ARMENIAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE INTERNATIONAL

SITUATION UPDATE

Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Three Years After Ethnic Cleansing

A FACT-BASED RESOURCE FOR POLICYMAKERS AND THE PUBLIC

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Situation Update — September 2026

Introduction *1*

Azerbaijan's Consolidation of Control over Artsakh and Continuing Pressure on Armenia *3*

Armenian Hostages and Prisoners Held in Azerbaijan *4*

Pressure on Artsakh Authorities and Institutions in Armenia *6*

Humanitarian Situation of Displaced Artsakh Armenians *7*

Looking Ahead *9*

Infographic *10*

Introduction

Nearly three years after the forced displacement of the Armenian population of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), the consequences of the 2023 blockade, military offensive, and mass exodus remain unresolved. More than 100,000 people remain displaced; Armenian prisoners and former Artsakh leaders continue to be held in Azerbaijan; questions of return, property, missing persons, and accountability remain outstanding; and Armenian religious and cultural heritage in Artsakh continues to face destruction, alteration, and appropriation. At the same time, the displaced population faces increasingly difficult long-term challenges in Armenia, while the institutions seeking to represent its collective interests operate under growing pressure.

Security Environment and Regional Normalization

Nor has the broader Armenia-Azerbaijan security environment been fully normalized. According to an investigation based on satellite imagery and Soviet-era maps used in the delimitation process, as of October 2025 Azerbaijani forces controlled at least 241.4 square kilometers of Armenia's *de jure* sovereign territory, while Armenian forces controlled approximately 21 square kilometers of Azerbaijani *de jure* territory. The sensitivity of the still-undelimited border was illustrated again on September 6, 2026, when the acting administrative head of Kornidzor told a media outlet that Azerbaijani personnel near the Hakari Bridge were seeking to move forward in a disputed section but were being prevented from doing so by Armenian border guards. He said there had been no shooting, only a verbal confrontation. He subsequently sought to walk back his remarks, prompting media outlet to publish a recording of the original exchange.

Yet there are also important grounds for continued engagement and cautious optimism. Artsakh and the rights of its people have not disappeared from the international agenda. Legal, parliamentary, humanitarian, and diplomatic initiatives have expanded during

2026, creating avenues through which the rights of the displaced population can continue to be asserted and defended. At the same time, international involvement in Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization is deepening. The U.S.-backed Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) is moving toward implementation, and in September the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Armenia, David Allen, travelled to Baku for discussions with Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Elnur Mammadov on the peace process, TRIPP infrastructure, and establishment of the TRIPP Development Company. These developments create opportunities for regional connectivity and stability but also make it particularly important that normalization not proceed at the expense of unresolved humanitarian, territorial, and human-rights issues.

International Initiatives on Artsakh

One of the most significant initiatives specifically concerning Artsakh is in Switzerland. Following the adoption by the Swiss Parliament in March 2025 of a motion mandating the Federal Council to convene an international peace forum aimed at facilitating the collective return of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh representatives travelled to Bern in April 2026 and expressed their readiness to participate. The initiative offers a potential framework for restoring dialogue between Azerbaijan and representatives of the displaced Artsakh Armenians and for addressing return through peaceful negotiations and international guarantees.

International legal action is also expanding. Through the International Legal Initiative for Artsakh, more than 500 applications representing over 1,000 displaced persons had been lodged with the European Court of Human Rights by April 2026, concerning forced displacement, loss of property, conditions during the blockade, and inability to return. Additional communications involving hundreds of applicants are being pursued before UN mechanisms. Other initiatives include a complaint in Switzerland concerning the alleged role of SOCAR Trading in financing Azerbaijan's actions against the Artsakh population and submissions to UN mechanisms regarding Armenian prisoners and other human-rights violations.

Political attention has likewise continued. During 2026, the European Parliament reaffirmed the right of Artsakh Armenians to a safe, unimpeded, and dignified return under international guarantees, while calling for protection of their identity, property, and cultural heritage and for the immediate release of Armenian prisoners held by Azerbaijan. In July, the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee voted 44–7 for an amendment calling on Azerbaijan to immediately and unconditionally release Armenian hostages. A cross-party parliamentary inquiry in the United Kingdom has meanwhile examined forced displacement, destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, and legal accountability, while Artsakh-related human-rights concerns have continued to be raised at the UN Human Rights Council.

These initiatives cannot by themselves reverse the consequences of the forced displacement. They do, however, demonstrate that neither military conquest nor political declarations can extinguish the individual and collective rights of the Artsakh Armenian population.

Azerbaijan's Consolidation of Control over Artsakh and Continuing Pressure on Armenia

Destruction and Reframing of Armenian Heritage

Since the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh in September 2023, Azerbaijan has moved rapidly to consolidate not only military and administrative control but also a new physical and historical landscape from which much of the Armenian presence is being removed. Independent satellite monitoring has documented the destruction of churches, cemeteries, monuments, public buildings and residential areas. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) project recorded nearly 80 instances of destruction of Armenian historical, religious, political and residential sites between 2021 and August 2024, with the pace accelerating sharply after the 2023 exodus. Caucasus Heritage Watch has also documented attempts to reclassify Armenian monuments as "Caucasian Albanian" and to remove Armenian inscriptions and architectural features.

The process has continued in 2026. Satellite imagery confirmed the complete demolition of Stepanakert's Holy Mother of God Cathedral, the largest Armenian church in Artsakh; Azerbaijani religious authorities subsequently acknowledged and defended the destruction of that cathedral and another Armenian church as the removal of supposedly "illegal buildings." In Shushi, Armenian cemeteries have continued to be destroyed, while alterations to and new construction around the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral have raised further concerns about the erasure of its Armenian character and visibility. These developments continue despite the International Court of Justice's 2021 order requiring Azerbaijan to prevent and punish vandalism and desecration of Armenian cultural heritage.

Triumphalist Rhetoric and Pressure on Armenia

This physical transformation has been accompanied by triumphalist and frequently threatening official rhetoric. Azerbaijan openly maintains that the Karabakh conflict was **"resolved" by Azerbaijan itself through military means**, presenting the November 2020 ceasefire as Armenia's "capitulation" and the September 2023 offensive as the final restoration of Azerbaijani sovereignty. This narrative effectively treats the rights, security and return of the displaced Armenian population as a closed issue rather than an unresolved consequence of the conflict.

At the same time, Baku has continued to exert pressure on Armenia beyond the Artsakh question. In January 2025, President Ilham Aliyev called independent Armenia a "fascist state" and warned that "fascism must be destroyed," either by Armenia's leadership "or we will." In the same interview, he demanded that Armenia halt its military rearmament, insisted that the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" "must and will be opened," and made amendment of Armenia's Constitution a condition for a final peace treaty. He has also kept on the agenda the organized "return" of Azerbaijanis to what Baku calls "Western Azerbaijan"—territory encompassing much of present-day Armenia.

The Initialed Peace Agreement and Continuing Preconditions

These demands have persisted despite the **initialing in Washington on August 8, 2025 of the Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations**. The

published text provides for mutual recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity, renunciation of territorial claims, non-use of force and non-interference, and commits both states to combat racial hatred and discrimination. Significantly, it contains **no provision requiring Armenia to amend its Constitution**; indeed, Article XII states that neither party may invoke its internal legislation to justify failure to implement the agreement. Nevertheless, the agreement remains unsigned, and Azerbaijan continues to regard constitutional change in Armenia as a prerequisite for signature. Article XV would also require the parties, once the agreement enters into force, to withdraw or otherwise settle all interstate legal proceedings arising from earlier disputes—an important provision for accountability concerning the conflict and its consequences.

Against this background, the Armenian government increasingly presents the conflict itself as belonging to the past. In August 2026, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan described the Karabakh conflict as a **"trap"** that Armenia had to recognize as such in order to become a genuinely independent state, while the Government's 2026–2031 program identifies the strengthening and institutionalization of the already "established peace" with Azerbaijan as a principal objective.

The resulting contradiction remains central to the situation of Artsakh Armenians: **Azerbaijan treats its military victory and the depopulation of Artsakh as a definitive settlement, while questions of return, property, cultural heritage, detainees, missing persons and accountability remain unresolved.**

Armenian Hostages and Prisoners Held in Azerbaijan

Twenty Armenian hostages and prisoners remain imprisoned in Azerbaijan, including eight former political and military leaders of Artsakh detained following Azerbaijan's September 2023 military offensive and the forced displacement of the Armenian population. All have now been convicted by Azerbaijani courts, receiving sentences ranging from lengthy prison terms to life imprisonment. Human rights lawyers and international legal experts have raised serious concerns regarding the political character of the prosecutions and their compliance with fundamental fair-trial guarantees.

Detention Conditions and Alleged Abuse

Their conditions of detention have become an increasingly serious concern. According to Siranush Sahakyan, who represents the prisoners before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), they are being held in **"absolute isolation"** from the outside world, without physical contact with their families, Armenian or third-country consular representatives, independent doctors or lawyers, or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Their principal outside contact consists of monitored telephone calls that Azerbaijani authorities may terminate. Sahakyan has also reported inadequate medical care and serious injuries, including fractures allegedly resulting from beatings.

Particularly disturbing allegations concern the targeting of the prisoners' Christian identity. Sahakyan reported cases in which **cross-shaped tattoos were burned from prisoners' skin**, Bibles and Christian religious symbols were prohibited or confiscated, and Armenian Christian prisoners were forced to read the Quran. She characterized such treatment as both physical abuse and religious persecution. These allegations, like

reports of beatings and other mistreatment, cannot presently be independently investigated because Azerbaijan no longer permits independent humanitarian access to the detainees.

Efforts continue to restore some form of independent international access. Armenia has approached a neutral third country regarding possible consular visits, although Azerbaijan's consent would be required. Ruben Vardanyan's wife, Veronika Zonabend, has separately proposed an international women's humanitarian mission to Baku to visit the prisoners and deliver letters, photographs, and personal items from their families.

Judicial Proceedings and International Remedies

Serious concerns also surround the judicial proceedings. Fifteen Armenians, including former Artsakh Presidents Bako Sahakyan, Arkadi Ghukasyan and Arayik Harutyunyan and other former officials and servicemen, were convicted by the Baku Military Court in February 2026. **Azerbaijan's Court of Appeals subsequently rejected their appeals**, leaving in place sentences that include five life terms, 20-year sentences for former presidents Ghukasyan and Sahakyan, and 15–19-year terms for other defendants. The International Commission of Jurists has concluded that the proceedings against former Artsakh officials fell short of international standards of fairness and equality of arms.

An application filed with the ECtHR on behalf of fifteen prisoners on August 21 alleges violations of the rights to a fair trial and defense, the presumption of innocence, and the principle that no one can be punished without law. Among the issues raised are the use of a military court to try civilians; declarations of guilt by senior Azerbaijani officials before the trials ended; inadequate interpretation; and severe restrictions on the defense's ability to examine the **422-volume, approximately 105,000-page case file**. Copies of the complete judgment were reportedly not provided to the prisoners' families or even to their Azerbaijani-appointed lawyers.

The Case of Ruben Vardanyan

The case of **Ruben Vardanyan**, sentenced separately by the Baku Military Court to 20 years' imprisonment on February 17, is particularly illustrative. The judgment convicted him on 41 counts under 21 provisions of Azerbaijan's Criminal Code. According to Sahakyan's review, however, it fails to establish his individual responsibility for killings, attacks, displacement, or other crimes attributed to him. Instead, it links him to a purported "criminal organization" encompassing Artsakh's political and administrative structures and attributes responsibility to him for events extending back decades, including periods before he moved to Artsakh in 2022.

The judgment also treats Vardanyan's assumption of the civilian post of State Minister as a forcible seizure of power, his entry into Artsakh through the Lachin Corridor as an illegal border crossing, and elements of his business and philanthropic activity as illegal entrepreneurship or financing of terrorism. Even support for schools and kindergartens, the 2008 "Great Artsakh Wedding," and activities associated with the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative were invoked as evidence of criminal activity. Vardanyan's application to the ECtHR, filed on July 19, alleges violations of eight provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Court has now formally communicated

it to Azerbaijan for a response.

With domestic judicial remedies effectively exhausted, international legal and diplomatic action has become increasingly important. Immediate priorities remain the release of the Armenian detainees and, pending their release, unrestricted access by families, independent lawyers and doctors, humanitarian organizations, and representatives of a neutral third country.

A full list of the Armenians currently held in Azerbaijan, together with brief details on their cases, is attached to this Situation Update.

Pressure on Artsakh Authorities and Institutions in Armenia

Following the forced displacement of the Artsakh Armenian population in 2023—and with several former Artsakh political leaders now imprisoned in Azerbaijan—the remaining elected and governmental structures of Artsakh have sought to maintain a limited presence in Armenia. Their principal stated functions have been to represent the displaced population, defend its rights, advocate for the release of prisoners and clarification of the fate of missing persons, preserve institutional continuity, and pursue the right of Artsakh Armenians to return to their homeland. The Artsakh National Assembly has repeatedly declared that it considers itself the legitimate representative body of the displaced population and intends to continue these activities.

Hostile Rhetoric and Challenges to Legitimacy

The Armenian government, however, has increasingly challenged the legitimacy and continued operation of these institutions. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has repeatedly rejected the idea of an Artsakh "government in exile," arguing that Armenia cannot permit a "second state" to operate on its territory. During the 2026 parliamentary election campaign, this rhetoric escalated sharply. In a May 18 confrontation with Artsakh activist Artur Osipyan, Pashinyan attacked what he called the "Karabakh pseudo-elites" and publicly warned that no one should claim that an Artsakh parliament or government exists in Armenia, threatening to "root out" such structures. His remarks were accompanied by broader rhetoric portraying displaced Artsakh Armenians as "runaways," "ungrateful," or people who should remain outside Armenia's political life—language that Armenian civil society organizations and democracy-monitoring groups have criticized as discriminatory and as fueling hostility toward refugees.

Law-Enforcement and Institutional Pressure

Pressure has also taken concrete institutional and law-enforcement forms. Minutes after his confrontation with the Prime Minister, Osipyan was detained and subsequently placed in pre-trial detention on charges including hooliganism, obstructing election campaigning, and public calls for violence. Numerous Armenian civil society organizations described the prosecution as disproportionate, unfounded and politically motivated; he was released on June 10, after the elections, following sustained public pressure. Former Artsakh President Samvel Shahramanyan was also repeatedly questioned by Armenian law-enforcement bodies in 2025 amid government warnings against the continued operation of Artsakh institutions.

One of the most consequential developments has concerned the **Artsakh Permanent Representation building in Yerevan**, which serves as the principal remaining institutional base for Artsakh authorities and a center for coordinating advocacy on behalf of the displaced population. Acting on a lawsuit filed by Armenia's Prosecutor General, the Administrative Court in May 2026 invalidated the registration of the Artsakh government's ownership of the property. The court had also declined requests to include the Artsakh Republic or its government as a party to the proceedings. Artsakh representatives argued that the building was not simply real estate but one of the last practical means through which their institutions could coordinate efforts to protect the rights of the displaced population.

Institutional Continuity

These pressures have contributed to growing institutional instability. In July 2026, Artsakh National Assembly Speaker and acting president Ashot Danielyan resigned, saying that maintaining the continuity of Artsakh's state institutions and the political voice of its people had become a struggle involving "pressure, heavy responsibility and personal sacrifice." He also referred to a targeted campaign against him and difficulties caused by the absence of sufficient unity and shared responsibility. Despite these obstacles, remaining Artsakh representatives continue to insist that preserving representative institutions is essential to protecting the political, humanitarian, property and return rights of the displaced population.

Humanitarian Situation of Displaced Artsakh Armenians

Three years after the forced depopulation of Artsakh in September 2023, its Armenian population continues to face serious humanitarian, socio-economic, legal, and human rights challenges. The September 2023 Azerbaijani military offensive, following ten months of blockade, displaced virtually the entire Armenian population of Artsakh and caused substantial loss of life. Official figures record 265 servicemen and 21 civilians killed in the military operations, while at least 218 people died in the fuel depot explosion near Stepanakert during the exodus and at least 64 elderly and vulnerable persons died during evacuation.

Unresolved Humanitarian Issues

Several fundamental humanitarian issues remain unresolved. 429 Armenians are registered by the ICRC as missing in connection with the conflict escalations of 2020–2023, without an effective mechanism for determining their fate. The plight of the 20 Armenian hostages and prisoners held in Azerbaijan is addressed separately above. Displaced families also remain unable to visit family graves, arrange the repatriation of relatives' remains, or freely access Armenian religious and cultural heritage sites in Artsakh. These issues have received little substantive attention within the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiating process.

Housing, Employment and Poverty

The socio-economic situation of the displaced population in Armenia remains precarious. Emergency rental and cash assistance has progressively been reduced and is now largely limited to particularly vulnerable categories, while housing costs remain

high. The government's permanent housing program has so far benefited only around 4,000 of approximately 25,000 families requiring housing. Its effectiveness is constrained by insufficient certificate values relative to property prices, bureaucratic delays, and the requirement that beneficiaries obtain Armenian citizenship.

Employment and poverty remain major concerns. Only about 25,000 displaced Artsakh Armenians have registered formal employment—approximately one-quarter of the working-age population—and many employed persons work substantially below their qualifications. Their average monthly salary is approximately 150,000 AMD, about half the national average, while more than 40 percent of employed displaced persons, and over half of employed women, are overqualified for their current positions. Employment opportunities are particularly limited outside Yerevan. International cash, food, and other emergency assistance has meanwhile declined significantly despite continuing vulnerability.

Healthcare, Education and Documentation

Access to healthcare is comparatively well integrated into Armenia's state system, but significant gaps remain, particularly in specialized treatment, rural access, mental-health services, and treatment of chronic conditions. The lasting physical and psychological effects of the blockade, war, and forced displacement—including trauma, anxiety, depression, chronic disease, and nutritional consequences among children—require sustained rather than emergency-oriented assistance.

Most displaced children have entered Armenia's education system, but poverty, insufficient preschool capacity, difficulties recovering educational records, and inadequate psychosocial support remain serious problems. There are also growing concerns about preserving the distinct cultural identity, dialect, traditions, and community cohesion of Artsakh Armenians as displacement becomes prolonged.

Thousands of displaced persons continue to encounter difficulties recovering civil-status documents, educational certificates, property records, and other documentation left behind in Artsakh. These administrative obstacles can affect employment, education, citizenship, and eligibility for housing assistance.

Three years after the displacement, the central challenge has therefore shifted from immediate humanitarian relief to securing durable living conditions while protecting the rights and collective identity of Artsakh Armenians.

Recommended Priorities

Stakeholders recommend a shift from short-term emergency assistance toward a comprehensive, long-term policy for displaced Artsakh Armenians, with particular emphasis on:

- ensuring sustainable housing, including continued rental assistance until permanent housing is secured;
- expanding employment opportunities, vocational retraining, and support for small businesses and self-employment;

- maintaining access to healthcare while strengthening mental-health and psychosocial services;
- improving educational support and introducing measures to preserve Artsakh's cultural identity, dialect, traditions, and community cohesion;
- simplifying procedures for the recovery and recognition of lost civil, property, and educational documents;
- establishing effective mechanisms to determine the fate of missing persons;
- securing the release of Armenians detained in Azerbaijan and ensuring international access to them;
- facilitating access to family graves, including the exhumation and repatriation of remains where requested; and
- protecting Armenian cultural and religious heritage in Artsakh.

The full Brief, containing the detailed findings and recommendations, is attached to this Situation Update.

Looking Ahead

Three years after the forced displacement of the Armenians of Artsakh, the humanitarian consequences remain severe, and many fundamental questions—return, property, cultural heritage, missing persons, prisoners and accountability—remain unresolved. Yet the issue is neither legally nor politically closed. International legal proceedings, parliamentary initiatives, humanitarian advocacy and the Swiss peace initiative provide important avenues for continued engagement. The immediate challenge is to translate these initiatives into coordinated international action: securing the release of Armenian prisoners, protecting the rights and livelihoods of the displaced population, preserving Armenian cultural heritage, ensuring accountability, and maintaining the right of Artsakh Armenians to a safe, dignified, and internationally guaranteed return to their homeland.

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PEOPLE · HERITAGE · RIGHTS · A JUST AND LASTING PEACE



1 AT A GLANCE

KEY FIGURES HIGHLIGHT A CONTINUING HUMANITARAIAN AND HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS.

100,000+ displaced

20 Armenian hostages and prisoners in Azerbaijan

429 missing persons

241.4 km² of Armenia's sovereign territory remains under Azerbaijani control

500+ ECHR applications (representing 1,000+ displaced persons)

Over 100 recorded cases of destruction of Armenian historical, religious, political and residential sites (2021–Aug 2026)

2 AZERBAIJAN IN ARTSAKH

DESTRUCTION, DENIAL AND ONGOING PRESSURE.

Armenian churches, cemeteries, monuments and inscriptions continue to be destroyed, altered or reclassified.

Azerbaijan presents the Karabakh conflict as 'resolved' by force.

Baku continues to pressure Armenia with demands including constitutional change and the "Zangezur Corridor".

The initialed peace agreement remains unsigned, while issues of return, property, detainees missing persons and accountability remain unresolved.



3 HOSTAGES AND PRISONERS

UNJUST DETENTION. ONGOING ABUSES. INTERNATIONAL ACTION NEEDED.

All 20 Armenians still held in Azerbaijan have been convicted in proceedings criticized as politically motivated and unfair.

Lawyers report "absolute isolation": no direct family contact and no independent humanitarian access.

Reported abuse includes beatings, inadequate medical care, religious humiliation, and barring of cross tattoos.

Cases are now advancing before the European Court of Human Rights.

Immediate priorities: release, independent access, medical care, and due process.

4 PRESSURE IN ARMENIA

ONGOING POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES.

Remaining Artsakh institutions in Armenia face hostile rhetoric and political delegitimization.

The Artsakh Representation building in Yerevan has been targeted through court action.

Law-enforcement pressure and political attacks have made institutional continuity more difficult.



INSTITUTIONS MATTER FOR PEOPLE AND THEIR RIGHTS.

5 HUMANITARIAN SITUATION OF THE DISPLACED

ONGOING NEEDS. REAL LIVES.

Housing
Only around 4,000 of 25,000 families in need have secured housing through the state program.

Employment
About 25,000 have formal jobs—roughly one-quarter of the working-age displaced population; average salary about 300–500 USD, around half the national average.

Health & Education
Mental-health needs, chronic illness, rural access gaps, poorly rebuilt school dropouts, and preservation of identity remain major concerns.

Documentation
Many displaced persons still struggle to recover civil, educational and property records.

2023 human toll: **265** servicemen and **21** civilians killed; at least **218** killed in the Stepanakert fuel depot explosion; at least **64** died during evacuation.

EACH NUMBER REPRESENTS A HUMAN LIFE.

6 LOOKING AHEAD

A MORE JUST AND STABLE FUTURE REQUIRES CONCRETE ACTION.

Protect the rights and livelihoods of displaced Artsakh Armenians.

Secure the release of Armenian prisoners and independent access to them.

Preserve Armenian cultural and religious heritage.

Ensure accountability and international legal follow-up.

Keep open the right to a safe, dignified and internationally guaranteed return.

PEOPLE TODAY.
A JUST TOMORROW.

Based on the Artsakh Situation Update, September 2026.

RIGHTS KEEP PEOPLE ALIVE.