As U.S. led peace talks between the two countries began in June 2023, 4 Armenian soldiers were killed near the border of the two countries. Azerbaijan proposed a peace deal on five principles: recognize state sovereignty, forgo further territorial claims, prohibit use of threats, fix the borders of the countries, and restarting travel and communication. Armenia might be adding its own principles. There is a willingness to make a deal relatively soon: Azerbaijan wants to make a deal while Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is in power and is eager to reintegrate Karabakh into the country.

At the June 2023 peace talks held in Washington, DC, the two countries made undisclosed agreements on certain articles of a deal and have a “mutual understanding on the draft agreement.” However, the U.S. believes that “there remains hard work to be done to try to reach a final agreement.”

## **Relations with the U.S.**

The United States and Armenia maintain diplomatic relations. In 1992, the United States became the first country to open an embassy in Armenia. The United States has a large ethnic Armenian community. The U.S. government has been satisfied with the overall Armenian political system and encourages it to further develop its democratic institutions.



The United States provides Armenia with assistance in order to reduce poverty levels, expand trade, strengthen the healthcare system, and establish regional stability and resolve the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Since 1992, Washington has invested over \$908 million in aid and support programs to Armenia. In December 2001 and January 2002, Congress and President Bush approved the creation of an annual waiver of a law (Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act) that prohibits military assistance to Azerbaijan, except for disarmament-related assistance (pending “demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh”).

In 2000, the US-Armenia Joint Economic Taskforce (USATF) was formed. The USATF meets annually to further economic cooperation and advance economic and market reforms in Armenia. The task force is an open forum used by both countries to discuss issues of concern and interest. It also provides the opportunity to check progress in certain areas and clarify priorities for moving forward. It produces an action plan that is used to tailor assistance to Armenia from the United States Government.

Following September 11, 2001, Armenia condemned the attacks on the United States and called for collective international efforts to fight terrorism. Armenia implemented UN Security Council Resolution 1373 to freeze bank accounts and assets of terrorists and their supporters and joined the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the Council of Europe’s anti-terrorism conventions. Washington imposed sanctions on several Armenian firms in May 2002 for allegedly providing nuclear weapons-building assistance to Iran.

While its close neighbors, Azerbaijan and Georgia, voiced their support for the 2003 U.S. effort to overthrow Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Armenia remained in favor of Russia’s anti-war policy. But in January 2005, despite national opposition, the government sent 46 military personnel to Iraq, although in December 2004, Prime Minister Andranik Markarian called Armenia’s presence in Iraq purely symbolic and for political purposes.

In 2004, the United States granted Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status to Armenia and removed Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions on Armenian goods. Also in 2004, Armenia signed an agreement with the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad on The Protection and Preservation of Certain Cultural Properties.

In March 2006, the Millennium Challenge Corporation signed a compact with Armenia for \$235 million over a five-year period, for infrastructure rehabilitation and improvements in the agricultural sector. Additionally, since 1993, the United States has funded the travel of over 4,627 Armenian citizens to the United States on academic and professional exchange programs. There are 90 Peace Corps Volunteers working in Armenia.

In May 2006, the State Department asked Ambassador to Armenia John Evans to step down after he publicly referred to the World War I Armenian atrocities as “genocide”; the U.S. government officially uses the term “tragedy” when referring to this historical episode. Members of Congress accused Evans of imparting his personal views and Evans later reissued his statement, insisting that his use of the

term “genocide” did not reflect or change U.S. policy toward Armenia. Since the controversial recall of Ambassador Evans, which was condemned by Armenian organizations and activists, members of both Houses of Congress have raised serious concerns about the State Department’s decision.

In 2021 on Armenian Remembrance Day, President Joe Biden formally declared the Armenian massacre as a genocide.

## Relations with Israel

While Israel and Armenia maintain diplomatic relations, neither have an embassy in the other country. Armenia does have a Consulate in Jerusalem, but the country’s ambassador to Israel is stationed in Cairo. Israel maintains a Consulate in Yerevan. However, authorities express confidence in opening embassies in both countries in the near future. Armenia considers Israel a major trade partner.

By the end of 2004, Israel had become Armenia’s third-largest trading partner as a result of joint diamond-cutting ventures.

The Holocaust Memorial in Israel “Yad Vashem” has honored thirteen Armenians for risking their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Israel has not yet formally recognized the World War I-era massacre of Armenians as a genocide. In the summer of 2011, the Israeli Knesset held a session during which Armenian Genocide recognition was formally discussed for the first time.

In 2017, the parliamentary Armenian Israeli Friendship Group visited Armenia led by the Vice-Speaker of Knesset Tali Poloskova. They met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Edward Nalbandyan to discuss a visa-free regime between the two countries and the development of trade relations.

In November 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian met in Israel to discuss issues of strengthening relations between Israel and Armenia and the possibility of cooperation in technology, cyberindustry, and agriculture.

Historically, a large Armenian diaspora lives in Israel. Its most notable geographic concentration is the Armenian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Armenia’s leadership has expressed frustration that Israel frequently supplies weapons and technology to Azerbaijan. In a March 2019 interview, however, Armenia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Grigor Hovhannisyan stated that while he hoped Israel would cease selling weapons to Azerbaijan, this situation is not an impediment to improving relations between the two countries. He continued that Israel’s recognition of the Armenian Genocide is also not a requirement for strengthening the Israeli-Armenian relationship.

In the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Israel supported Azerbaijan’s efforts to take the territory by negotiating a major arms deal.

In the same year that U.S. President Joe Biden formally recognized the Armenian genocide, Israel issued a more cautious statement, calling it a “terrible suffering and tragedy of the Armenian people,” which has complicated diplomatic relations.

## Jewish Communal Life

The Jewish community in Armenia dates back 2,000 years to ancient Armenia. Jews from Syria and Mesopotamia settled in Armenian cities (including Armavir and Vardges) during the first century BCE. Many of these earliest Jewish settlers later converted to Christianity and even joined local aristocracies.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews began arriving in Armenia from both Poland and Persia, creating separate Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities in Yerevan. Several displaced Jews settled in Soviet Armenia during and after World War II, raising the Jewish population to approximately 5,000, though subsequent emigration has reduced the Jewish community to fewer than 1,000. Another wave of Jews came to Armenia between 1965 and 1972. The Jewish population peaked at 10,000 in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1991, the government officially recognized the Armenian Jewish community. Despite a small Jewish population, high intermarriage rates, and relative isolation, several programs exist to help meet community needs. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is active in Armenia through annual community events, while the “Orot Chesed” community charity organization, with the help of Yerevan’s synagogue, assists senior citizens by providing food deliveries, heating fuel, medical equipment, and a daily hot meals program.

Most of Armenia’s Jewish population resides in Yerevan, though there are active Jewish community centers in Seven and Vanadzor as well. The Jewish community in Armenia has just one working synagogue, headed by Chief Rabbi Gersh Meir Burshtein. However, the Jewish community is active, and expanding.

The Jewish Community of Armenia (JCA) is the largest organization engaged in reviving Jewish culture and traditions in the country. It was established in 1991 and has been chaired by Rima Varzhapetyan-Feller since 1996; it now consists of about 300 families. JCA is a member of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) and the World Congress of Russian Jewry (WCRJ), sponsors advanced education classes, a children’s chorus, cultural events, and does outreach work.



*Jewish life in Yerevan (photo: FJC.ru)*

While the regional office of the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI/ "Sochnut") is in neighboring Georgia, a representative in Armenia coordinates JAFI support for a Sunday school, an ulpan, a Chessed seniors' center and other Jewish community activities. A second Sunday school, run by the Religious Society of Armenia, also holds a summer camp. Cultural activities are also conducted by the Armenia-Israel cultural group Menorah.

The Jewish Religious Community of Armenia, a Chabad-affiliated group established in 1992, operates both a Sunday school, called Torah Or, and a community center. The Yerevan synagogue holds Sabbath services and holiday celebrations and houses a multi-lingual Jewish library. The group has published its newsletter, Koelet, since 1997.

The large majority of the community is represented by Jews who came to Armenia after the collapse of the USSR and is currently estimated at less than 1,000 people. The Jewish community is represented by the Jewish Community of Armenia (JCA) and the Jewish Religious Community of Armenia (JRCA), and at times, the organizations' rivalry over funding has spiraled into heated opposition, with each group accusing the other of failing to observe fundamental teachings of the Torah. As a result, Jews in Armenia ally with either the JCA or JRCA.



*Yerevan synagogue*

In 1999, the JCA planted 12 trees representing the 12 Tribes of Israel at the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan and erected a commemorative Holocaust memorial stone. When the original stone was stolen, the Mayor's office arranged for an even larger replacement.

Since 2002, the Jewish community in Armenia has published their own newspaper called the Magen David.

The Jewish community has strong contacts with the government. Attempts have been undertaken to retrieve Torah scrolls and other religious items from state collections.

In 2014, the Head of the Jewish community of Armenia Rima Varzhapetyan received the Movses Khorenatsi medal from the President Serzh Sargsyan (the Movses Khorenatsi is Armenia's highest cultural award. It is presented by the president of Armenia to people who have significantly contributed to the advancement of Armenian culture).

In 2018, the Jewish community stated their intention to create the Jewish Museum in Yeghegis (Vayots Dzor Province of Armenia) on the place of an old Jewish cemetery.

# Anti-Semitism

Historically, Jews and Armenians have had good relations. Both are ancient peoples with rich cultural and religious traditions that have helped preserve their identities amid statelessness and modern persecution. However, along with other non-ethnic Armenians including Russians and Poles, Jews are widely considered 'guests' in Armenia.

While not virulent or frequent, anti-Semitism does exist in Armenia. In February 2002, an anti-Semitic book, *National System*, was published and distributed by author Roman Yepiskoposyan. It describes Jews and Turks as the biggest enemies of the Armenian nation and claims the Holocaust to be a fabrication. Jewish leadership met with the Armenian President, who stated the need to vigilantly counter rising anti-Semitism. Still, officials remain reluctant to comment on the book and the presence of discrimination in the country, even in the wake of further anti-Semitic publications and incidents.

On January 25, 2005, the General Prosecutor's Office in Armenia announced the arrest of the chairman of the small ultra-nationalist Union of Armenian Aryans, Armen Avetisian. Avetisian was charged with ethnic intolerance for anti-Semitic statements in an interview with the weekly IRUVUNK, branding Jews as enemies of Armenia and calling for their expulsion from an ethnically purified Armenia. Avetisian was given a suspended three-year prison sentence by a Yerevan court and spent two months in prison in pre-trial detention. His brand of Armenian Aryanism appears to be a fringe phenomenon. Also in 2005, a Holocaust memorial in Yerevan was vandalized. Again in 2007, a Holocaust memorial was vandalized, this time with the carving of a swastika and the splashing of black paint into the monument.

The 2000 reburial with state honors of the ashes of General Dro Kanajan, an Armenian anti-Bolshevik leader who cooperated with the Nazis during World War II, in Armenia and the creation of a youth leadership institute resulted in some tension between Armenia and Israel.

In 2010 the Jewish Holocaust side of the Joint Tragedies Memorial in Yerevan was vandalized. A swastika and the words "Death to the Jews" was painted on the memorial. The city administration removed the signs of vandalism by the next morning, and police launched an investigation. There have been no reports of anti-Semitic acts in recent years.

According to data of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) published in 2014, Armenia had the third highest level of anti-Semitism among European countries. The report showed that Armenia had a 58% index score, meaning that out of an adult population of 2,202,661, 1,300,000 harbored anti-Semitic values.

In a 2016 Pew Research Center poll, 32% of Armenians responded that they do not consider Jews as their fellow citizens.

In Armenia, anti-Semitic acts are limited to the extent that they should not be considered popular, or state sanctioned. Vandalism against Jewish property and attacks on individuals are rare in the country.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2022 Human Rights Report on Armenia, anti-Semitism has decreased in the past year due to the peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This report also detailed an incident, in which a man cut a speaker's wire during prayer which led to a circuit explosion and damage to the speakers. The man's motivations were caused by a lack of recognition by the Israelis about Armenian genocide.