

Azerbaijan's Retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Displacement of Karabakh Armenians

October 18, 2023

On September 20, 2023, Azerbaijan reasserted control over Nagorno-Karabakh (also known in Armenian as Artsakh), a predominantly Armenian-populated region at the center of a dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia for more than 30 years (**Figure 1**). Since December 2022, Azerbaijan had taken [measures](#) to restrict movement of people, goods, and services between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to what some observers called a [blockade](#) of the region. Following an Azerbaijani offensive on September 19-20, regional authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh [consented](#) to a cease-fire that included the disarmament of Nagorno-Karabakh's self-defense forces and the region's [reintegration](#) with Azerbaijan. Within 10 days of the offensive, more than 100,000 people—most of Nagorno-Karabakh's then-estimated population of 120,000—[departed](#) for Armenia (population 2.8 million). Azerbaijani authorities subsequently [detained](#) several regional officials or ex-officials.

Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. The region's ethnic Armenian population controlled the region and surrounding territories with the support of Armenian forces since Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in conflict in the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (of which Armenia and Azerbaijan were part). In 1992, the region's legislature issued an internationally unrecognized declaration of independence. About 500,000 Azerbaijanis who formed a majority in areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh (and a minority in Nagorno-Karabakh) were displaced during the conflict in the early 1990s. In a six-week [war](#) in 2020, Azerbaijan restored control over territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and a portion of the region itself.

Assistance for the Displaced Population

The Armenian government is addressing the needs of Nagorno-Karabakh's newly displaced population (others were displaced after the 2020 war). On October 12, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [stated](#) that the government had allocated \$100 million in assistance, including the [provision](#) of about \$240 to each displaced person and up to \$720 per person for six months' rent and utilities as needed, as well as schooling and job placement services.

The International Committee of the [Red Cross](#) and [U.N. agencies](#) are providing humanitarian assistance. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [announced](#) the United States would provide

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more than \$11.5 million in regional assistance, including “for those affected by the ongoing crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh.” The European Union (EU) [announced](#) it would provide about \$11 million in humanitarian assistance and another \$16 million in budget support to Armenia. EU member states and others also are providing assistance.

International organizations have made efforts to [assist](#) people remaining in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijani authorities [reported](#) providing food and water, medical supplies, and fuel. A U.N. mission that traveled to the region on October 1 [reported](#) seeing “very few local population” and “heard from interlocutors that between 50 and 1,000 ethnic Armenians” remained.

Future Prospects

Whether displaced persons will seek or be able to return temporarily or on a permanent basis is uncertain. Without commenting on the displacement or possibility of return, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev [said](#) Azerbaijan would protect “the rights and security of the Armenian population of Karabakh,” including their “religious, educational, cultural, municipal, [and other] rights.” The nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch [said](#) “such assertions are difficult to accept at face value after the months of severe hardships, decades of conflict, impunity for alleged crimes ... and the Azerbaijani government’s overall deteriorating human rights record.”

The future of Karabakh Armenians could depend on the prospects for a broader peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. [According](#) to European Council President Charles Michel, who has [offered](#) to continue mediating EU-led negotiations, a peace agreement might address issues related to recognition of the two countries’ territorial integrity and border delimitation; detainees, missing persons, and demining; and the development of transport and economic linkages.

Transport linkages that have been and may continue to be a subject for negotiations are the opening of a [route](#) between mainland Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhchivan, on the other side of Armenia; a restoration of the [Lachin corridor](#) between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; and the [reopening](#) of the land border between Armenia and Turkey (which closed its border in solidarity with Azerbaijan in the 1990s). Such [linkages](#), if established [peacefully](#), could boost the [role](#) of Armenia and Azerbaijan in a transit corridor linking China and Central Asia to Europe. Some [Armenians](#) and [observers](#) have expressed concerns that Azerbaijan might seek to forcibly establish a corridor across Armenia or seize other territory.

Changing Geopolitics

Azerbaijan’s assertion of control over Nagorno-Karabakh could further affect regional geopolitics. After independence, Armenia developed strong security and economic ties to Russia. Since 2018, Armenia has been led by a democratically elected and reform-minded government, while authoritarian Azerbaijan and Russia have improved relations, including by issuing a 2022 [declaration](#) of “allied interaction.”

Armenians [increasingly](#) have [questioned](#) Russia’s reliability as a security guarantor and economic partner, particularly as Moscow did not prevent Azerbaijan from launching its 2020 offensive. Subsequently, the Russian government and peacekeepers stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh did not protect against Azerbaijani [incursions](#), including cross-border [attacks](#) in September 2022, the transit blockage, or the September 2023 offensive. The Armenian government has taken subsequent steps that Russian [officials](#) and [some observers](#) have characterized as efforts to reorient Armenia away from Russia and toward the West. Russia [retains](#) leverage in Armenia, however, due to Armenia’s economic dependency and security needs vis-à-vis Azerbaijan.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Action

Since the 2020 war, U.S. officials have [mediated](#) directly between Azerbaijan and Armenia on various [issues](#), including the cessation of new military hostilities, the release of detainees, border delimitation, transit through the Lachin corridor, and the development of new transport linkages. In September 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [called](#) on Azerbaijan to “provide assurances to the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh that they can live secure in their homes and that their rights will be protected.” Several Members of Congress have cosponsored legislation or signed letters to the Administration supporting assistance to Armenia and displaced persons, the rights and security of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, a prohibition of assistance to Azerbaijan, and/or sanctions on Azerbaijani officials (S. 2900/H.R. 5683, S. 3000, H.R. 5686, H.Res. 735).

Figure I. Armenia and Azerbaijan



Source: CRS, using data from the U.S. Department of State and ESRI. Internal boundaries are approximate.

Note: The region between Armenia and Iran is Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Region.

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