

# Human Rights Council – Research Report I

## Safeguarding Human Rights in the Aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

### Introduction to the Topic:

Nagorno-Karabakh has long been an epicentre of conflict and violation of human rights given its geographical, political, and socio-economic complexities. The region lies within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan but has always been inhabited by a large Armenian population. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Armenians accounted for 95% of the population during the Soviet occupation and administration of the region. This delicate demographic balance has led to a series of disputes, eventually escalating into a conflict with severe humanitarian consequences.



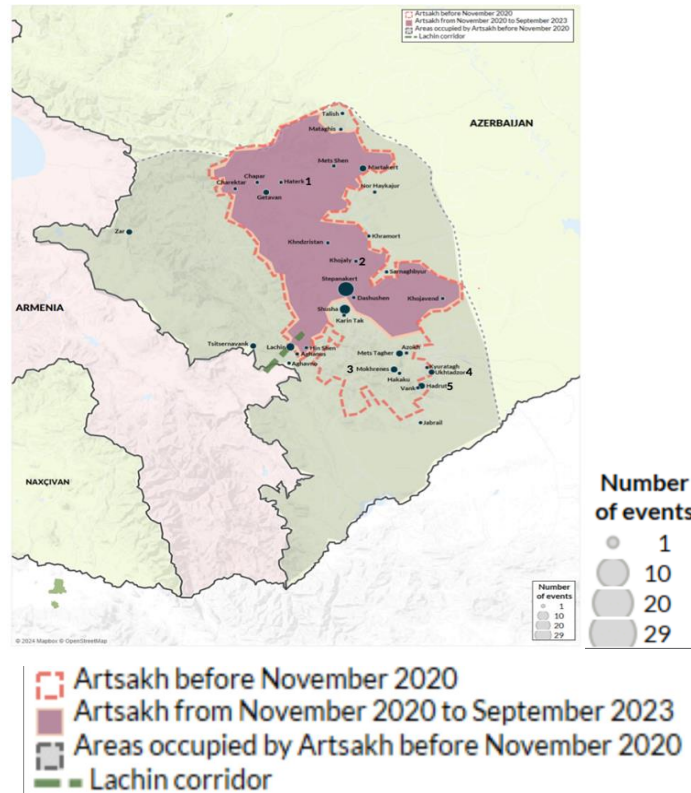
**Fig.1 - Map of Armenia and Azerbaijan (2021, Aljazeera News)**

In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched an "anti-terrorist" offensive that resulted in its complete reclamation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Prior to this offensive, the region was de facto governed by the Armenian-backed separatist authorities known as the Republic of Artsakh. By January 2024, however, Armenia had successfully abolished the status of this region as an Armenian enclave. The offensive triggered a mass exodus of more than 100 000 Armenians into Armenia, creating a humanitarian crisis that continues to strain the host nation's resources.

The displaced individuals face several challenges, including access to shelter, food, and medical care. Families have been separated and have little prospects of returning due to the fear of discrimination and lack of safety. Moreover, displaced Armenians struggle with unemployment

and the loss of livelihoods, as many were forced to abandon their homes and possessions during the exodus. Overcrowded infrastructures and social services further intensify their day-to-day lives, while legal and bureaucratic barriers limit access to aid and residency documentation. Psychological trauma from the conflict, together with the uncertainty of their future, adds to their suffering. The crisis has also strained communities in Armenia, leading to competition for resources, jobs, and housing, further increasing the humanitarian impact of the displacement.

The aftermath of the conflict has also raised concerns about the preservation of Armenian cultural heritage in the region. Reports on the destruction of Armenian cultural landmarks has caused alarm. Beyond threatening cultural identity, this destruction constitutes a clear violation of human rights. As the 2003 UNESCO Declaration states, “cultural heritage is an important component of cultural identity and of social cohesion, so that its intentional destruction may have adverse consequences on human dignity and human rights.” The endangerment of cultural heritage also undermines the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and violates the right of communities to preserve their cultural identity.



**Fig. 2 Destruction of Armenian Heritage in Former Artsakh, November 2020-September 2024 (ACLED, 2024)**

### Background Information:

The roots of the issue trace back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the Soviet Union’s establishment of administrative boundaries. Despite its majority Armenian population, Nagorno-Karabakh was made an autonomous oblast within Soviet Azerbaijan in 1923. This decision generated discontent among the territory’s Armenians, who strived for unification with Armenia.

In the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union began to disintegrate, tensions grew. Ethnic Armenians in the enclave voted to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia, triggering widespread violence (99.98% of its participants voted for the region’s independence). The dispute escalated into the first Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994), resulting in the deaths and displacement of many, including ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians. By the end of the war, Armenian forces controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent Azerbaijani territories.

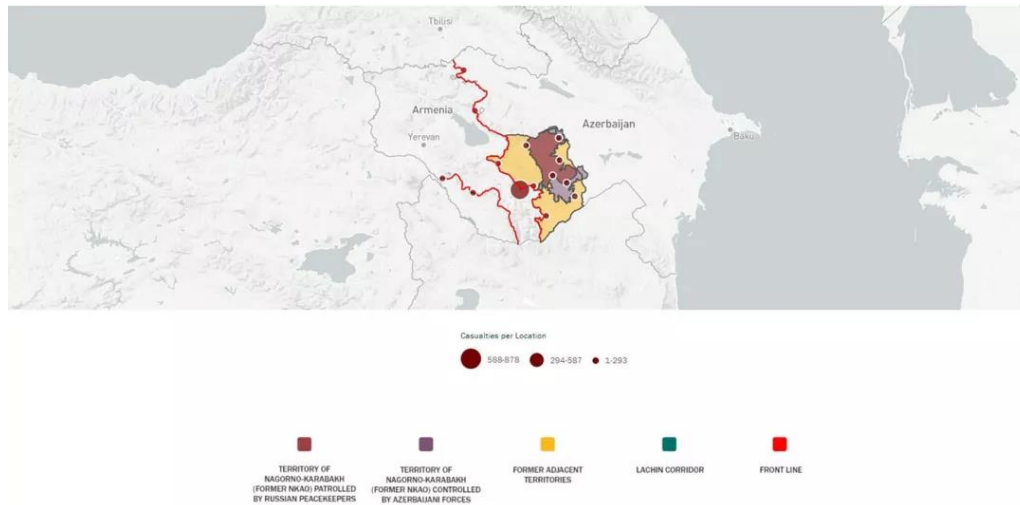
A ceasefire mediated by Russia, in 1994, led to Nagorno-Karabakh remaining under Armenian administration. The Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh then declared the region

independent, calling it the Republic of Artsakh. The region's *de facto* control was Armenian, but the *de jure* position was that it was still Azerbaijani. The situation was left in a legal limbo, where the world recognized Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, but the region's ethnic Armenians treated it as their own. This declaration of independence was made unilaterally by the region's ethnic Armenian leaders and was not recognized by Armenia itself, nor by any other country. Azerbaijan maintained its claim to sovereignty over the region, and periodic clashes continued along the ceasefire line. Diplomatic efforts led by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group failed to resolve the conflict.



**Fig. 3 Map of Territory after first Nagorno Karabakh war (1994, The Conversation)**

The area became somewhat stable until, in 2020, tensions erupted into the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Azerbaijan, with significant military support from Turkey and new weaponry such as drones, reclaimed large portions of territory, including parts of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. These attacks targeted several locations inside Armenian territory, which forced the evacuation of more than 2700 civilians. A Russia-proposed and mediated ceasefire ended the war, leaving Armenian forces weakened and Azerbaijan in control of significant areas. A Russian peacekeeping force was deployed to oversee the fragile truce and to safeguard the region.



**Fig.4 Map that indicates the casualties that have happened between the 2020 war and 16 September 2023 (2023, International Crisis Group)**

On September 19, 2023, days after an agreement to reopen aid deliveries sparked hopes of easing the crisis, Azerbaijan launched an “anti-terrorist” offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. Officials said at least two hundred people died in the operation, and nearly 100 000 Armenians were displaced from the region. Within two days, Azerbaijan claimed to have regained full control over the region, and Russia-mediated negotiations began in Yevlakh, Azerbaijan, over the disarmament of Armenian separatists and the reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan. This led to a mass exodus of the region’s Armenian population into Armenia, effectively depopulating Nagorno-Karabakh of its Armenian residents. As part of this ethnic cleansing, political prisoners were taken hostage, including former leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh. Currently, these leaders remain in Azerbaijani prisons, which are among the most inhumane in the world.

### **Recent Developments:**

Human rights in the region have faced significant challenges following Azerbaijan's full reclamation of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. A prevailing public narrative against Armenians has deepened concerns about the safety of those who might consider returning. The international community has also voiced concerns over the rights, safety, and cultural heritage of Armenians, particularly as Azerbaijan's renewable energy projects in Nagorno-Karabakh are perceived by

some as a means to solidify its control over the region while sidelining the historical and cultural claims of the displaced Armenian population.

Despite continuous talks, the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan is still in its infancy. Although a ceasefire deal mediated by Russia in 2023 has mainly maintained, important issues such as the protection of cultural assets and security assurances for displaced Armenians have not been addressed. Due to persistent mistrust and the absence of firm resolutions regarding human rights protections, the European Union has increased its role in mediating peace negotiations, but their progress is slow.

Important parties have also changed in their responsibilities. Because of its attention to other issues such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia's influence has decreased, enabling the European Union to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan more actively. However, it has been challenging to resolve transgressions due to the EU's limited enforcement capacity. Additionally, international efforts to protect the rights of displaced Armenians are made more difficult by Turkey's continued backing for Azerbaijan.

### **Focus of the Debate:**

Delegates should develop strategies and frameworks to ensure the safe, unimpeded and sustainable return of displaced Armenians to Nagorno-Karabakh, with guarantees of safety and non-discrimination. Delegates should also address the provision of humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons in Armenia, ensuring immediate relief and long-term support. Ultimately, it is crucial to consider efforts aimed at safeguarding Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh, balancing the maintenance of historical sites with wider reconciliation initiatives.

### **Parties involved:**

**-Azerbaijan:** The internationally recognized state to which Nagorno-Karabakh belongs. Azerbaijan aims to assert its sovereignty over the region, integrating it fully into its administrative and political framework. The country's approach, including the "anti-terrorist" offensive and subsequent actions, has raised international concerns over human rights and cultural heritage protection.

**-Armenia:** Armenia has historically supported the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The mass exodus of Armenians from the region has created a humanitarian crisis that Armenia is struggling to address. It has also sought international assistance to safeguard the rights of displaced individuals and protect their cultural heritage.

**-Russia:** Russia has historically played the role of mediator in the conflict and deployed peacekeepers to oversee ceasefires. However, its involvement has diminished due to its focus on other conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine. Despite this, Russia remains a significant player in facilitating dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

**-Turkey:** Turkey is a key ally of Azerbaijan, providing military and diplomatic support. Its involvement has influenced the human rights discourse, especially regarding the treatment of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey aims to strengthen its alliance with Azerbaijan, support its territorial claims over Nagorno-Karabakh, and counter Armenian influence in the region. It also seeks to expand its regional influence and promote economic cooperation with Azerbaijan.

**-OSCE Minsk Group (U.S., France, Russia):** This group has led peace negotiations since the 1990s, though it has struggled to find a lasting solution and address human rights concerns of displaced populations.

**-Iran:** Iran has maintained a position of neutrality but is a key regional actor due to its proximity to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has expressed concerns over the humanitarian impact of the conflict, particularly regarding the displacement of ethnic Armenians and the potential for regional instability.

## **Past UN Actions & Possible Solutions:**

**UN Secretary-General's Reports:** The UN Secretary-General issued reports (October 2, 2023, August 2, 2023) in response to the violence and humanitarian crises in Nagorno-Karabakh. These reports include calls for accountability, protection of civilians, and restoring stability to the region.

**Human Rights Council Resolution (2022):** In 2022, following the renewed escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, the UNHRC expressed deep concern about the humanitarian crisis in the region, including the displacement of civilians and the destruction of cultural heritage. The resolution called for international humanitarian law to be respected and for parties to ensure unhindered access for humanitarian aid to populations affected by the conflict.

**UNHCR Emergency Refugee Response Plan (October 2023):** Allocated \$97 million to support displaced populations in Armenia until March 2024.

**ICJ (December 2023):** ordered Azerbaijan to ensure free passage through the **Lachin Corridor**, aiming to alleviate the humanitarian situation.

**UN humanitarian mission:** Conducted assessments in Armenia and Azerbaijan to evaluate the needs of displaced individuals. Allocated \$4 million from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund to address critical needs like shelter ahead of winter.

**World Food Programme (WFP) support:** Provided 4,000 food packages to assist 16,000 ethnic Armenians displaced by the conflict through the **Lachin corridor** and distributed 21,000 hot meals to Armenia's government registration and triage centres

## **Glossary and Key Terms:**

**Enclave:** Territory or area that is distinct or surrounded by a different territory, often with a different culture, ethnicity, or governance. It can refer to a region or community that is geographically or politically separated from the larger surrounding area.

**Oblast:** A term used to describe an administrative region or province, typically in countries of Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. It is a subnational division, similar to a state or a county,



and is often used to refer to a political or administrative district within a country. (in this case, the republic of Artsakh)

**Exodus:** A mass departure or migration of a large group of people from a particular place, often due to difficult or dangerous circumstances. It is commonly used to describe the movement of people escaping conflict, persecution, or disaster.

**Lachin Corridor:** the narrow bridge between the ethnic Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armeni. It was built to provide a secure link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, ensuring unimpeded movement of people and goods, particularly for ethnic Armenians living in the region.

**IDP:** Internally displaced people (IDPs) have been forced to flee their homes by conflict, violence, persecution or disasters, however, unlike refugees, they remain within their own country.

**OSCE:** The Minsk Group, the activities of which have become known as the Minsk Process, is a group focused primarily on resolving the nagorno kharabakh conflicts and tensions.. It is co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation, and the United States.

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