

COI Focus

ARMENIA

Mobilisation of reservists in Nagorno-Karabakh

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Cedoca

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TO A MORE INTEGRATED MIGRATION POLICY, THANKS TO AMIF

This COI Focus examines in what measure the Armenian Ministry of Defence has called up reservists in Armenia since the resurgence of violence on 27 September 2020 on the line of contact, i.e. the border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. Nagorno Karabakh is a de facto independent region that officially belongs to Azerbaijan, but which is governed from its own capital Stepanakert by ethnic Armenians living there. Armenian sources regularly refer to the Republic of Artsakh in news reports about the region. Artsakh is the Armenian name that includes both Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas occupied by the ethnic Armenian troops of Nagorno-Karabakh. This COI Focus only uses the official name of the region, namely Nagorno-Karabakh. For the sake of readability, Cedoca does not use terms such as "de facto republic" or "unrecognised republic" to refer to Nagorno-Karabakh. This does not imply that Cedoca has taken a position on the status of the region.

For this research, Cedoca consulted the website and official Twitter channels of the Armenian Ministry of Defence, news reports from various Armenian press channels including Armen Press, Hetq and Arka, as well as reports from the analytical press channels Caucasian Knot (and the Russian variant Kavkazkiy Uzel), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), OC-Media, Jam News, Eurasianet, and the BBC. Cedoca also followed the reports of several Armenian human rights organisations on the resurgence of violence, including the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly Vanadzor (HCAV) and Protection of Rights Without Borders (PRWB). Cedoca also searched for media coverage of the mobilisation of reservists in Armenia on Google and on the social media channels Facebook and Twitter. Finally, Cedoca contacted two Armenian experts by e-mail. These were Richard Giragosian, director of the Armenian independent think tank Regional Studies Center (RSC) and expert in the conflict, and Armine Sadikyan, a human rights expert at the HCAV on conscription and other military issues.

The press usually writes about (ethnic) Armenian troops without clarifying whether these are the ethnic Armenian troops of Nagorno-Karabakh who have their own army structure – the Artsakh Defense Army –, or the army of the Republic of Armenia. The first chapter will attempt to clarify this where possible. This chapter briefly explains the resurgence of violence since 27 September 2020 and summarises the main events leading up to 22 October 2020. Chapter two examines the extent to which the Armenian army has called on reservists to assist the troops in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the criteria they use in this regard.

The research for this COI Focus took place between 27 September and 22 October 2020. As this COI Focus was being drafted, the battles on the line of contact were ongoing. Cedoca continues to monitor the situation and will update this COI Focus if the situation changes to any significant extent.

For more background information on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh itself, the COI Focus *Nagorno-Karabakh Security Situation* of 2 April 2020 can be consulted.

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1. Situation sketch - resurgence of conflict

In the morning of 27 September 2020, fighting between Azerbaijani troops and the ethnic Armenian troops of Nagorno-Karabakh flared up over the entire line of contact. On both sides of the frontline, the warring factions deployed heavy weaponry, including helicopters, drones, tanks and heavy artillery.¹

In the first week of the resurgence, the conflict rapidly spread to areas far beyond the line of contact and the national borders. On 2 October 2020, the Azerbaijani army attacked Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh. Arayik Harutyunyan, the president of Nagorno-Karabakh, announced that he would respond with attacks on military targets in major Azerbaijani cities. On 4 October 2020, ethnic Armenian troops attacked the military airport of Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan.² Further attacks on other Azerbaijani cities, including Tartar, Barda, Mingacevir and Beylagan, followed in the next days.³ Stepanakert remained under fire for several successive days after 2 October 2020, and on 8 October 2020, the cathedral of the city of Shusha in Nagorno-Karabakh was damaged by a rocket attack.⁴ The Armenian Ministry of Defence denied that rocket attacks were being launched on Azerbaijani territory from Armenia. Nevertheless, Harutyunyan stated that his troops (the ethnic Armenian troops of Nagorno-Karabakh) attacked Ganja military airport, but stopped the shelling to avoid civilian casualties.⁵

The continuing and ever more intense fighting has ensured that the conflict has received more international attention, but there is (for the time being) no talk of an intervention. The original mediators of the conflict – the Minsk Group represented by France, Russia and the United States – called for a ceasefire.⁶ In the end, Russia organised a meeting between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan on 9 October 2020. As was the case previously, the authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh did not take part in the talks.⁷ On 10 October 2020, both countries agreed on a ceasefire that started at noon local time on the same day.⁸

This agreement only lasted for a few hours before both sides once again accused each other of violating the ceasefire. On 11 October 2020, an apartment building in the Azerbaijani city of Ganja was hit by a rocket attack. On 12 and 13 October, further talks were held in Moscow between the Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zohrab Mnatsakyan, and representatives of the Minsk Group and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).⁹ On 14 October 2020, the Azerbaijani army attacked a munitions depot in the village of Shatvan (Gegharkunik province, Armenia), just across the border from Kelbajar district, an area controlled by the ethnic Armenian troops of Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994. Azerbaijan admitted for the first time to having carried out an attack on Armenian territory, because the military equipment was allegedly “in a state of launch”. The spokesperson for the Armenian Ministry of Defence stated that Armenia reserved itself the right to shoot down military targets in Azerbaijan, or to respond to military movements.¹⁰

On 15 October 2020, two videos showing the arrest and execution of two men circulated on Azerbaijani Telegram channels. Substantiated analysis of these videos by an expert at the British investigative journalism website Bellingcat revealed that they were two unarmed Armenians who were captured by

¹ RFE/RL, 28/09/2020, [url](#)

² Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 04/10/2020, [url](#)

³ RFE/RL, 05/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴ RFE/RL, 08/10/2020, [url](#)

⁵ RFE/RL, 05/10/2020, [url](#)

⁶ RFE/RL, 08/10/2020, [url](#)

⁷ RFE/RL, 09/10/2020, [url](#)

⁸ RFE/RL, 10/10/2020, [url](#)

⁹ RFE/RL, 12/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁰ OC-Media, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

Azerbaijani soldiers and executed shortly afterwards in the city of Hadrut, located in the south of Nagorno-Karabakh. After the videos were taken offline, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence claimed that the videos had been staged.¹¹ With its strategic location, Hadrut is an important target in the offensive, according to Jam News. Since 9 October 2020, Azerbaijan has claimed control of the Hadrut region, a claim the Armenian side repeatedly denies.¹² On 16 October 2020, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence declared that an Armenian missile had exploded in the Ordubad region of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan, an exclave of Azerbaijan south of Armenia. According to the Armenian Ministry of Defence, Azerbaijan is spreading lies to extend the geographical scope of the conflict.¹³ On 17 October 2020, Ganja once again came under heavy shelling. According to the Armenian Ministry of Defence, Stepanakert and Shusha are still subject to the heaviest bombardments in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴

On 17 October 2020, at the insistence of the Minsk Group, Armenia and Azerbaijan once again agreed on a humanitarian ceasefire that was to start at midnight on 18 October 2020.¹⁵ Immediately after the start of the truce, both parties once again accused each other of breaking it.¹⁶ OC-Media has highlighted the fact that it is difficult to verify the allegations, as there are no independent observers on the ground monitoring the situation. At the request of the Minsk Group, the United Nations Security Council met on 19 October 2020 to discuss the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁷ The Council called on Armenia and Azerbaijan to respect the truce and stressed the need for a verification mechanism to monitor it.¹⁸ Both the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan indicated their willingness to meet and have talks.¹⁹ On 21 October 2020, the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan met again in Moscow.²⁰ On Friday 23 October 2020, a meeting was scheduled in Washington between the foreign ministers of the United States, Armenia and Azerbaijan individually.²¹

Both sides of the conflict declared having taken measures to ensure the safety of civilians, although the death toll continued to rise on both sides.²² As of 22 October 2020, a total of more than 1,000 deaths (including civilians) had been officially recorded, including casualties on both sides. The actual number is presumably much higher. For instance, Azerbaijan does not communicate military casualty figures.²³ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has criticised the attacks on densely populated villages and towns, and is concerned by the number of civilian casualties. The ICRC has called on the parties to make every effort to protect civilians and civil infrastructure. Many hospitals and schools have since been destroyed and water supplies, roads, communication networks, electricity and gas pipes have been damaged. Some families have fled the attacks, others have sought refuge in air-raid shelters day and night.²⁴

Since the resurgence of the conflict at the end of September 2020, there have been regular reports on the possible involvement of Turkey in the conflict. Turkey is suspected of supporting Azerbaijan militarily, but it has only declared providing political support. Various media channels, including the BBC and The Guardian, claim to have credible witness statements regarding Syrian fighters taking

¹¹ Bellingcat (Waters N.), 15/10/2020, [url](#)

¹² Jam News, 12/10/2020, [url](#)

¹³ Jam News, 17/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁴ Jam News, 17/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁵ OC-Media, 17/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁶ OC-Media, 18/10/2020, [url](#); Jam News, 19/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁷ OC-Media, 18/10/2020, [url](#); RFE/RL, 19/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁸ RFE/RL, 20/10/2020, [url](#)

¹⁹ OC-Media, 19/10/2020, [url](#)

²⁰ OC-Media, 21/10/2020, [url](#)

²¹ Politico (Toosi N.), 19/10/2020, [url](#)

²² Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 04/10/2020, [url](#)

²³ Jam News, 22/10/2020, [url](#); Jam News, 17/10/2020, [url](#)

²⁴ ICRC, 04/10/2020, [url](#)

part in the battles on the Azerbaijani side, on behalf of Turkey, for financial reward. In addition, there are reports that the bodies of more than fifty Syrians have been repatriated from Azerbaijan to Syria. Azerbaijan and Turkey deny this and claim that reports of Syrian fighters in Azerbaijan are part of a disinformation campaign on the part of Armenia.²⁵ Azerbaijan has however admitted to using Turkish and Israeli armed drones in the conflict.²⁶

The situation on the line of contact has remained tense up to the drafting of this COI Focus. Both sides continue to accuse each other of breaking the truce, as well as spreading disinformation about violations.²⁷ Meanwhile, an information war is being waged online, in which both parties regularly make exaggerated claims about the damage they have inflicted on the other party, or regarding territorial victories.²⁸ Azerbaijan reports on an almost daily basis about the areas it claims to have captured. For its part, Armenia claims that Azerbaijan is exaggerating the advance of its troops. On 21 October 2020, Eurasianet reported that independent military analysts, using images from open sources, had ascertained that Azerbaijani troops were effectively moving deeper and deeper into areas previously controlled by ethnic Armenian troops. These are primarily areas bordering Iran in the south of Nagorno-Karabakh and areas in the north of Nagorno-Karabakh on the land borders with Armenia.²⁹

A diplomatic solution to the conflict does not appear to be in sight at the moment, even though negotiations are ongoing. In a speech on 20 October 2020, Azerbaijani President Aliyev gave the impression, according to Eurasianet, that the offensive would last as long as necessary and that Azerbaijan intended to further extend its control over the region. Aliyev stated the following:

“We are fighting on our own land, giving martyrs and restoring our territorial integrity. These steps will continue to be taken. Armenia must declare before it is too late that it is withdrawing from the occupied territories. After that the fighting may stop.”³⁰

At this stage of the conflict, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan does not believe in a diplomatic solution either. In a live broadcast on Facebook, Pashinyan stated that in the current situation, there is no other option but to fight to the end, without reservation or hesitation.³¹

2. Mobilisation of reservists from Armenia

On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan as well as Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh announced the entry into force of martial law. Under Armenian law, this entails a general mobilisation of troops, the drawing-up of a plan to deploy the troops and the drafting of officers and reservists under the age of 55.³² The proclamation of martial law was accompanied by a ban on men aged between 18 and 55 travelling outside Armenia. Leaving Armenia is only authorised with the written agreement of the regional military commissariat where the person in question is registered (according to their place of residence).³³

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been drafting reservists to take part in the fighting since the first day of the fighting.³⁴ The reports on the mobilisation of reservists in Armenia do not make clear how

²⁵ Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 01/10/2020, [url](#); RFE/RL, 15/10/2020, [url](#)

²⁶ RFE/RL, 09/10/2020, [url](#); RFE/RL, 16/10/2020, [url](#)

²⁷ Jam News, 13/10/2020, [url](#); Jam News, 19/10/2020, [url](#)

²⁸ Eurasianet, 11/10/2020, [url](#); RFE/RL, 05/10/2020, [url](#)

²⁹ Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 21/10/2020, [url](#)

³⁰ Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 21/10/2020, [url](#)

³¹ OC-Media, 21/10/2020, [url](#)

³² Jam News, 27/09/2020, [url](#)

³³ Sputnik Armenia, 28/09/2020, [url](#)

³⁴ Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 30/09/2020, [url](#)

the mobilisation is actually being organised in this constantly evolving situation. Aside from reports of people volunteering to take part in the fighting, there are also reports of people being individually called up to fight. Below is a chronological overview of these reports to clarify the progression of events.

On 27 September 2020, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan called on reservists and military personnel, on Facebook, to report to their regional military commissariats.³⁵ On 27 and 28 September 2020, thousands of volunteers reported to the military commissariats in Armenia. The Ministry of Defence stated that for the time being there was no need for volunteers and that it would communicate if this changed.³⁶ On 28 September 2020, in a press release, the spokesperson of the Armenian Ministry of Defence asked all volunteers to report to their regional commissariats, so that the mobilisation could be organised. He added that the military commissariats themselves were responsible for organising the mobilisation of the military personnel falling under their regional department.³⁷

On 30 September 2020, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) wrote that Armenia and Azerbaijan had started to mobilise their troops, including reservists who had been called up for deployment in the combat zones.³⁸ On 4 October 2020, the Armenian online newspaper Hetq reported that dozens of Armenian men were flying from the Russian city of Krasnodar to the Armenian capital Yerevan to go to the front in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the article, the majority were drafted. Some of them went voluntarily.³⁹

On 5 October 2020, Pashinyan instructed all men who had completed their military service during the past year to report to the military commissariats. Armenian law stipulates that they benefit from an exemption in the event of a general mobilisation, but according to Pashinyan it was precisely these men who were needed most at the front, as they had recently completed military training and were therefore the best prepared.⁴⁰ His own son, 20 year-old Ashot Pashinyan, who ended his military service in June 2020, set an example and volunteered on 5 October 2020.⁴¹ On 15 October 2020, the President of Nagorno-Karabakh, Arayik Harutyunyan, called on all Armenians outside Armenia to come to the front.⁴² The day after Harutyunyan announced that militias were allowed to participate in the fighting, civilians who were willing to fight were issued with weapons in order to defend Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴³ On 9 October 2020, the Armenian Parliament adopted a law giving conscripts and volunteers the same rights as military personnel. As such, they also received a salary from the government, as well as guarantees to keep their job.⁴⁴

In a photo report by Eurasianet published on 16 October 2020, a caption described a volunteer saying goodbye during a mobilisation event in Yerevan. Another caption described war veterans assessing the qualifications of volunteers. The veterans in the photo were members of the Armenian National Army, an organisation that is separate from the Armenian Army and which was helping to organise the mobilisation. According to the caption in another photo, at the end of September 2020 a general was telling a group of volunteers that the army does not yet need them on the frontline, but these

³⁵ MassisPost, 27/09/2020, [url](#)

³⁶ ArmenPress, 27/09/2020, [url](#)

³⁷ ArmenPress, 28/09/2020, [url](#)

³⁸ RFE/RL, 30/09/2020, [url](#)

³⁹ Hetq (Ghazaryan D.), 04/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Sputnik Armenia, 05/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴¹ Novoye Vremya, 05/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴² CivilNet, 15/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴³ AP, 15/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴ News.am, 09/10/2020, [url](#)

volunteers have since departed. According to the caption, men in their forties are now sent to the front.⁴⁵

On 19 October 2020, Caucasus expert Laurence Broers posted the following on Twitter:

“Seems clear that AZ advance has reached halfway point between former Line of Contact and ARM border; mobilisation of all men of military age reported in Meghri, Kajaran, in southern ARM region of Syunik.”⁴⁶

An article in the magazine *Nouvelles d'Arménie* confirmed that on 18 October 2020, all men between 20 and 60 years old in the Armenian region of Syunik were called up to join the Armenian army.⁴⁷ According to the Armenian newspaper *Ivraban*, the municipality of Meghri called on its inhabitants to voluntarily register in the military commissariat of Meghri to protect the borders of the municipality.⁴⁸

On 21 October 2020, Pashinyan used a video message on Facebook to call on all mayors, town councils, political parties, NGOs and civil initiatives to form more military units of volunteers to defend the country. These volunteer units would then operate under the guidance of the general staff of the Armenian army.⁴⁹

From the above information, it appears that – initially – only volunteers were counted upon. However, local military commissariats were soon instructed to coordinate mobilisation in the region under their authority, not only to mobilize volunteers, but also specifically to call up reservists. In addition, there were reports of war veterans enlisting to help select volunteers to take part in the fighting. Based on the public sources consulted, the proportion of people drafted on a voluntary basis compared to people who were specifically (obligatorily) called up is unclear.

Cedoca made contact with two local experts in order to get an overview of the progress of the mobilisation in Armenia and the extent to which Armenian reservists have been deployed on the front in Nagorno-Karabakh. Their responses do not entirely concur, but this may have to do with the date on which the responses were given. Indeed, the situation is constantly changing. The first response on 8 October 2020 came from Richard Giragosian, an expert in the conflict and Director of the Regional Studies Center (RSC).⁵⁰ When asked how the mobilisation of reservists worked in practice in Armenia, Giragosian replied on 8 October 2020 that the legal requirements to mobilise reservists had been complied with. At the same time, he stated that reservists were being called up on an entirely voluntary basis. His response was the following:

“The short answer is that the legal requirement against the mobilization of reserves that have been released from completing their service remains in effect and is respected. The call-up for any such reserves has been strictly voluntary, seen as a move to bolster the ranks with veterans. But I need to check on the enforcement and see if there is any additional pressure or coercion involved.”

In addition, Giragosian pointed out that the Armenian troops (at that point) were not fully deployed in the fighting:

In general, it is more interesting to note and assess the rather prudent policy of restraint by the Armenian leadership, where and when the Armenian forces (of Armenia proper), in contrast to the

⁴⁵ Eurasianet (Winslow M.), 16/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁶ Broers L. [Twitterpost], 19/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷ *Nouvelles d'Arménie Magazine* (Amirzayan K.), 18/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸ *Ivraban*, 18/10/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁹ OC-Media, 21/10/2020, [url](#); AP, 21/10/2020, [url](#)

⁵⁰ Giragosian was supposed to provide additional explanations and indicated several times that he would respond, but Cedoca had not received anything by the time this COI Focus was drafted.

frontline Karabakh forces, which have their own separate command structure, are not fully engaged.”⁵¹

Armine Sadikyan is an expert with the HCAV who specialises in human rights, and more specifically the situation of conscripts in the Armenian army. Asked how general mobilisation in Armenia works in practice, Sadikyan outlined the legal framework and explained the recruitment of volunteers. Her response by e-mail on 13 October 2020 was as follows:

“Yes, it is right that there is general call-up and martial law, and thus we have mobilisation and call-up. First of all, except the current servicemen /mandatory and contract based/, reservists are called-up according to their military composition/ranks and age. It is carried out for the following categories:

- 1) ordinary soldiers/privates, junior and senior officers (or they are called non-com) in reserve until the age of 48,
- 2) junior officers in reserve until the age of 50,
- 3) senior officers (major, lieutenant-colonels) in reserve until the age of 55
- 4) senior officers (colonels) until the age of 58,
- 5) high-ranking officers (general-major, general-lieutenant) until the age of 65
- 6) high-ranking officers (general-colonel, army general) until the age of 70.

These categories are obliged to appear in the military commissariats once they are notified. This is according the current law: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=144466>.⁵²

When asked whether there are valid reasons not to be called up, Sadikyan stated the following:

“There are only four cases when reservists are exempted from being mobilised: They are

- 1) those who have been given this right by the RA Government.
- 2) those who have health problems and are recognized unfit for military service.
- 3) those who have four or more children.
- 4) those who are members of Parliament.

Apart from that, reservists who are not called up because their military specialization is not a priority yet, can be recruited as volunteers. Former combatants, who fought in the 90s can be also recruited as volunteers.

If I am not mistaken, today they have made an amendment in a law to provide weapons to ordinary citizens who want to join the troops and go to the frontline to fight.”⁵³

In an additional response on 15 October 2020, Sadikyan stated that she was not sure whether the government respects the sequence for calling up reservists, as many reservists emigrated years ago and are living abroad. According to Sadikyan, in the current situation it is difficult to state this with certainty. In Sadikyan's opinion, the government aims to recruit as many people as possible without distinction. As such, in her opinion, it may even be possible that people who are ill, if the illness is not

⁵¹ Giragosian R., Director of the Regional Studies Center in Armenia and expert in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, e-mail, 08/10/2020

⁵² Sadikyan A., human rights expert at the HCAV specialising in conscription, military personnel and conditions in the army, e-mail, 13/10/2020

⁵³ Sadikyan A., human rights expert at the HCAV specialising in conscription, military personnel and conditions in the army, e-mail, 13/10/2020

an obstacle to fighting, may still be called up in the present circumstances (even if they are exempted in peacetime).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Sadikyan A., human rights expert at the HCAV specialising in conscription, military personnel and conditions in the army, e-mail, 15/10/2020

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