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The Conflict Over Artsakh (Mountainous/Nagorno-Karabakh)

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Policy Brief

UNRESOLVED: The Conflict Over Artsakh (Mountainous/Nagorno-Karabakh)

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- *Nagorno-Karabakh's Right to Self-Determination: Putting it on the Agenda*
  Prepared by the Public International Law & Policy Group (August 2023) [1]
- *Nagorno-Karabakh: Refugee Right of Return*
  Prepared by the Public International Law & Policy Group (October 2023) [2]
- *Right of Return of the Armenians of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)*
  Prepared by the Aram Manoukian Institute for Strategic Planning (February 2025) [3]

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Executive Summary

Three years after Azerbaijan's blockade and military offensive forced virtually the entire Armenian population of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), more than 100,000 people, from their homeland, the conflict over Artsakh remains unresolved. Military force changed who controls the territory. It did not settle the rights of the people who lived there.

This paper traces the conflict from its origins and documents what has happened since March 2025 (when the first version of this Brief was published). Its main findings:

- **Recognition without guarantees.** In the Prague statement of 6 October 2022, and explicitly in May 2023, the Armenian Government recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan without any agreed guarantee for its people. The agreement initialled in Washington on 8 August 2025 is silent on their right of return, security, property and heritage and on the Armenian hostages, and it would close the interstate cases through which accountability could be pursued. It remains unsigned as Azerbaijan adds new preconditions, including a change to Armenia's Constitution.
- **No international format.** The OSCE Minsk Process was closed on 30 November 2025, leaving no internationally mandated format in which the rights of the Armenians of Artsakh are on the agenda.
- **A government in retreat.** The Armenian Government has declared return "not realistic" and the Karabakh movement closed, and it has moved against Artsakh's representative institutions in exile.
- **Hostages and sham trials.** Azerbaijan holds 20 Armenian hostages, including eight former leaders of Artsakh sentenced to life or 20 years after trials that fell far short of international standards, and has cut them off from independent access.
- **Erasure.** Stepanakert's Holy Mother of God Cathedral and other churches and memorials were destroyed in 2026 in breach of binding orders of the International Court of Justice, while Azerbaijan presents Armenian monasteries to foreign diplomats as "Caucasian Albanian."
- **Displacement entrenched.** Some 150,000 Armenians have been forced from Artsakh since 2020. Azerbaijan is repopulating the region with its own citizens while denying the Armenians their right of return, and the displaced face growing hardship in Armenia.
- **The issue is not closed.** The European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, national parliaments, the European Court of Human Rights, where more than 500 applications are pending, and the Swiss Parliament's peace-forum motion keep the rights of the Armenians of Artsakh on the international agenda.

ANC–International calls for:

- the immediate and unconditional release of all 20 Armenian hostages and, until then, independent humanitarian access to them, and a full accounting for the disappeared and the missing;
- the collective, safe and dignified return of the Armenians of Artsakh under international guarantees, with protection of their property, identity and heritage, as the International Court of Justice has ordered;
- a new internationally mandated format, under the OSCE or the United Nations, with Artsakh's own elected representatives at the table, and the convening of the peace forum mandated by the Swiss Parliament;
- accountability rather than impunity, with no settlement that extinguishes the claims of the displaced and the detained;
- protection of Armenian heritage, including an independent UNESCO mission, and no legitimization of its reattribution;
- the withdrawal of Azerbaijani forces from the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia and an end to Azerbaijan's preconditions; and
- from the Government of Armenia, a defense of these rights, an end to pressure on Artsakh's institutions, and a long-term policy for the displaced population.

Note on preparation: *This paper was revised and updated by the* ***Armenian National Committee–International****. An AI assistant was used to help research recent developments, draft and edit the text, compare statements with the cited sources, and format the document.* ***ANC–International*** *directed the analysis, reviewed and edited the text, and* ***is responsible for its content and conclusions****.*

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ANC-International Publications

Brief History of the Conflict

BEFORE SOVIETIZATION

Nagorno-Karabakh is a historic Armenian territory which, in different eras, has formed part of Armenia. Its Armenian roots reach at least back to before the first millennium BC. Armenian princely dynasties successively presided over Karabakh, guaranteeing its sovereignty through treaty arrangements with neighboring powers. [1]

The Russian Empire, expanding southwards in the Transcaucasus, annexed Karabakh (then part of the Persian Empire) in 1805. This action was officially recognized by Persia in the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813. After the 1917 Russian revolutions and the collapse of Tsarist rule, there emerged in 1918 the briefly independent Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The dispute over Mountainous Karabakh between the Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijan, on whose side the Ottoman Turkish army intervened, dates from this period. [1]

In July 1918, the First Armenian Assembly of Mountainous Karabakh declared the region self-governing and created a National Council and government. The size of Mountainous Karabakh was then significantly greater than the portion that subsequently became the Nagorno-Karabakh (from the Russian for "Mountainous") Autonomous Oblast. In August 1919, the Karabakh National Council entered into a provisional treaty agreement with the Azerbaijani government. Despite signing the Agreement, the Azerbaijani government continuously violated the terms of the treaty. This culminated in March 1920 with the Azerbaijanis' massacre of Armenians in Karabakh's former capital, Shushi, in which the Armenian half of the city was destroyed and its Armenian population killed or driven out; estimates of the dead range from several hundred to 20,000. [4] In this light, the Ninth Karabakh Assembly nullified the treaty in whole and pronounced union with Armenia. [1]

From 1918 to 1920 Karabakh possessed all necessary attributes of statehood, including an army and legitimate authorities. The League of Nations and the leading world powers recognized the disputed status of Karabakh. The League of Nations neither recognized the sovereignty of the Azerbaijan Republic over Karabakh nor accepted the Azerbaijan Republic as its member-state. [1]

In 1918, 330,000 Armenian people lived within the then-existing borders of Karabakh. They made up 95 percent of its population, with 3 percent Azerbaijanis and 2 percent others. As a result of the Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression between 1918 and 1920, which sought the complete eradication of Armenians from Karabakh, approximately 20% of the Armenian population was killed. [1]

NAGORNO-KARABAKH UNDER SOVIET AZERBAIJANI RULE: 1921-1988

The violent conflict in the Caucasus ended with the Sovietization of the Caucasian republics. On 30 November 1920, the Sovietized government of Azerbaijan recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Armenia but then reversed this decision several days later. [1]

On 16 March 1921, a treaty (Signed in Moscow) between the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and

Soviet Russia placed Nakhichevan, as an autonomous territory, under the protectorate of Soviet Azerbaijan. The treaty did not mention Nagorno-Karabakh. [5] On 12 June 1921, the government of Soviet Armenia declared Nagorno-Karabakh as its integral part based on the repeatedly expressed will of its population. [1]

On 5 July 1921, the Caucasus Bureau of the Russian Communist Party, at a meeting held with Stalin's participation, adopted a political decision to annex Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh to Soviet Azerbaijan, thus laying the foundation for the Stalinist practice of gerrymandering in Transcaucasia. The Bureau decided that Nagorno-Karabakh should be an autonomous region within the boundaries of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, citing, in the decision's words, "the necessity of national harmony between Muslims and Armenians, the economic linkage between upper and lower Karabakh, and its permanent ties to Azerbaijan." [6] [1]

In 1923, Nagorno-Karabakh had a population of almost 158,000, 95 percent of which were Armenians. On 7 July 1923, Soviet Azerbaijan's Revolutionary Committee resolved to dismember Karabakh and to create on part of its territory the Autonomous Region (*oblast* in Russian) of Nagorno-Karabakh. From 1924 to 1929, an uncertain jurisdiction called "Red Kurdistan" was established, with the intent of effectively separating Nagorno-Karabakh from Soviet Armenia. In 1930, the Kurdish autonomous area was abolished, but the artificial buffer between Armenia and Karabakh, the Lachin (Berdzor) and Kelbajar (Karvachar) districts (regions), was retained. Stalin's 1936 Constitution sealed this territorial arrangement. [6] [1]

This separation became a subject of continual protest — from both Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia — which was expressed periodically in the form of petitions to Moscow. Furthermore, in September 1966, the Soviet Armenian leadership petitioned the central authorities to examine the question of returning Karabakh to Armenia. In addition to the petitions, by the late 1960s, there were mass protests held in Karabakh, which led to a large-scale crackdown on Armenian activists. [1]

1988 TO 2020

The latest struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh began in February of 1988 when the Karabakh Armenians, encouraged by *perestroika* and *glasnost*, began to take steps to break free of Azerbaijani control. On 20 February 1988, the Decision of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) Regional Soviet of People's Deputies, which was addressed to the highest legislative bodies of the Supreme Soviets of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the USSR, contained the official request to consider and resolve positively "the question of handing over the NKAO from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia." [7] [1]

The response within Azerbaijan was brutal acts of violence organized by Azerbaijani nationalists with the tacit support of the secret police directed against the Armenian civilian population. From 27 to 29 February 1988, the international community witnessed the massacre of Armenians in Sumgait, the third-largest city of Azerbaijan and its second-largest industrial center. Individual Armenians were attacked in their homes, at their businesses, and on the streets. Azerbaijani authorities exerted no effort to apprehend or prosecute the perpetrators. Pogroms against Armenians followed in Kirovabad and

Baku, and expulsions followed on both sides. [7] [8]

On 13 June 1988, the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijani SSR denied the application of the Karabakh Assembly. This was counterbalanced on 15 June by Armenia's Supreme Soviet, which approved Karabakh's request and appealed to the Soviet government to resolve the matter.

On 18 July 1988, the USSR Supreme Soviet, relying on Article 78 of the Soviet Constitution, which prohibited any territorial changes to a Union republic without its consent, decided to leave Nagorno-Karabakh within the structure of Soviet Azerbaijan. However, by the 24 March 1988 resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Arkadi Volsky was appointed Moscow's authorized representative in the territory. Beginning on 20 January 1989, the Supreme Soviet established a special authority in Nagorno-Karabakh, headed by Volsky, which was directly subject to the USSR government. In the summer of 1989, a legislative body, named the National Council was formed which represented all the strata of the Nagorno-Karabakh population.

The USSR Supreme Soviet's resolution of 28 November 1989, liquidated the "Volsky Committee." Three days later, on 1 December 1989, at the joint session of the Parliaments of Soviet Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the reunification was accepted. Soon after, the NKAO legislative body voted in favor of secession from Azerbaijan. The Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan quickly rejected the decision as illegal, and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Union declared it null and void.

In 1989, according to the official USSR census, Nagorno-Karabakh had 189,000 inhabitants, of whom 76.9 percent were Armenians and 21.5 percent were Azerbaijanis. [9]

On 15 January 1990, a USSR Supreme Soviet decision installed Soviet Azerbaijan's "Republic Organizational Committee" (*Orgkom*). The stated purpose of this body was to reestablish the erstwhile local "soviets" of Nagorno-Karabakh. In reality, though, the Committee, under the direction of Azerbaijani Communist Party deputy leader Viktor Polianichko, schemed to do away with Karabakh's autonomy. Polianichko aimed to resolve the issue by ridding Karabakh of its Armenian majority. Therefore, he artificially increased the size of the Azerbaijani community in Nagorno-Karabakh. This was combined with concerted military actions. From January to May 1991, the inhabitants of 24 Armenian villages in Nagorno-Karabakh were forcibly driven from their homes. Consequently, Soviet Azerbaijan placed more than half of Nagorno-Karabakh's territory under military occupation. [8] [1]

On 30 August 1991, Soviet Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet adopted its "Declaration on re-establishment of the national independence of the Azerbaijani Republic." Four days later Nagorno-Karabakh initiated the same process through the joint adoption of the "Declaration of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" by the local legislative councils of Nagorno-Karabakh and the bordering Armenian-populated Shahumyan district. The only difference was that, for Karabakh, independence was declared not from the Soviet Union but from Azerbaijan. This act fully complied with existing law. Indeed, the April 1990 Soviet law titled "Law of the USSR Concerning the Procedure of Secession of a Soviet Republic from the USSR," provided that the secession of a Soviet republic from the body of the USSR allows an autonomous region and compactly settled minority regions in the same republic's territory

also to trigger their own process of independence. [10]

On 18 October 1991, the Azerbaijani Republic confirmed its independence by adopting its "Constitutional Act" on national independence, and in November the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan adopted a resolution on the "Abolition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast." Azerbaijani President A. Mutalibov then signed the law on the dissolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region on 23 November 1991.

Following the adoption of this resolution, the Azerbaijani parliament redrew Nagorno-Karabakh's borders in favor of neighboring Azerbaijani districts and changed the names of its cities and villages. In so doing, Baku flouted Articles 86 and 87 of the Soviet Constitution, which codified autonomous region status for Nagorno-Karabakh and prohibited any change therein without its consent and also violated its own law. This decision was designed to prevent Nagorno-Karabakh from using the relevant articles of Soviet law to legally separate from Azerbaijan, as well as to more directly manipulate Karabakh's demography through territorial gerrymandering, forced depopulation, and resettlement.

On 27 November 1991, the USSR Constitutional Oversight Committee's resolution deemed unconstitutional the Orgkom created by the Supreme Soviet decision of 15 January 1990, as well as the 23 November 1991, Azerbaijani decision abolishing Karabakh's autonomy. It also revoked the 1 December 1989, Armenian resolution on reunification.

The actions of the USSR Constitutional Oversight Committee did not, however, annul the joint decision of the NKAO and Shahumyan district to declare the establishment of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on 2 September 1991, since that declaration was deemed in compliance with the then-existing law (The 3 April 1990 "Law of the USSR Concerning the Procedure of Secession of a Soviet Republic from the USSR," provides autonomous entities and compactly settled ethnic minorities living in a seceding republic's territory with the right of self-determination, to be confirmed with a referendum. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was proclaimed based on the referendum provided under this law by the NKAO and Shahumyan district after the announcement of Azerbaijan's independence on 30 August 1991).

On 10 December 1991, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic held its own referendum on independence in the presence of international observers. The Azerbaijan population boycotted the referendum. The vote overwhelmingly approved Karabakh's sovereignty. This action of Nagorno-Karabakh, which at that time was part of a still existent and internationally recognized Soviet Union, corresponded fully with the relevant Soviet law on leaving the USSR. As an initial step along the path to full sovereignty, the newly independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic created legitimate government institutions. On 28 December 1991, elections took place for its parliament, and on 6 January 1992, the newly convened parliament of Karabakh adopted its Declaration of Independence based on the referendum results. [1]

The reaction from Azerbaijan, which physically surrounded Karabakh and its capital, Stepanakert, was to commence a campaign of indiscriminate bombardment and shelling of the Karabakh Armenians and to launch a series of ground attacks. Azerbaijani attacks commenced in early 1991, with mass

bombardment of Stepanakert and other towns and villages. By the summer of 1992, Azerbaijan had seized and occupied about half the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and forcibly dislocated and displaced large numbers of the Armenian inhabitants.

The Karabakh Armenians organized an army and undertook military operations which allowed them to seize Azerbaijani-held areas used to launch attacks on Stepanakert and nearby towns and to break the Azerbaijani-imposed blockade of Karabakh by establishing a ground connection to Armenia.

On 8 May 1992, the Karabakh Defense Forces took the strategically important town of Shushi, from which the Azerbaijanis had been shelling Stepanakert. On 18 May, they established a land link with Armenia across the Lachin (Berdzor) region, thus breaking the blockade on Karabakh. [1]

Facing continuing efforts by the Azerbaijani forces aimed at the elimination of the Karabakh Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh reached out to the international community. It then prepared for a limited counteroffensive to secure for its inhabitants some level of safety. At the same time, Nagorno-Karabakh moved ahead with establishing itself as a functioning democracy in the region.

On 20 September 1992, the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament petitioned the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and individual countries for recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

On 27 March 1993, the Karabakh Defense Forces, responding to an Azerbaijani spring offensive, launched counterattacks at two strategic Azerbaijani cities, Kelbajar (Karvachar) and Fizuli (Varanda). The capture of Kelbajar on 3 April freed Karabakh from Azerbaijani attacks on its North and West. From 23 July to 4 September 1993, Karabakh Defense Forces took control of Agdam (Akna), Fizuli, Jebrail (Jrakan), and Horadiz, to acquire sufficient territory to create a buffer zone for civilians against any indiscriminate attacks of the Azerbaijani army. From 22 December 1993 to May 1994, the re-formed Azerbaijani army launched new unsuccessful attacks on Karabakh. [1]

At the time of the 1994 ceasefire, Azerbaijan continued to occupy all of the Shahumyan district, as well as parts of the Martakert and Martuni districts of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, while the latter controlled parts of Azerbaijan seized for defensive purposes.

Following the ceasefire agreement of May 1994, signed by Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia and in force from 12 May, [11] Nagorno-Karabakh set about demonstrating to the international community its ability to maintain and promote highly developed governmental institutions, political parties, and free local and parliamentary elections. On 28 December 1994, the Nagorno-Karabakh Parliament adopted a resolution establishing the post of President of the republic. In the presence of international observers, the legislature elected Robert Kocharyan president *pro-tempore*. Two years later, on 24 November 1996, national elections were held, and Robert Kocharyan was reelected president by popular vote, with the presence of international observers. After Robert Kocharyan accepted the position of Prime Minister of Armenia, new Presidential elections were held in August 1997, with former Foreign Minister Arkadi Ghukasyan elected for a five-year term.

From 1997 until 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh held regularly scheduled free and fair elections and functioned as a modern democratic political entity, with regular peaceful transitions of government. In 2017 it was officially renamed the Republic of Artsakh. [12]



On 29 November 2007, the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group issued a set of Basic Principles for the Peaceful Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, referred to as the Madrid Principles. The Co-Chairs indicated that these principles represented their assessment of the best possible path toward resolving the conflict. [1] The Principles provided in part that:

1. The final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh will be determined through a plebiscite allowing the free and genuine expression of the will of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh.
2. During the interim period until the determination of the final legal status of NK, its inhabitants will enjoy certain rights and privileges.
3. All the Azerbaijani territories around Nagorno-Karabakh under Armenian control will be returned to Azerbaijan's control.
4. A corridor of an agreed width will link Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.
5. All internally displaced persons and refugees from the conflict-affected areas will have a right to return voluntarily, as soon as the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has determined that conditions are appropriate, in the places of their former residence.

Concerning principle number 2, the Madrid Principles specifically provided:

- The inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh will have the right to protect and control their political

and economic viability and security within a democratic society committed to the rule of law. Their human rights and fundamental freedoms will be respected.

- The inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh will have the right to elect officials to govern Nagorno-Karabakh during the interim period. These officials will exercise legislative and executive power over the internal affairs of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as provide for the establishment and maintenance of courts of law to administer justice. These officials will also be able to engage in external relations in those areas specified in the Peace Agreement.
- The interim authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh will be allowed observer status in the OSCE for those sessions in which issues directly related to Nagorno-Karabakh are discussed. They will also have the right to seek membership in international organizations for which statehood is not a precondition.
- The inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh will be entitled to receive aid from foreign countries and international donor organizations provided that such aid is intended to promote human rights, peaceful economic and democratic development, cultural and commercial ties or to meet basic humanitarian needs. They will also be able to seek foreign direct investment and access to international markets.

The Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan did not sign the Principles as requested, but the Principles continued to be considered as the legitimate basis for a negotiated settlement. The Principles were reaffirmed in 2009 by the Presidents of France, Russia, and the United States at the G8 summit in L'Aquila, Italy, and through subsequent joint trilateral announcements. [13]

Despite strong support from the Republic of Armenia, as well as organized communities and individuals from the global Armenian diaspora, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Artsakh) persistently sought a negotiated settlement with an unyielding Azerbaijan—either independently or primarily through Armenia. The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by the United States, Russia, and France, facilitated the peace process. Throughout the decades, various meetings and summits were shaped by shifting geopolitical dynamics, influenced not only by interactions between Washington, Moscow, and Paris but also by those among Yerevan, Baku, and Stepanakert.

Regional actors played a crucial role as well—Turkey consistently supported its close ally Azerbaijan, while Iran, despite its official neutrality, often leaned in Armenia's favor while maintaining a pro-Azerbaijan stance in the meetings of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Although Armenia's relationship with it contained substantial elements of recognition, no UN member state formally recognized it; the Republic of Artsakh operated as a de facto state through repeated wars. [14]

Tensions along the line of control and the Armenia-Azerbaijan border intensified, particularly after 2014. The most significant escalations included the Four-Day War of April 2016 and the clashes in July 2020 across the Tavush (Armenia) and Tovuz (Azerbaijan) provinces.

The Second Karabakh War and Its Aftermath (2020–March 2025)

On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijani forces—backed by Turkish military advisors and matériel, along with support from Israel, Pakistan, and Syrian mercenaries—launched a large-scale offensive against positions held by the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). The conflict unfolded amid global diplomatic efforts, with leaders from the United States (preoccupied with a presidential election), Russia, and France attempting mediation, all while the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread. [15]

For six weeks, Azerbaijani troops advanced steadily. On the night of 9-10 November 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin brokered a ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The deal required the withdrawal of Armenian forces and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to secure what remained of Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan kept the parts of Nagorno-Karabakh it had captured and regained the surrounding districts. Article 7 provided that internally displaced persons and refugees would return to Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent areas under the supervision of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; none of the Armenians displaced by the war was able to return to the areas Azerbaijan had captured. Article 8 of the statement provided for an exchange of prisoners of war, hostages and other detained persons; that exchange was never completed, and two men captured in October 2020 are still held in Azerbaijan. [16] [17] [18]

Nagorno-Karabakh's only land link to Armenia, the Lachin (Berdzor) Corridor ("The Lachin Corridor (5 km wide), which will provide a connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia while not passing through the territory of Shusha, shall remain under the control of the Russian Federation peacemaking forces"), was left under Azerbaijani military pressure and nominal Russian oversight. The ceasefire line itself did not hold: in December 2020 Azerbaijani forces seized the villages of Khtsaberd and Hin Tagher in Hadrut, capturing dozens of Armenian servicemen. As winter turned to spring in 2021, Azerbaijan escalated its aggression by launching incursions into Armenia itself—seizing territory that had never been in dispute during the Soviet era while also making claims on various parts of Armenia as "historically Azerbaijani lands." [16] In March 2022 Azerbaijani forces took Parukh and positions on the Karaglukh heights. Azerbaijan had begun building a new road around the corridor in 2021 without consulting Armenia, and in late August 2022, when the corridor was rerouted, it took over the town of Berdzor (Lachin) and the villages of Aghavno (Zabukh) and Sus. [16]

On 13–14 September 2022, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale attack on the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia, striking Jermuk, Goris, Sotk and other localities; Armenia reported 207 servicemen killed or missing. [19] Three weeks later, on 6 October 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met in Prague with French President Emmanuel Macron and European Council President Charles Michel. In the statement issued after the meeting, Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitment to the UN Charter and to the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, "through which both recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty." [20] By accepting this formula, the Armenian Government recognized Nagorno-Karabakh

as part of Azerbaijan, without any agreed guarantee for the rights and security of its Armenian population and without the participation of its elected representatives. [21] (On why the Alma-Ata Declaration does not bear the weight placed on it, see "The Washington Summit and the Initialled Agreement" below.)

The recognition was soon made explicit. After a meeting in Brussels on 14 May 2023, Prime Minister Pashinyan confirmed on 22 May 2023 that Armenia recognizes Azerbaijan's territorial integrity of 86,600 square kilometers and that this area includes Nagorno-Karabakh, proposing that the rights and security of its Armenians be addressed in a Baku–Stepanakert dialogue with international guarantees. [22] The National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh rejected the statement in an emergency session. [23] No such dialogue or guarantee ever materialized. The blockade of the Lachin corridor had already begun nine weeks after Prague; four months after the Brussels statement, Azerbaijan's offensive ended the Armenian presence in Nagorno-Karabakh.

On 12 December 2022, Azerbaijanis presenting themselves as environmental protesters began blocking the Lachin Corridor; from April 2023 an Azerbaijani military checkpoint took their place. [24] Russian peacekeepers did not intervene. Over the next nine months, the blockade led to severe shortages of food, medicine, electricity, water, and natural gas, creating a humanitarian catastrophe for the remaining Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. [25]

During the blockade, the Azerbaijani government deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure that supplied fuel, electricity, and internet. Additionally, it seized the territory surrounding the Lachin corridor establishing military checkpoints to block any alternative routes and isolate the Artsakh people from the rest of the world. The blockade seriously threatened the survival of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to the extent that many, including Armenia, have claimed it amounts to a genocidal act. [26] Before the blockade, approximately 400 tons of food and medicine would enter Nagorno-Karabakh daily. As Armenia stressed, closing the Lachin corridor meant that humanitarian convoys could not enter the territory and provide humanitarian aid that was necessary for the survival of the Artsakh people. [2]

In February 2023, the International Court of Justice acted on the request of Armenia for provisional measures and ordered Azerbaijan to lift the blockade and take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions. [27] However, Azerbaijan took no action to comply with this order with the result that the Artsakh people subsequently suffered from severe starvation, and lack of water, medical aid, electricity, and fuel. To cope with the food shortages, Artsakh authorities introduced rationing of basic food, prioritizing families with children. While hospitals were forced to select patients to be treated to save medical equipment. The increased malnutrition and lack of medical aid have caused the death of many. [2]

The humanitarian crisis reached a climax on 19 September 2023, when Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. In a 24-hour assault on the region, Azerbaijan occupied nearly all the remaining territory of Nagorno-Karabakh; a ceasefire the next day required Artsakh's forces to

disarm. [28] Under duress, on 28 September, the President of the Republic of Artsakh, Samvel Shahramanyan, signed a decree providing for the dissolution of all state institutions of the Republic by 1 January 2024. [29] On 19 October 2023, after relocating to Yerevan, President Shahramanyan signed Decree No. 659-N annulling the dissolution decree. The annulment became known on 22 December 2023, when he stated that no document of the Republic of Artsakh provides for the dissolution of its state institutions, and the text of the decree was made public on 14 May 2025. [30] [31]

After nine months of blockade and the September offensive, nearly all of the 120,000 Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were forced to flee to Armenia through the Lachin corridor, facing violence, persecution and the threat of genocide by Azerbaijan. These individuals now reside in Armenia and elsewhere. By 3 October 2023, more than 100,600 had been registered as arriving in Armenia, and a UN mission reported that only between 50 and 1,000 Armenians remained. [32] [29] [33]

In the aftermath of this forced displacement, Azerbaijani soldiers were seen looting the homes the Armenians had been forced to leave, with images and videos of the plunder posted on social media. In mid-2024, with no Armenians left in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian peacekeepers withdrew from the region. [34] Meanwhile, Baku demolished the National Assembly (Parliament) building in March 2024 and the Government building in March 2025 in Stepanakert. [35]

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On 2 December 2023, the National Assembly of the Artsakh Republic, meeting in Yerevan, Armenia, established the International Committee for the Defense of the Fundamental Rights of the People of Nagorno-Karabakh empowering it to pursue the right of return of the Karabakh Armenians. [36]

In its 9 March 2025 press statement, the Committee says: [37]

"The Committee for the Defense of the Fundamental Rights of the People of Nagorno-Karabakh convened on Saturday in Yerevan, with the full participation of all members. Over the course of the day, the Committee assessed its progress, analyzed domestic, regional, and global developments, and planned its next steps. Additionally, the Committee held meetings with the acting chairman and the members of the National Assembly.

"Since its inception, the Committee has focused on advocating for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of the forcibly displaced Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh to their homeland. It has worked to secure the release of all Armenian captives held in Baku's prisons and to ensure the protection of Armenian cultural and religious heritage, as well as properties left behind.

"Over the past year, sustained engagement with the international community has led to growing support for the right of return. Beyond established international law and diplomatic norms affirming the rights of displaced peoples to return to their homeland, the right of return for the Armenians of Artsakh has been further reinforced by the International Court of Justice's ruling on 17 November 2023, and the European Parliament's resolutions of 12 March and 25 October 2024. These rulings affirm this right and call on Azerbaijan to ensure a safe return.

"Furthermore, the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group—the United States, Russia, and France—have publicly supported the right of return. Most recently, the Swiss National Council adopted a motion [38] calling for the establishment of a forum where representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan can engage in dialogue. Several similar resolutions are pending in major European capitals and the U.S. Congress. These developments illustrate a broad international consensus, further strengthening the case for continued advocacy.

"Having laid a strong foundation, the Committee is now in a decisive phase of its efforts. In the coming months, it will organize and participate in major events in Washington, Brussels, Geneva, and other key capitals, alongside high-level meetings aimed at building momentum toward a formal mediation process.

"The Committee also decided to intensify efforts to secure the release of Armenian prisoners in Baku, underscoring the troubling inaction of the Armenian government. As Azerbaijan stages sham trials against Nagorno-Karabakh's democratically elected leaders and attempts to silence its people, major global powers have failed to take concrete steps to prevent further violations. The Committee calls on international actors—particularly the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs—to take a leading role in securing the release of all Armenian captives.

"The Committee remains steadfast in its mission to ensure the recognition and protection of the fundamental rights of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. It will continue to engage with international stakeholders, including the United Nations, the OSCE, and human rights organizations, to advocate for a just and lasting resolution to the crisis."

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On 13 March 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia announced that it has "conveyed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan that Armenia accepts the proposals of Azerbaijan on the two unresolved articles of the draft 'Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan', and has proposed issuing a joint statement announcing that the text of the Peace Agreement has been agreed upon and that the negotiations on the draft agreement have been finalized. Official Baku preferred to make a unilateral statement.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia confirms the fact that the draft 'Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan' has been agreed upon and the negotiations have been concluded accordingly." [39]

Under direct Azerbaijani pressure and the actual threat of force, the Armenian government accepted Baku's proposals on the two remaining unresolved articles of the draft "peace treaty". Specifically, Yerevan agreed to the mutual withdrawal of international lawsuits filed by both countries and the removal of European monitors stationed along Armenia's border with Azerbaijan since 2022. [40]

It was also announced that the "peace agreement" does not address two critical issues: the right of return for Artsakh Armenians and the immediate, unconditional release of 23 confirmed Armenian hostages abducted since November 2020—including eight former political and military leaders of Artsakh who were then being "tried" in closed-door sham trials in the Military Court of Baku. Their verdicts are described below.

Developments Since March 2025

THE WASHINGTON SUMMIT AND THE INITIALLED AGREEMENT

On 8 August 2025, at a summit hosted by U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a Joint Declaration, and the two foreign ministers initialled the "Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations." The 17-article text of the Agreement was published on 11 August 2025. [41] [42] The text reflects the outcome of Azerbaijan's use and threat of force since 2020. It is silent on everything that matters most to the Armenians of Artsakh. It contains no provision on their right of return, their security, their property or their cultural heritage, none on the release of the Armenian hostages held in Baku (it provides only for cooperation on missing persons and enforced disappearances) [43], and none on the withdrawal of Azerbaijani forces from the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia. According to a CivilNet mapping study, as of October 2025 those forces held at least 241.4 square kilometers of that territory, while Armenian forces held about 21 square kilometers of Azerbaijani territory, in both cases excluding Soviet-era enclaves; no withdrawal has been reported since. [44]

Several provisions entrench that imbalance. [45] Article XV requires the parties, within one month of the agreement's entry into force, to withdraw or otherwise settle all interstate claims and proceedings. This would end Armenia's case under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination at the International Court of Justice and its interstate applications at the European Court of Human Rights, and with them the main international legal avenues for accountability for the war, the blockade and the forced displacement. Article VII, which bars the deployment of any third-party forces along the border, is aimed at the EU Mission in Armenia, which Azerbaijan has long opposed. Article VIII, on combating "separatism" and "extremism," sits uneasily with the non-interference undertaking of Article IV and invites each side to judge the other's domestic affairs. Implementation is entrusted only to a bilateral commission, with no independent verification and no consequences for violations. The two concessions on Articles VII and XV were extracted from Armenia in March 2025 under renewed military pressure.

The Joint (Washington) Declaration, for its part, invokes the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration as a basis for "the inviolability of international borders." The Alma-Ata Declaration created no binding obligation of Armenia toward Azerbaijan, which joined the Commonwealth of Independent States only on 24 September 1993. Formal mutual recognition of borders among CIS members came only with the CIS Charter of 22 January 1993, to which Azerbaijan was not then a party. Armenia ratified the CIS

founding agreement on 18 February 1992, with an explicit reservation recognizing the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as an independent state with the right to join the CIS, a position reaffirmed in the Supreme Council's decision of 8 July 1992 and in the Constitution of 5 July 1995. [45] The same formula (Alma-Ata Declaration) was the basis of the Prague statement of 6 October 2022, by which the Armenian Government recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan (see above).

The Washington summit also launched the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP) across Armenia's Syunik province, which ANC–International has analyzed in a separate Policy Brief. [45]

As of this update, the Armenia-Azerbaijan agreement has not been signed. Azerbaijan makes its signature conditional on the removal from the preamble of Armenia's Constitution of the reference to the 1990 Declaration of Independence, which cites the 1 December 1989 decision on the reunification of Soviet Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. [46] [47] The agreement itself contains no such requirement: Article XII provides that neither party may invoke its internal legislation to justify a failure to implement it. Baku's demands nevertheless keep growing. In January 2025 President Aliyev called independent Armenia a "fascist state," insisted that the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" "must and will be opened," and made constitutional change a condition of peace; he also keeps on the agenda the "return" of Azerbaijanis to what Baku calls "Western Azerbaijan," a territory covering much of the Republic of Armenia. [44] The Armenian Government is drafting a new constitution; in September 2026 the Minister of Justice said the draft was expected to be published by the end of the year. [48] Under the current Constitution, a draft new constitution must be approved by at least two-thirds of the National Assembly before it can be put to a referendum. In the parliamentary elections of 7 June 2026, the ruling Civil Contract party won 49.75 percent of the vote and was allotted 64 of the 105 seats, short of that threshold. [49] [46] That seat count is itself contested. The Central Electoral Commission annulled the results at three polling stations and refused to rerun the vote there, leaving Prosperous Armenia at 3.99 percent, just under the 4 percent threshold. Had Prosperous Armenia cleared it, Civil Contract would have held 61 seats, short also of the three-fifths majority required to adopt constitutional laws. On 4 July 2026 the Constitutional Court nonetheless upheld the Commission's position that the annulment did not affect the results. In its election observation report, the delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) called the Commission's decision unsatisfactory given the significance of its consequences, said a repeat vote would have been a perfectly acceptable option, and listed among its concerns "the disenfranchisement of an opposition party's electorate, with significant parliamentary consequences." [49]

CLOSURE OF THE OSCE MINSK PROCESS

In Washington, Armenia and Azerbaijan also signed a joint appeal to close the OSCE Minsk Process, one of Azerbaijan's stated preconditions. On 1 September 2025, the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted decision MC.DEC/1/25 terminating the Minsk Process and its related structures, including the Minsk Group, the Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office and the High-Level

Planning Group. The closure was completed at 23:59 on 30 November 2025. [50] The National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh condemned the decision. [51] The format has gone, but the issue that led to its creation in 1992, the rights and security of the Armenians of Artsakh, has not. With the Minsk Process closed, no internationally mandated format remains in which the status of Artsakh and the rights of its people, including the plebiscite and the right of return set out in the Madrid Principles (see above), are on the agenda. Abandoning international mediation tells the region that power, not law, decides disputes.

THE ARMENIAN GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON RETURN AND ON ARTSAKH'S INSTITUTIONS

In his Address to the Nation of 18 August 2025, Prime Minister Pashinyan described the return of the Armenians of Artsakh as dangerous and the Karabakh movement as a past burden. As ANC–International has shown, this reversed the platform on which his Civil Contract party was re-elected in 2021, which had made the self-determination of Artsakh a pillar of Armenia's foreign policy. [52] At a press briefing in Hamburg on 11 December 2025, the Prime Minister said he had told the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh that their return is "not realistic," declared the Karabakh movement closed, and proposed a joint roadmap with Azerbaijan to close, simultaneously, the question of their return and Baku's "Western Azerbaijan" narrative. [53] In May 2026 he declared that Karabakh had not been Armenia's territory and called the Karabakh movement a fatal mistake; [54] in August 2026 he described the Karabakh conflict as a "trap." The Government's 2026–2031 program makes the institutionalization of the already "established peace" with Azerbaijan a principal objective. [44]

The right of the Armenians of Artsakh to return belongs to them under international law; no government can waive it on their behalf. The International Court of Justice's binding Order of 17 November 2023 obliges Azerbaijan to ensure that persons who left Nagorno-Karabakh after 19 September 2023 and who wish to return can do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner, and to protect and preserve their registration, identity and private property documents and records. [55] Placing that right on the same footing as Azerbaijan's "Western Azerbaijan" narrative, which is directed at the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia, treats a recognized right as if it were a territorial claim.

The Armenian authorities have also moved against the institutions through which the displaced population is represented. On 21 May 2025, when President Samvel Shahramanyan's term expired, the National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh elected Ashot Danielyan as its Speaker, who under the Constitution assumed the powers of the President. [56] The same month, the leadership in Yerevan made public President Shahramanyan's Decree No. 659-N of 19 October 2023, which annuls the dissolution decree (see above). [57] [31] Former President Shahramanyan was repeatedly questioned by Armenian law-enforcement bodies in 2025. Prime Minister Pashinyan has repeatedly rejected the idea of an Artsakh "government in exile," arguing that Armenia cannot permit a "second state" on its territory. In July 2025 Armenia's Prosecutor General sued to invalidate the registration of the Republic

of Artsakh's ownership of its Permanent Representation building in Yerevan, the main remaining base of its institutions; on 26 May 2026, the Administrative Court granted the claim after refusing to admit the Republic of Artsakh or its government as a party, and the decision has been appealed. At a campaign event on 18 May 2026, Prime Minister Pashinyan attacked what he called the "Karabakh pseudo-elites," warned against claims that an Artsakh parliament or government exists in Armenia, and threatened to "root out" such structures; his campaign rhetoric also portrayed displaced Artsakh Armenians as "runaways" and "ungrateful." The activist who confronted him, Artur Osipyan, was detained minutes later and held in pre-trial detention until 10 June, after the elections. [58] [44] On 2 July 2026, Speaker Danielyan resigned, citing a campaign against him. Deputy Speaker Gagik Baghunts became acting Speaker, and the National Assembly has suspended the election of a new Speaker, citing among other reasons pressure from the Armenian authorities. [59]

THE ARMENIAN HOSTAGES AND THE SHAM TRIALS IN BAKU

On 5 February 2026, after a trial of more than 150 hearings that began on 17 January 2025, the Baku Military Court sentenced former President Arayik Harutyunyan, former Commander of the Defense Army Levon Mnatsakanyan, former First Deputy Commander Davit Manukyan, former Speaker of the National Assembly Davit Ishkhanyan and former Foreign Minister Davit Babayan to life imprisonment. Former Presidents Arkadi Ghukasyan and Bako Sahakyan, whom Azerbaijani law bars from life sentences because of their age, received 20 years. Eight other Armenians tried with them received 15 to 19 years. [60] [61] On 6 August 2026, the Baku Court of Appeal upheld the verdict; cassation appeals are pending before Azerbaijan's Supreme Court. [62] [61] In a separate case, on 17 February 2026, the same court sentenced former State Minister Ruben Vardanyan to 20 years. He declined to appeal, regarding the proceedings as staged and domestic remedies as ineffective. [63] [61]

The trials followed one pattern: a military court trying civilians, in hearings largely closed to independent observers, foreign media and families; 422 volumes of case files, some 105,000 pages, mostly untranslated; lawyers of the defendants' choosing excluded; final statements cut short; senior officials, including President Aliyev, calling the defendants "terrorists" and "war criminals" before any verdict; and judgments still not provided in full to the defendants, their families or their lawyers. The International Commission of Jurists concluded that the trials fall short of the guarantees of fairness, equality of arms and public scrutiny required under international human rights law. [64] [61] Applications on behalf of Vardanyan and of the 15 jointly tried Armenians were lodged with the European Court of Human Rights on 19 July and 21 August 2026; the Court has maintained interim measures requiring Azerbaijan to report on their condition, and Azerbaijan has not provided the full judgments it requested. [61]

Azerbaijan holds 20 Armenian hostages in ANC–International's count: the eight former leaders of Artsakh named above, the eight captured men tried with them, two prisoners of war captured in 2020, and two civilians, including Karen Avanesyan, one of the few Armenians who had stayed in Stepanakert, arrested in September 2025 and sentenced to 16 years. Official Armenian statements cite

19 because they do not include him. All 20 have been sentenced, to terms from 15 years to life. [61] [44] Releases have come only as political bargains: the four Armenians freed on 14 January 2026, Vagif Khachatryan, Vigen Euljekjian, Gevorg Sujyan and Davit Davtyan, were handed over in parallel with Armenia's transfer of two Syrian mercenaries who had fought for Azerbaijan in 2020. [65] [61]

The hostages are held in near-total isolation. At the request of the Azerbaijani Government, the International Committee of the Red Cross closed its delegation in Azerbaijan on 3 September 2025; it identifies a single visit by Geneva-based representatives on 24–25 December 2025 as its last. The report of the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture on its 2025 visit remains unpublished because Azerbaijan has not consented. There have been no family visits, and no meeting between the prisoners and the lawyer who represents them before the European Court of Human Rights. Their counsel reports beatings causing fractures, inadequate medical care and religiously targeted abuse; the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported, citing Armenian officials, that prisoners were denied Bibles, made to read the Quran and had Christian tattoos burned off. The 1,254 letters collected for the prisoners worldwide cannot be delivered, and Armenia says the third countries it asked to provide consular access were told by Azerbaijan to "stay away." [66] [67] [61] Beyond the 20, at least 80 Armenians captured during the 2020 war remain victims of enforced disappearance, their captivity denied by Azerbaijan, and the ICRC registers 429 Armenians as missing in connection with the conflict escalations of 2020–2023. [18] [68]

ERASURE OF ARMENIAN HERITAGE AND THE REWRITING OF HISTORY

Since September 2023, Azerbaijan has moved to remove the Armenian presence from the physical and historical landscape of Artsakh. The ACLED project recorded nearly 80 instances of destruction of Armenian historical, religious, political and residential sites between 2021 and August 2024, accelerating sharply after the forced displacement. [44] [35] Satellite imagery analyzed by Caucasus Heritage Watch shows that the Holy Mother of God Cathedral in Stepanakert, the largest Armenian church in Artsakh, was destroyed between 3 March and 2 April 2026. The Church of St. Hakob in Stepanakert was demolished in April 2026, and the city's Armenian Genocide Centennial Memorial was destroyed between July 2025 and April 2026. [69] Azerbaijan's state-affiliated Caucasus Muslims Board defended the demolitions, describing the churches as illegally built during what it called the period of occupation. [70] In Shushi, Armenian cemeteries continue to be destroyed, and alterations to and new construction around the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral threaten its Armenian character. These acts violate the International Court of Justice's Order of 7 December 2021, which requires Azerbaijan to take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage. [71] [44]

On 11–12 September 2026, Azerbaijan's Presidential Administration took diplomats it said represented 58 countries and nine international organizations, among them the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Magdalena Grono, on a tour of Artsakh. ANC–International has identified named representatives of 21 countries, including the United States, France and the

United Kingdom, and of four international organizations. At Gandzasar and Dadivank, Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan Hikmet Hajiyev presented both Armenian monasteries as "Caucasian Albanian" and accused Armenians of falsifying them; the Matenadaran answered that the originals of the manuscripts he displayed in replica are held in Yerevan. The public record of the tour contains no encounter with the displaced Armenians, no discussion of their return and no reference to the Court's Order of 17 November 2023. In the weeks that followed, the same reattribution was repeated by Azerbaijani state, academic, religious and civic bodies and extended by the "Western Azerbaijan Community" to sites inside the Republic of Armenia; Hajiyev has announced a similar diplomatic visit to Nakhichevan, where the medieval Armenian cemetery of Julfa was destroyed. [72] [73]

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

The international record has not followed Baku's claim that the conflict is closed. The European Parliament, in resolutions of 13 March 2025 (523 votes to 3), 30 April 2026 (476 to 47) and 8 October 2026 (492 to 23), condemned the sham trials and the unjust detention of the Armenian prisoners and demanded their immediate and unconditional release; called for the International Criminal Court to investigate the forced displacement; reaffirmed the right of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh to a safe, unhindered and dignified return under international guarantees; and condemned the destruction of their heritage. [74] Azerbaijan's Milli Majlis responded by suspending all cooperation with the European Parliament. [75] In January 2026 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, by 75 votes to 1, urged Azerbaijan to release those detained on politically motivated charges, including the Armenian detainees; on 3 February 2026 the French National Assembly, by 183 votes to 0, demanded the immediate and unconditional release of Artsakh's political leaders; on 17 July 2025 the Belgian House of Representatives condemned Azerbaijan's military aggression against the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh; and on 22 July 2026 the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, by 44 votes to 7, called for the immediate and unconditional release of all Armenian prisoners. In October 2026, 101 members of the U.S. Congress urged the Secretary of State to prioritize their release and to withhold U.S. military assistance from Azerbaijan if it did not cooperate. In the United Kingdom, a cross-party parliamentary inquiry has examined the forced displacement, the destruction of Armenian heritage and legal accountability. [76] [77] [78] [79] [80] [61] [44]

Swiss Motion 24.4259, adopted in March 2025 (see source [38]), required the Federal Council to convene, within a year, an international forum between Azerbaijan and the representatives of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. Artsakh's representatives went to Bern in April 2026 and declared their readiness to take part. The Federal Council has not convened the forum. It has stated that the Foreign Ministry is unable to plan it, that Armenia and Azerbaijan reject it, and that Switzerland does not maintain contacts with representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh, which it does not recognize, although the motion assigns no role to the Republic of Armenia. A cross-party committee of 19 Swiss parliamentarians, the Swiss Peace Initiative for Nagorno-Karabakh, continues to press for its implementation. [81] [44]

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 the inability to return; further communications are before UN mechanisms, and a complaint has been filed in Switzerland concerning the alleged role of SOCAR Trading in financing Azerbaijan's actions against the population of Artsakh. [44]

THE POPULATION OF ARTSAKH: FROM MAJORITY TO EXPULSION

The Armenian character of Nagorno-Karabakh is documented throughout the modern record. When the autonomous region was created in 1923, Armenians made up some 95 percent of its population, and the first Soviet census, in 1926, still recorded 89 percent. [1] [9] Under Soviet Azerbaijani rule their share fell to 76.9 percent by 1989 as Azerbaijanis were settled in the region. Former President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, who led Soviet Azerbaijan from 1969 to 1982, acknowledged in 2002 that he had sought to increase the number of Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh and to reduce the number of Armenians. [9] [82]

The Republic's 2015 census counted about 145,000 residents, virtually all of them Armenian. [83] Before the 2020 war the population was estimated at about 150,000. Some 90,000 fled to Armenia during the war, and about 34,000 lost their homes in the areas Azerbaijan captured, including Hadrut and Shushi. [84] On the eve of the September 2023 offensive about 120,000 Armenians lived in Nagorno-Karabakh; within ten days more than 100,600 had arrived in Armenia, and a UN mission found that only between 50 and 1,000 remained. [29] [33] Counting those displaced in 2020 and in 2023, some 150,000 Armenians have been forced from Artsakh since 2020. [85]

Azerbaijan, meanwhile, presents the repopulation of the region as the measure of its victory. Its "Great Return" program set a target of 140,000 residents in Karabakh and the area it calls "East Zangezur" by the end of 2026; by 1 October 2026, 40,520 people had been settled there, and President Ilham Aliyev said in October 2026 that 96,000 people live, work and study there. [86] Azerbaijan thus settles its own citizens on Armenian land while denying return to the Armenians it displaced. Every settlement built on land and in homes that belonged to Armenians makes their return harder to realize and an international mechanism to protect their property and their right of return more urgent.

THE DISPLACED ARMENIANS OF ARTSAKH

The offensive of September 2023 killed 265 servicemen and 21 civilians; at least 218 people died in the fuel depot explosion near Stepanakert during the forced displacement, and at least 64 elderly and vulnerable persons died during the forced displacement. Displaced families still cannot visit their relatives' graves, arrange the repatriation of remains, or reach their churches and monuments, and no mechanism exists to establish the fate of the missing. [68] More than 115,000 forcibly displaced Armenians of Artsakh are registered in Armenia. From 1 April 2025, the Government restricted the monthly "40+10" rent and utilities assistance (AMD 50,000 per person) to the most vulnerable, and

universal cash assistance for working-age adults has ended. Its housing program has so far allowed only around 4,000 of some 25,000 families in need to acquire a home: certificate values have not kept pace with property prices, and eligibility requires Armenian citizenship, which raises concerns about the protection of property claims in Artsakh and of the right of return. [87] [68] Only about 25,000 displaced persons, roughly a quarter of the working-age population, have registered formal employment; their average salary is about half the national average, and more than 40 percent work below their qualifications. International cash and food assistance has largely ended, and families are being made homeless. The displaced also face growing pressure on their distinct identity, dialect and community life as their displacement is prolonged. [68]

Why the Conflict Remains Unresolved

The war of 2020, the nine-month blockade and the offensive of September 2023 changed who controls the territory. They did not resolve the conflict. More than 100,000 Armenians were forcibly displaced from their homeland and have not been able to return in safety. The initialled agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan does not mention them. The only international mediation format that addressed Artsakh has been closed. Artsakh's elected and military leaders are serving life or long sentences imposed after sham trials, and 20 Armenian hostages remain in Baku. Armenian churches and memorials continue to be destroyed in breach of binding orders of the International Court of Justice, while Azerbaijan rewrites their history before foreign diplomats.

A status quo created by military force, blockade and ethnic cleansing cannot produce a lasting peace. The rights of the Armenians of Artsakh remain unaddressed: to return safely and with dignity under international guarantees, to their property and cultural heritage, to the release of their captives, and to be heard through their own representatives. As long as these rights are not addressed, the conflict over Artsakh remains unresolved.

What ANC–International Calls For

FROM AZERBAIJAN

1. Release all 20 Armenian hostages immediately and unconditionally, without exchanges or political concessions; pending their release, allow regular access by the ICRC or another independent international humanitarian mechanism, independent medical assessment, family contact and correspondence (including delivery of the 1,254 letters already collected), access to lawyers of their choosing and to the full judgments, and publication of the report of the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

2. Account for the disappeared and the missing, including the at least 80 Armenians captured in 2020 whose captivity it denies, and cooperate in an independent mechanism to establish the fate of the

429 Armenians registered as missing.

3. Comply with the binding Orders of the International Court of Justice: ensure the safe, unimpeded and expeditious return of the Armenians of Artsakh, preserve their identity and property records, and prevent and punish the destruction and desecration of Armenian heritage, admitting an independent UNESCO mission to Artsakh and Nakhichevan.

4. Withdraw its forces from the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia and drop the preconditions, including the demand to change Armenia's Constitution, that it attaches to an agreement it has already initialled.

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

5. Treat the conflict over Artsakh as unresolved. The closure of the Minsk Process must not end international engagement. The OSCE and the United Nations, which hold the legitimate international mandate on this issue, should establish a format in which the rights of the Armenians of Artsakh are addressed with their own elected representatives at the table.

6. Secure the right of return. Support the collective, safe, guaranteed and dignified return of the Armenians of Artsakh under international guarantees and an international presence, together with the protection of their property, identity and heritage. The Swiss Federal Council should implement Motion 24.4259 and convene the peace forum, and other states should support it.

7. Make the release of the hostages a condition of normal relations with Azerbaijan. Governments should raise the hostages at every level, link future agreements and military assistance to their release, and press for independent access in the meantime.

8. Ensure accountability. Peace must not be bought with impunity. Interstate settlements must not foreclose the individual applications of the displaced and the detained before the European Court of Human Rights and UN mechanisms, and the forced displacement of the Armenians of Artsakh should be investigated, including by the International Criminal Court.

9. Refuse to legitimize the erasure of Armenian heritage. Governments whose diplomats joined the September 2026 tour should state whether they raised the displaced population, the Court's Orders and the hostages, make clear that they do not accept the "Caucasian Albanian" reattribution of Gandzasar and Dadivank, and decline to take part in similar visits, including to Nakhichevan, without independent access.

10. Sustain humanitarian support for the displaced Armenians of Artsakh in Armenia, whose needs have outlasted the emergency response.

FROM THE GOVERNMENT OF ARMENIA

11. Defend the rights of the Armenians of Artsakh, including their right of return, in its negotiations and on every international platform, and make the release of the hostages a condition of

signing any agreement.

12. End the pressure on Artsakh's representative institutions and on displaced activists, and withdraw the action against the Permanent Representation building in Yerevan.

13. Adopt a long-term policy for the displaced population: continue rental assistance until permanent housing is secured; raise housing certificate values and decouple housing support from naturalization so that property claims and the right of return are not prejudiced; expand employment, retraining and small-business support; simplify the recovery of lost documents; and support the preservation of Artsakh's identity, dialect and community life.

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