

Research Briefing

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What is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh?

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Summary

On 19 September 2023 Azerbaijan launched what it called “an anti-terrorist operation” in Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave in Azerbaijani territory that has a 95% ethnic Armenian population of approximately 120,000 people.

Even though [the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan](#), it has been mostly governed as a self-declared republic (the Republic of Artsakh), backed by Armenia, since the early 1990s.

Since full-scale conflict broke out over the disputed region in late-2020, Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to maintain what has been a fragile peace.

Military escalation in 2023

The offensive operations that began on 19 September were short lived. Just over 24 hours after operations began, Karabakh authorities accepted a ceasefire proposal put forward by the Russian peacekeeping command in the region. [Azerbaijan declared military victory](#) while [Armenia accused the Azerbaijani Government of pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing](#).

The offensive followed a nine-month blockade of the Lachin Corridor, the only road linking the enclave to Armenia, which has resulted in a shortage of food, fuel, medicine and basic supplies. In August 2023, [the UN had already declared a humanitarian emergency](#) in the region.

Current status of Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh is now fully under Azerbaijan’s control. Under [the terms of the ceasefire agreement](#) Armenian forces must withdraw and disarm. Discussions over the reintegration of the region into Azerbaijan are also underway. [Azerbaijan has said that it will guarantee the rights and security of Karabakh Armenians in the same way as any other Azerbaijani citizen](#). It has

also said that any individual who chooses not to accept Azerbaijan's proposals, was free to leave Karabakh.

A high level of mistrust exists between Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijan and, amid a pre-existing humanitarian crisis, [observers are warning of a mass exodus from the region](#). The international community has called for the rights and security of Karabakh Armenians to be guaranteed and for the immediate and unimpeded provision of humanitarian assistance.

In response to the situation, thousands have protested in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, and called on Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan to resign.

1 A history of conflict

Competing territorial claims to the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh/ Artsakh, have their roots in the fall of the Russian empire in 1917, Stalin's "divide and rule" policies toward the Caucasus region in the 1920s and 1930s and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹ Both countries and some Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars would, however, go further back into history to legitimise their claims over the region.²

1.1 Impact of the fall of the Soviet Union

For much of the Soviet period, tensions over the region remained suppressed. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated a three-decade long conflict over the region.

The international borders of Azerbaijan, including Nagorno-Karabakh, were recognised when the country achieved independence in October 1991. In November 1991 Azerbaijan passed a law [abolishing the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast](#) and brought the territory under the direct control of the Azerbaijani Government.

However, ethnic Armenians in the region continued to push for independence. In December 1991, the Council of People's Deputies in Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum approving the creation of an independent state (the Republic of

¹ See: Britannica, [Soviet Union](#) (accessed 4 May 2023); Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, [Nagorno-Karabakh: The long lasting effects of Soviet rule](#), October 2021; Tim Potier, Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia: A legal appraisal, 2001; "[Karabakh Movement 88](#)", EVN Report, January 2018

² See for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, [Nagorno-Karabakh issue](#) (accessed 20 September 2023); Azerbaijan Chamber of Notaries, [History of Karabakh](#) (PDF) and President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict](#) (accessed 20 September 2023)

Artsakh). 99% of voters approved independence, although the vote was boycotted by local Azerbaijanis.³

1.2

Conflict in 1992

Tensions in the region developed into full-scale conflict in 1992 between Karabakh forces, backed by Armenia and Russia, and Azerbaijan. Armenian forces took control of most of the autonomous region, plus a corridor of Azerbaijan's territory connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia via the Lachin Pass. In addition to Nagorno-Karabakh, approximately 9% of Azerbaijani territory was under Armenian control.⁴

Three UN Security Council resolutions were passed in 1993 calling for an immediate ceasefire and on Armenia to withdraw its forces.⁵

The conflict was brought to an end in 1994, with [a ceasefire agreement](#) mediated by [the OSCE Minsk Group](#), which was created by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and is co-chaired by Russia, the United States and France. Based on [the Bishkek Protocol](#) (PDF) the ceasefire essentially froze the territorial gains made by Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh remained part of Azerbaijan, but has since been governed by a separatist, self-declared republic, run by ethnic Armenians and backed by the Armenian Government.

The deal also established the Nagorno-Karabakh 'Line of Contact', separating Armenian and Azerbaijan forces. The OSCE Minsk Group monitors the ceasefire lines and attempts to encourage a peaceful solution. OSCE member states [imposed an arms embargo](#) aimed at minimising violence in the region.

1.3

Renewed conflict in 2020

The peace achieved in 1994 has been a fragile one with frequent clashes along the line of contact.

In September 2020 full-scale conflict broke out once again. After six weeks of fighting, in which at least 5,970 people, including 169 civilians, were killed⁶

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Artsakh, [The recognition of independence of the Republic of Artsakh](#)

⁴ Thomas de Waal, Black Garden, NYU Press, 2013

⁵ [UN Security Council Resolution 853 \(1993\)](#) (PDF), [UN Security Council Resolution 874 \(1993\)](#) (PDF) and [UN Security Council Resolution 884 \(1993\)](#) (PDF)

⁶ International Crisis Group, [The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: a visual explainer](#), June 2021

and 30,000 Karabakh Armenians were reportedly forced to flee their homes,⁷ hostilities ceased on 10 November following the signing of [a Russia-mediated ceasefire agreement](#).

Under the terms of the agreement, Azerbaijan regained control in all the areas adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh that ethnic Armenian forces had held since the previous war. In addition, Azerbaijan took substantial parts of Nagorno-Karabakh itself, already captured during the conflict. The remaining areas of Nagorno-Karabakh would continue to be governed by self-declared Armenian authorities.

Two thousand Russian peacekeeping forces were also deployed to patrol along the line of contact and the land corridor of the Lachin Pass that links Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia.

2 Ongoing tensions

Despite bringing the conflict to an end, the 2020 ceasefire deal remained short of a clear and stable peace agreement and clashes between Azerbaijani forces and ethnic Armenian forces have continued to be commonplace.

Azerbaijan has demanded the disarmament of what it called “illegal Armenian formations” around Nagorno-Karabakh, which it accused of shelling Azerbaijani forces.⁸ It has also accused Armenian forces of continuing to lay landmines in contested regions now under Azerbaijani control.⁹

Armenia and Russia have, in turn, accused Azerbaijan of violating the ceasefire and occupying Armenian territory.¹⁰ Each side has long accused the other of war crimes, evidence of which has been documented by human rights groups such as Amnesty International.¹¹

2.1 Blockade of the Lachin Corridor

The Lachin Corridor is the only transport link between Armenia and the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Under the terms of [the November 2020](#)

⁷ “Unfinished business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict”, Carnegie Europe, 11 February 2021

⁸ [“Armenia calls on international community to help stop violence over Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), Global security, 3 August 2022 and [“Armenia says 105 troops killed in Azerbaijani border clashes”](#), BBC News, 15 September 2022

⁹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Press release](#), 22 August 2022

¹⁰ [“Armenia calls on international community to help stop violence over Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), Global security, 3 August 2022

¹¹ Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [War crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Armenia against Azerbaijani civilians](#); [Azeriwarcrimes.org](#); Human Rights Watch, [Press release](#), 14 October 2022 and Amnesty International, [Last to flee](#), 17 May 2022

[ceasefire agreement](#), Russian peacekeepers patrol the corridor, while Azerbaijan is obliged to guarantee safe passage, in both directions, for civilians, vehicles and cargo.¹²

Since December 2022, however, pro-Azerbaijani activists have been blockading the corridor, preventing the passage of food, medicines and humanitarian supplies into Nagorno-Karabakh and the movement of people between Armenia and the enclave.¹³

What started the blockade?

The blockade was initially established in protest at the alleged illegal mining of natural resources in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴ The Armenian Government accused Azerbaijan of being behind the protests which Russian peacekeepers failed to disperse.¹⁵

In turn, Azerbaijan accused Armenia of not only exploiting natural resources in the region but also using the road to move military hardware, including landmines, into Nagorno Karabakh and those areas which returned to Azerbaijan under the November 2020 ceasefire agreement.¹⁶

The Azerbaijan Foreign Ministry suggested that the protests were the result of “the legitimate dissatisfaction of the Azerbaijani society against the mentioned illegal activities, and this position should be respected”.¹⁷ Azerbaijan also insisted that Russian peacekeeping forces were responsible for closing the corridor and called for border and customs checkpoints to be established.¹⁸

In April 2023, and only days after the Armenian Prime Minister acknowledged Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, including over Nagorno-Karabakh (see What do Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Karabakh authorities want?), Azerbaijan proactively established its own checkpoint along the Lachin Corridor, effectively consolidating the blockade which had begun four months earlier. Russian peacekeepers did not intervene, despite having responsibility for control of the Lachin Corridor under the terms of the 2020 ceasefire agreement.

¹² [Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation](#), 10 November 2020, para.6

¹³ [“Russian peacekeepers find themselves sidelined in Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 December 2022

¹⁴ [“Russian peacekeepers find themselves sidelined in Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 December 2022

¹⁵ [“Russian peacekeepers find themselves sidelined in Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 December 2022

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Press statement](#), 18 December 2022 and [“Supplies begin to run low as Nagorno-Karabakh blockade continues”](#), Eurasianet, 19 December 2022

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Press statement](#), 14 December 2022

¹⁸ [“Supplies begin to run low as Nagorno-Karabakh blockade continues”](#), Eurasianet, 19 December 2022

In February 2023 the International Court of Justice passed a ruling, calling on Azerbaijan to “take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions”.¹⁹

Humanitarian crisis

The nine-month blockade has prompted a humanitarian crisis as fuel, food and medical supplies have not been able to get through to the region. Hundreds of people, including children have also been stranded in Armenia, unable to return home.²⁰

In August 2023 a group of UN experts called the blockade a “humanitarian emergency” having left the population “facing acute shortages of food staples, medication, and hygiene products”, leaving medical and educational institutions unable to function and placing “the lives of the residents – especially children, persons with disabilities, older persons, pregnant women, and the sick – at significant risk”.²¹

Russian peacekeepers have been widely criticised for failing to protect the corridor, and the population of the enclave under the terms of the 2020 ceasefire agreement.²² In an interview with La Repubblica on 2 September 2023 the Armenian Prime Minister accused Azerbaijan of “ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh” by creating “an artificial humanitarian crisis” with the purpose of “rid[ding] Nagorno Karabakh of Armenians”. He went on to say that Russia was either not able to maintain control over the Lachin Corridor, or that “it just doesn’t want to”.²³

The Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs had previously claimed that a humanitarian blockade of the Lachin Corridor was “fake news” as vehicles of the International Committee of the Red Cross and ambulances had been allowed through.²⁴

In early September 2023, almost nine months after the closure of the Lachin Corridor, a lorry of humanitarian aid from the Russian Red Cross was permitted to enter the region via a road through Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani

¹⁹ International Court of Justice, [Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(Armenia v. Azerbaijan\), Summary of the Order of 22 February 2023](#), 22 February 2023

²⁰ “The Lachin Corridor: A looming humanitarian catastrophe”, [EVN Report](#), 14 December 2022

²¹ UN Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, [Press release](#), 7 August 2023

²² Freedom House, [As the world focuses on Ukraine, civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh face an authoritarian siege](#), 13 May 2023

²³ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, [Interview to Italian La Repubblica newspaper](#), 2 September 2023

²⁴ [Twitter account of Aykhan Hajizada, Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), 19 December 2022

Government called it a “positive step”, although it remained unclear as to the status of further humanitarian aid.²⁵

3 International attempts to mediate a lasting peace settlement

Since 2020, Russia, the US, the EU and the UN have consistently called for all sides to respect the ceasefire and continue talks on the demarcation of borders and the negotiation of a peace settlement.

Cooperation and work within the OSCE Minsk Group has effectively ceased since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, suggested had happened “at the initiative of the American and French participants” (the co-chairs of the group alongside Russia).²⁶ The effectiveness of the Minsk Group as a format for pursuing peace talks was already under scrutiny, however, after nearly three decades and little progress.²⁷

Peace talks have therefore been pursued on multiple, independent, tracks, often complicated by the existence of differing treaty texts and priorities and amid increasing tensions in the region.

3.1 What do Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Karabakh authorities want?

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has said that the only peace deal it would countenance was one that recognised its sovereignty over all territory within Azerbaijan’s internationally recognised borders, including Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁸ It has rejected Armenian suggestions for an international mechanism for protecting the rights and security of ethnic Armenians in the region, claiming that such guarantees will be provided at the national level.²⁹

²⁵ Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Statement No.479/ 23](#), 12 September 2023

²⁶ [“Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov: OSCE Minsk Group ceased its activities”](#), Caspian News, 25 June 2022

²⁷ Vasif Huseynov, [Opinion: The moment of the Minsk Group has passed](#), Commonsplace.eu, 8 August 2022

²⁸ Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Armenia’s aggression against Azerbaijan months](#)

²⁹ [“New war with Azerbaijan very likely”](#), France 24, 21 July 2023

Armenia

Armenia has previously demanded special status for the region, including self-governance and rights for ethnic Armenians living there.³⁰ The Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, announced in April 2023, however, that peace could be achieved if Armenia relinquished its territorial claims to Nagorno-Karabakh and both sides recognised the 1991 borders.³¹ That statement followed a previous declaration in Prague in October 2022 in which both countries recognised each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.³²

Following a trilateral meeting between US, Azerbaijani and Armenian Foreign Ministers on 4 May 2023, the Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said that the withdrawal of troops, border delimitation based on 1991 declarations and addressing the rights and security of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh are the “key to a comprehensive settlement and establishing long-term stability in the region”.³³

In his interview with La Repubblica in September 2023, Prime Minister Pashinyan explained Armenia's priorities going forward:

If Armenia and Azerbaijan fail to recognize each other's territorial integrity on the basis of the Alama-Ata declaration, this will mean that there will never be peace [...]

The first [priority] is the implementation of the agreement of Armenia and Azerbaijan recognizing each other's territorial integrity. Secondly, the rights and security of Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh should be addressed in the format of Baku-Stepanakert dialogue within the framework of international mechanisms, and thirdly, signing such a peace treaty, which will include mechanisms which will make it possible to truly guarantee peace.³⁴

When asked whether giving up control of Nagorno Karabakh was the price to pay for peace, he said that “In Nagorno Karabakh the situation has always been under the control of the authorities of Nagorno Karabakh itself”.³⁵

On 18 September 2023, the Armenian Foreign Ministry confirmed that it viewed direct dialogue between Azerbaijan and the de-facto authorities in Nagorno-

³⁰ International Crisis Group, [Warding off renewed war in Nagorno-Karabakh](#), 9 August 2022

³¹ [“Armenia is ready to relinquish Nagorno-Karabakh: What next?”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 April 2023. The [Alma-Ata Declaration](#) (PDF) of December 1991 established the Commonwealth of Independent States after the collapse of the Soviet Union and recognised the territorial integrity of each country and the inviolability of existing borders (the administrative borders of the individual Soviet Socialist Republics at the time).

³² Council of the European Union, [Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel](#), 6 October 2022

³³ [“Negotiations in Washington between Armenia and Azerbaijan continue”](#), Caucasus Watch, 4 May 2023

³⁴ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, [Interview to Italian La Repubblica newspaper](#), 2 September 2023

³⁵ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, [Interview to Italian La Repubblica newspaper](#), 2 September 2023

Karabakh (what is referred to as the Baku-Stepanakert dialogue) as “the path to reduce tensions”.³⁶

Republic of Artsakh

Officials of the Republic of Artsakh have continued to call for the protection of the security and rights of Karabakh Armenians, including their right to self-determination.³⁷

However, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijani activists since December 2022 (see above) has increasingly put pressure on the de-facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh to agree a peace deal on Azerbaijan’s terms.

3.2 Talks mediated by Russia

Russia, as the mediator of the 2020 peace agreement and keen to retain some influence in the region, held a series of trilateral talks with Armenia and Azerbaijan, most notably in November 2021, October 2022 and May 2023.³⁸

However, Russia has been increasingly criticised for its apparent disengagement from the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, amid its ongoing war in Ukraine. The failure of Russian peacekeepers to prevent an escalation in tensions and to resolve the impasse over the Lachin Corridor has lent weight to those claims.³⁹

On the territorial claims to Nagorno-Karabakh and the role of Russia, President Putin told the Eastern Economic Forum on 12 September 2023:

Since Armenia has recognised Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, what is there to discuss? This is the key aspect of the issue. Armenia determined the status of Karabakh itself. That is all there is to it.⁴⁰

He did acknowledge, however, the ongoing mandate of Russian peacekeepers and outstanding humanitarian concerns:

³⁶ [“Baku-Stepanakert dialogue the path to reduce tensions – Armenia MFA”](#), Public Radio of Armenia, 19 September 2023

³⁷ [“Armenia vows to recognise disputed Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijan amid rising tensions”](#), Politico, 18 April 2023

³⁸ President of Russia, [Statement by leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia following trilateral talks](#), 26 November 2021; [Trilateral talks with President of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister of Armenia](#), 31 October 2022 and [Meeting with President of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister of Armenia](#), 25 May 2023

³⁹ Freedom House, [As the world focuses on Ukraine, civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh face an authoritarian siege](#), 13 May 2023

⁴⁰ President of Russia, [Plenary Session of the 8th Eastern Economic Forum](#), 12 September 2023

Of course, there are other issues related to the humanitarian aspect and the mandate of our peacekeepers. This is true. The mandate is still in effect. The humanitarian questions, including the prevention of ethnic cleansing, have remained unresolved, and I fully agree with that. I hope that the Azerbaijani leadership – they have always told us so and continue to say so – is not interested in ethnic cleansing. Moreover, on the contrary, they are interested in having this process unfold smoothly.⁴¹

3.3 Talks mediated by the EU and US

The EU has taken on an increasing role since early 2022, hosting a series of peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The most recent was in July 2023.⁴² Those talks have been accompanied by parallel mediation efforts in the United States.⁴³ A briefing by the European Parliament Research Service in June 2023 suggested that the increasing role of the EU and US was to “avoid a security vacuum in the region” given Russia’s apparent pre-occupation in Ukraine.⁴⁴

EU civilian mission in Armenia

In October 2022 the EU agreed, at the request of Armenia, to deploy an EU civilian confidence-building mission to the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan, for a period of two months.⁴⁵ The aim of that monitoring mission was to contribute to stability and confidence building between the two countries and to enable the EU to support the work of the Joint Border Commission, which had been established in 2022 to further work on the delimitation of borders.

That mission served as the basis for a fully-fledged civilian EU mission in Armenia (EUMA), which was launched in January 2023 under the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy. In addition to contributing to stability on the ground, a stated aim of the mission is to contribute to the mediation process being led by the EU.⁴⁶

⁴¹ President of Russia, [Plenary Session of the 8th Eastern Economic Forum](#), 12 September 2023

⁴² Council of the European Union, [Press remarks by President Charles Michel](#), 15 July 2023

⁴³ US Department of State, [Press release](#), 19 September 2022; [Press release](#), 8 November 2022 and [Press release](#), 30 May 2023

⁴⁴ [Armenia and Azerbaijan: Between war and peace](#) (PDF), European Parliament Research Service, June 2023

⁴⁵ European Council, [Press statement](#), 7 October 2022 and [Press release](#), 17 October 2022

⁴⁶ Council of the European Union, [Press release](#), 23 January 2023

4

Military escalation in September 2023

Tensions have been increasing in the region for several months with the ongoing blockade of the Lachin Corridor, increasing clashes between Azerbaijani and ethnic Armenian forces and reports of Azerbaijani forces amassing on the Azerbaijani/Armenian border and along the Line of Contact.⁴⁷

On 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Government said it was “an anti-terrorist operation” in response to two incidents in which several civilians and military personnel were killed after their vehicles had hit landmines, allegedly laid by Armenian forces.⁴⁸

The purpose of the subsequent operation was to:

ensure the provisions of the Trilateral Statement, suppress large-scale provocations in the Karabakh economic region, to disarm and secure the withdrawal of formations of Armenia’s armed forces from our territories, neutralize their military infrastructure, provide the safety of the civilian population returned to the territories liberated from occupation, the civilians involved in construction and restoration work and our military personnel, and ultimately restore the constitutional order of the Republic of Azerbaijan.⁴⁹

The Azerbaijani Government said that civilians and civilian infrastructure were not being targeted.⁵⁰ The Foreign Ministry said that Azerbaijan was “fully committed to protect all its residents, including of Armenian nationality, and restore its constitutional system throughout whole Azerbaijan’s territories”.⁵¹ Humanitarian corridors were reportedly established “to ensure the evacuation of the population from the dangerous area”.⁵²

Armenia, however, said the operation was aimed at “completing its [Azerbaijan’s] policy of ethnic cleansing” and that under the pretext of destroying military targets, “Azerbaijan is shelling civilian settlements, the city of Stepanakert, and other cities and villages”. It also accused the Azerbaijani government of spreading false information about mining and sabotage activities, indicating a level of pre-planning for the attack.⁵³

⁴⁷ [“Azerbaijan launches attack in Nagorno-Karabakh, announces an ‘evacuation’ of Armenian population”](#), Politico, 19 September 2023

⁴⁸ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Statement](#), 19 September 2023

⁴⁹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Statement](#), 19 September 2023

⁵⁰ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Statement](#), 19 September 2023

⁵¹ Republic of Azerbaijan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Commentary No.506/23](#), 19 September 2023

⁵² [“Azerbaijan launches attack in Nagorno-Karabakh, announces an ‘evacuation’ of Armenian population”](#), Politico, 19 September 2023

⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, [MFA Statement on Azerbaijan’s aggression in Nagorno-Karabakh](#), 19 September 2023

Armenia has denied that its own armed forces personnel and military equipment are deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁴

Authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh called the military offensive an “undisguised act of genocide and an extreme form of denial of the fundamental rights of the people of Artsakh” and criticised the failure of the international community to act.⁵⁵

International actors including Russia, the US, the EU and the UK all called for the cessation of hostilities and the resumption of genuine political dialogue between Azerbaijan and the authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁶

Despite fears that the military escalation could reignite full-scale conflict, just over 24 hours after military operations began Karabakh authorities accepted a ceasefire proposal put forward by the Russian peacekeeping command in the region. Azerbaijan declared a military victory.⁵⁷

Armenian press reports suggest that over 200 people, including civilians, have been killed and more than 400 injured.⁵⁸

4.1

What are the terms of the 2023 ceasefire agreement?

According to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense, the ceasefire agreement includes the following provisions:

1. The formations of Armenia’s armed forces stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh, along with illegal armed groups, must lay down their arms, withdraw from their military positions and completely disarm.
2. All ammunition and military equipment must be surrendered.
3. Such measures will be coordinated within the Russian peacekeeping contingent deployed in the region.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, [MFA Statement on Azerbaijan’s aggression in Nagorno-Karabakh](#), 19 September 2023

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Artsakh, [Statement](#), 19 September 2023

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Statement on the situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh](#), 20 September 2023; European External Action Service, [Statement by the High Representative on military escalation](#), 19 September 2023; Department of State, [Press statement](#), 19 September 2023 and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Statement to the UN Security Council](#), 21 September 2023

⁵⁷ President of Azerbaijan, [Ilham Aliyev addressed the nation](#), 20 September 2023

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, [Statement of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia at the UN Security Council emergency meeting](#), 22 September 2023

⁵⁹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [Press release](#), 20 September 2023

The Armenian Government said it was not involved in the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement and once again refuted that any military personnel of the Republic of Armenia were stationed in the region, having already withdrawn in August 2021.⁶⁰

5 What happens now?

All of Nagorno-Karabakh is now under Azerbaijani control. Assuming the ceasefire holds, the disarmament of ethnic Armenian forces and reintegration of the enclave will be priorities for the Azerbaijani Government.

However, concerns remain over the humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and the rights and security of ethnic Armenians living there. It is also unclear whether the surrender of Karabakh Armenian forces will have longer-term political repercussions for Armenia, and Prime Minister Pashinyan in particular.

5.1 Reintegration and disarmament

On 21 September representatives of the Azerbaijani Government and Karabakh Armenians met in the city of Yevlakh to begin discussing proposals for the reintegration of the Armenian population of Karabakh into Azerbaijani constitutional systems and law and for the restoration of regional infrastructure.⁶¹ The talks were mediated by the leaders of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in the region.⁶²

Under the proposals being discussed, Azerbaijani presidential adviser, Hikmet Hajiyev, said Karabakh Armenians will be granted the same economic, social, religious and municipal rights as Azerbaijani citizens. Humanitarian assistance to the region will be provided as a matter of priority and that there will be an amnesty for former fighters.⁶³ He had previously called on the governing authority in Nagorno-Karabakh to dissolve itself.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ [“Armenia had no involvement in agreeing the new ceasefire deal in Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), Armen Press News Agency, 20 September 2023

⁶¹ [“Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijan meet in Yevlakh”](#), Caucasus Watch, 21 September 2023

⁶² President of Russia, [Telephone conversation with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan](#), 20 September 2023

⁶³ [“Amnesty is planned for former military in Nagorno-Karabakh- Hejijev”](#), First Channel News, 22 September 2023

⁶⁴ [“Azerbaijan launches operation against Nagorno-Karabakh and demands surrender”](#), BBC News, 20 September 2023

He also stated that any person who chose not to accept Azerbaijan's proposals was "free to leave Karabakh".⁶⁵

The conclusion of a ceasefire and proposals for reintegration, almost exclusively on Azerbaijan's terms, has raised concerns that Karabakh Armenians will face little choice but to leave.⁶⁶

Negotiation on the withdrawal of forces

While the current ceasefire agreement rests on the withdrawal and disarmament of Armenian forces, there are questions over the readiness of Karabakh Armenians to accept an amnesty and lay down their arms after 30 years of conflict.

Karabakh officials have suggested that security guarantees must first be extended before giving up their weapons.⁶⁷ Thomas de Waal, a Caucasus specialist at the international affairs think tank Carnegie Europe said:

The big question is about men who are under arms or who have fought against Azerbaijan - which is probably the majority of the Karabakh population.⁶⁸

There have been reports that an amnesty might not be extended to those individuals who Azerbaijan considers to have committed war crimes during previous conflicts in 1992 and 2020.⁶⁹ Such conditions may prove a disincentive to disarmament.

Russian peacekeepers are expected to stay in the region until 2025, under the terms of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, to monitor the withdrawal of Armenian forces.⁷⁰

However, as outlined above, Armenia refutes Azerbaijan's suggestion that it still has armed forces stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh, which may complicate implementation of this element of the ceasefire agreement.

A longer-term peace treaty?

Assuming the current ceasefire agreement holds, and the reintegration of the Karabakh-Armenian population can be achieved in a way that is acceptable

⁶⁵ ["Amnesty is planned for former military in Nagorno-Karabakh- Hejiyev"](#), First Channel News, 22 September 2023

⁶⁶ ["Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists"](#), BBC News, 22 September 2023

⁶⁷ ["Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians seek guarantees before handing arms to Baku"](#), Al Jazeera, 21 September 2023

⁶⁸ ["Panic in Nagorno-Karabakh but Azerbaijan rejects fears of ethnic cleansing"](#), BBC News, 24 September 2023

⁶⁹ ["Panic in Nagorno-Karabakh but Azerbaijan rejects fears of ethnic cleansing"](#), BBC News, 24 September 2023

⁷⁰ ["Amnesty is planned for former military in Nagorno-Karabakh- Hejiyev"](#), First Channel News, 22 September 2023

to all parties, then the conclusion of a peace treaty is the next logical, long-term step.

Although no timeframe was set, during a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on 21 September 2023, Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, agreed to intensify trilateral talks on restoring transport links, delimiting the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and drafting a peace treaty between the two countries.⁷¹

Armenia and Azerbaijan's leaders are expected to meet on the sidelines of the European Political Community meeting in Granada on 5 October 2023. President Macron, Chancellor Scholz and the President of the European Commission will also take part in the meeting, with the aim of discussing a possible peace treaty.⁷² Envoys from Armenia and Azerbaijan will meet in Brussels on 26 September to lay the groundwork for that meeting.

5.2

Humanitarian concerns

Nagorno-Karabakh is home to approximately 120,000 ethnic Armenians.

The blockade of the Lachin Corridor for the last nine months has already led to shortages of food, fuel, medicines and other essential supplies and prompted concerns of a humanitarian crisis (see section 2.1 of this briefing).

The latest military action has exacerbated that concern. Thousands of civilians have already fled their homes. Many are sleeping either on the streets without access to food or basic services, or in makeshift shelters in the regional capital Stepanakert.⁷³ Others have sought refuge at the Russian peacekeeping base near the city. Almost 5,000 civilians are reported to have arrived at the base since 19 September, a figure that is expected to rise.⁷⁴

On 23 September, the first shipments of aid were reported to have begun arriving from Russia and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Azerbaijani Government said the arrangement demonstrated the "seriousness" of its proposals for reintegration and guaranteeing the rights of ethnic Armenians.⁷⁵

⁷¹ President of Russia, [Telephone conversation with President of Azerbaijan](#), Ilham Aliyev, 21 September 2023

⁷² ["Armenia and Azerbaijan's leaders to meet in Spain next month to discuss peace treaty"](#), Euro News, 24 September 2023

⁷³ ["Karabakh humanitarian fears grow with thousands sleeping on Stepanakert streets"](#), BBC News, 24 September 2023

⁷⁴ ["Panic in Nagorno-Karabakh but Azerbaijan rejects fears of ethnic cleansing"](#), BBC News, 24 September 2023

⁷⁵ ["Nagorno-Karabakh exodus grows as Armenia warns of 'ethnic cleansing'"](#), Politico, 24 September 2023 and ["Azerbaijan establishes working group on humanitarian issues in Karabakh"](#), Caucasus Watch, 24 September 2023

Exodus of ethnic Armenians

Despite these reports of humanitarian aid, observers are warning of the increased likelihood of a mass exodus of the ethnic Armenian population. A first convoy of injured civilians was evacuated via the Lachin Corridor by the Red Cross on 24 September, reportedly followed by a stream of displaced civilians.⁷⁶ The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities also issued a statement saying any civilians left homeless by Azerbaijan's military offensive and wanting to leave would be escorted into Armenia by Russian peacekeepers.⁷⁷

In an interview with Reuters on 24 September, David Babayan, an adviser to the Karabakh Armenian leadership, suggested that 99.9% of ethnic Armenians would prefer to leave their "historic lands", rather than live as part of Azerbaijan. He called the fate of Karabakh Armenians "a disgrace and a shame for the Armenian people and the whole civilised world".⁷⁸

As of 26 September, 13,350 displaced people are reported to have crossed over into Armenia, approximately one tenth of the ethnic Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷⁹

The Armenian Government has said that it has plans in place to accept 40,000 people if they choose to leave, including providing housing, food, healthcare and other basic necessities.⁸⁰ However, Prime Minister Pashinyan said this was not "plan A", with the primary goal being to ensure that ethnic Armenians can remain in their homes.⁸¹

If most of the 120,000-strong ethnic Armenian population chose to leave Nagorno-Karabakh, it would also raise questions over the ability of Armenia to house and care for them.⁸²

Armenia has urged the UN to deploy an observer mission to the region to monitor the rights of ethnic Armenians.⁸³

In response to the increasing number of people crossing the border into Armenia, Hikmet Hajiyev, adviser to the Azerbaijani president, said the government "regretted the lack of confidence in its ability to secure their

⁷⁶ ["Nagorno-Karabakh exodus grows as Armenia warns of 'ethnic cleansing'"](#), Politico, 24 September 2023

⁷⁷ ["Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenians start to leave en masse for Armenia"](#), Reuters, 24 September 2023

⁷⁸ ["Ethnic Armenians will leave Nagorno-Karabakh, adviser to their leader says"](#), Reuters, 24 September 2023

⁷⁹ Government of the Republic of Armenia, [Official News](#), 26 September 2023

⁸⁰ ["Pashinyan updates on the developing situation in Nagorno-Karabakh"](#), Caucasus Watch, 24 September 2023

⁸¹ ["Pashinyan updates on the developing situation in Nagorno-Karabakh"](#), Caucasus Watch, 24 September 2023

⁸² ["Armenia is ready to relinquish Nagorno-Karabakh: What next?"](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 April 2023

⁸³ ["Armenia urges UN to send mission to Karabakh to monitor rights"](#), France 24, 23 September 2023

rights and security” but that “this is a free movement of the population – they have a choice”.⁸⁴

International calls for the guarantee of rights and security of ethnic Armenians

The international community has welcomed the cessation of hostilities and called for the just treatment of Karabakh Armenians, including guarantees of their rights and security, and for urgent and unimpeded humanitarian access to the region.

In his phone call with President Aliyev on 21 September, President Putin “stressed the importance of protecting the rights and security of the Armenian population in Karabakh” and called on Azerbaijan to address the humanitarian situation in the region.⁸⁵

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken urged Azerbaijan to “protect civilians and uphold its obligations to respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh and to ensure its forces comply with international humanitarian law”.⁸⁶

In his address to the UN Security Council meeting on 22 September, EU High Representative Josep Borrell said “Azerbaijan bears the responsibility to ensure full respect for the rights and security of Karabakh Armenians” and to take measures to ensure the provision of urgently needed humanitarian assistance.⁸⁷

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office spokesperson, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, called on Azerbaijan to engage with the Karabakh authorities:

It is now vital that talks resume with representatives of the Karabakhi Armenians, on the basis of a credible plan to ensure the rights and security of everyone in the region, and to allow them to live in peace.

And at this time in particular, the United Nations and international organisations, such as the ICRC, can also provide crucial assistance in addressing immediate and long-term humanitarian needs.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ [“Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians face up to a life in exile”](#), Politico, 26 September 2023

⁸⁵ President of Russia, [Telephone conversation with President of Azerbaijan](#), Ilham Aliyev, 21 September 2023

⁸⁶ US Department of State, [Secretary Blinken’s call with Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan](#), 23 September 2023

⁸⁷ European Union External Action Service, [Address by the High Representative Josep Borrell to UN Security Council on Nagorno-Karabakh](#), 22 September 2023

⁸⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Statement to the UN Security Council](#), 21 September 2023

5.3

Protests in Yerevan

The status of Nagorno-Karabakh and its 120,000 ethnic Armenians has often been a flashpoint in Armenian politics. Domestic dissatisfaction at the government's handling of the situation has led, in the past, to mass demonstrations and calls for the Prime Minister to resign.⁸⁹

Over the last week thousands of Armenians have taken to the streets in Yerevan to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan. They have accused the government of abandoning Nagorno-Karabakh and its ethnic Armenian population, while the political opposition have gone so far as to accuse Prime Minister Pashinyan of “treason”.⁹⁰

200 protesters are reported to have been detained so far following clashes with the police and there are concerns that the protests will continue to gain traction if an exodus of Karabakh Armenians from the region becomes more likely.⁹¹

Such developments potentially raise questions over the longer-term political stability of the Armenian Government, and Prime Minister Pashinyan in particular.

⁸⁹ After the conflict in 2020, which led to the loss of territory by Armenia, mass protests and threats of a military coup led Pashinyan to resign and call snap elections in June 2021 ([“Armenia: Embattled Prime Minister announces snap elections”](#), Al Jazeera, 18 March 2021)

⁹⁰ [“Thousands protest in Armenia over military strike in Nagorno-Karabakh”](#), The Guardian, 20 September 2023; [“Armenia protests follow Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire”](#), BBC News, 21 September 2023 and [“Armenia in political crisis after Nagorno-Karabakh defeat”](#), Deutsche Welle, 21 September 2023

⁹¹ [“Armenia in political crisis after Nagorno-Karabakh defeat”](#), Deutsche Welle, 21 September 2023 and [“Anti-government protests continue in Armenia”](#), Caucasus Watch, 24 September 2023

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