
FORMER ARMENIAN DEFENSE CHIEF'S RUSSIAN CITIZENSHIP CONFIRMED

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Russia has officially confirmed that a former Armenian defense minister wanted by Yerevan on coup charges is a Russian citizen, an Armenian law-enforcement agency said on Tuesday.

The Special Investigative Service (SIS) issued an international arrest warrant for retired Colonel-General Mikael Harutiunian in July. The SIS charged Harutiunian with illegally using the armed forces against opposition supporters who demonstrated in Yerevan against alleged fraud in a 2008 presidential election. It said that amounted to an overthrow of the constitutional order.

The SIS brought the same coup charges against former President Robert Kocharian and Yuri Khachaturov, the then secretary general of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Both men strongly denied them.

It emerged afterwards that Harutiunian now lives in Russia. Russian law-enforcement authorities notified the Armenian police in September that they will not arrest him.

The Interfax news agency reported at the time that Harutiunian has been a Russian citizen since 2002. Russias constitution forbids the extradition of Russian nationals to foreign states.

A spokeswoman for the SIS, Marina Ohanjanian, told RFE/RLs Armenian service that it has received a formal confirmation of Harutiunians Russian citizenship from relevant Russian authorities. She said the SIS has responded by asking them to clarify when the ex-general received a Russian passport.

The Armenian constitution did not allow dual citizenship until 2006.

Harutiunian, 72, served as defense minister from 2007-2008. He was previously the chief of the Armenian armys General Staff.

Moscow was quick to denounce the prosecutions of Kocharian, Harutiunian and Khachaturov. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in July that they run counter to the new Armenian leaderships earlier pledges not to persecute its predecessors for political motives.

Eight protesters and two police servicemen died when Armenian security forces quelled the post-election protests on March 1-2, 2008. Kocharian declared a state of emergency on that night, ordering troops into Yerevan.

The crackdown came just over a month before he handed over power to Serzh Sarkisian, his preferred successor. Kocharian has repeatedly defended the use of lethal force, saying that it prevented a violent seizure of power by Levon Ter-Petrosian, the main opposition presidential candidate.

The SIS essentially backed Kocharians version of events until this springs dramatic change of Armenias government. The law-enforcement agency now says that Armenian army units were secretly told to move into the capital before the declaration of emergency rule in violation of the Armenian constitution.

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