



## Azerbaijan and Armenia Conflict

### WHAT IS HAPPENING?

It has been a few weeks since both International monitors and Armenia have signalled a warning about Azerbaijan rallying their armed forces along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh. This was backed up by claims that Azerbaijan was preparing some sort of offensive attack against the local ethnic Armenian troops. (Videos were taken that showed Azerbaijani vehicles graffitied with an upside-down 'A'-symbol). Important to note: Armenia and Azerbaijan have already fought two wars over Karabakh in the three decades since the Soviet Union they were both members of collapsed.

On September 19th, 2023, Karabakh Armenian officials began to report that Azerbaijan's offensive attacks were starting. The air raid sirens in Stepankert (or Khankendi is the de facto capital) were activated. Residents were told by Azerbaijan to evacuate via humanitarian corridors that would lead them to Armenia. However, the Azerbaijani forces control all of the entry and exit points and many locals fear they will not be allowed to pass safely. Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that they began their offensive actions because at least six people had died in two accidents in the Azeri Khojavend district, allegedly due to landmines installed by Armenia's security forces.

### FEW POINTS THAT HAVE DEVELOPED IN THE LAST 24H:

- The Azerbaijani president has told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Baku is ready to stop “anti-terrorist measures” if Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh lay down their weapons
- Armenia has sent a request to the United Nations Security Council for an emergency meeting on Azerbaijan's military actions
- Russia has called for an immediate return to an agreement signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia that ended the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020.
- US soldiers will complete a joint military exercise with Armenian forces in Armenia on Wednesday as planned, and it has not been affected by Azerbaijan's military action
- According to Russian peacekeeping forces they have evacuated more than 2,000 civilians from the most dangerous areas of Nagorno-Karabakh
- Azerbaijan and Armenian officials in Nagorno-Karabakh offer different claims on what is the target of Azerbaijan's military operation
- Authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh say they have accepted a ceasefire proposed by the Russian peacekeeping mission in the contested region
- A first meeting to discuss the ceasefire agreement between authorities from Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan will take place on Thursday in the Azerbaijani city of Yevlakh
- According to Azerbaijani media, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry says its forces have taken control of more than 90 combat and “strategically important” positions in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- An agreement on a full ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh has been reached and will be implemented in coordination with Russian peacekeepers
- Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh ‘greatly decreased’

# SO, WHAT IS NAGORNO-KARABAKH?

Nagorno-Karabakh referred to as Artsakh by Armenians, is a mountainous region located in the southern part of the Karabakh range, situated within Azerbaijan. Despite its international recognition as part of Azerbaijan, the majority of its inhabitants are ethnic Armenians, and they have their own government closely aligned with Armenia, although this alignment lacks official recognition from other countries. Armenians, mainly followers of Christianity, claim a historical presence in the region that dates back centuries before the Common Era. Azerbaijan, whose population is predominantly Turkic Muslims, also asserts historical connections to the area, which has been influenced by Persians, Turks, and Russians over the centuries. The conflict between these two groups has persisted for more than a century. Recently, a Russian peacekeeping force was deployed to ensure the Lachin Corridor, a crucial route to Armenia, remains open. However, since December, it has been largely closed due to Azerbaijan's allegations of Armenian weapon smuggling and illicit resource extraction. This closure has resulted in severe food shortages in Nagorno-Karabakh, prompting Armenia to accuse Azerbaijan of attempting genocide through starvation.



## THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which has its origins in territorial and ethnic disagreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan, can be traced back to the late 1980s. The region of Nagorno-Karabakh was predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians, and as they aimed to shift the control of this area from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia, tensions began to rise. This increase in tension encountered opposition from both the Soviet government and Azerbaijan. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this prolonged standoff ultimately erupted into a full-scale armed conflict.

On August 30, 1991, Azerbaijan asserted its independence, and shortly thereafter, on September 2, Nagorno-Karabakh also declared its independence. This move by Nagorno-Karabakh was based on Soviet legislation that allowed autonomous regions to decide whether they wanted to remain part of the Soviet Union or join a federated republic within it, and to determine their political and legal status. However, on November 26, Azerbaijan annulled Nagorno-Karabakh's autonomous status, arguing that this action had placed the region in an illegal situation. This eventually led to the first war in 1991, leading to approximately thirty thousand casualties and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

During the summer of 1992, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which would later evolve into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), established the Minsk Group. This group included delegates from eleven nations and was led by co-chairs from France, Russia, and the USA. Its primary role was to act as a mediator in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

By 1993, Armenia had obtained control of the area, meaning they occupied 20% of Azerbaijan's territory. In 1994, a ceasefire known as the Bishkek Protocol was brokered by Russia. This ceasefire left the region in a de facto independent state, with a self-declared government in Stepanakert. However, it stayed closely tied to Armenia in terms of economic, political, and military support.

In early April 2016, the most intense fighting since 1994 took place resulting in hundreds of casualties. After four days of intense fighting, Armenia and Azerbaijan declared a ceasefire. Nevertheless, the negotiations led to accusations of ceasefire violations, which preserved the high tensions.

In late September 2020, heavy fighting erupted along the border between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. This conflict resulted in the deaths of over seven thousand people, with hundreds more injured on both sides. Tensions quickly escalated as they shifted from cross-border shelling to the use of longer-range artillery and heavier weaponry.

On November 9, 2020, after several unsuccessful attempts from countries around the world to mediate a ceasefire Russia managed to broker a deal with the support of Russian peacekeepers; ending the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. This led to Azerbaijan regaining most of its lost territory, leaving Armenia with only a portion of the region. The agreement also set terms on the Lachin corridor, a narrow strip of land which would be monitored by Russian peacekeepers to serve as a transit route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Since the conclusion of the Second War in 2020, ongoing clashes, mutual accusations, and heightened tensions have persisted on both sides. These circumstances have ultimately brought us to the current situation.

This raises the question of why there has been a prolonged conflict spanning decades in an area that is considered to lack significant strategic resources. Scholars have, over the years, associated one of the major challenges regarding Nagorno-Karabakh with its status as a disputable territory from a geographic, demographic, and cultural point of view. From a geographical perspective, Nagorno-Karabakh is situated within the Azerbaijani side of the mountainous watershed that delineates the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In terms of demographics, it has historically been a region characterised by a mixed population, with Armenians predominantly residing in the hilly areas and a higher Azerbaijani population in the plains, including the city of Shusha (or Shushi for the Armenian inhabitants). Culturally, Nagorno-Karabakh holds great importance for both parties involved. Armenians value it for its numerous Armenian churches spread across the region, its historical legacy of local self-governance under the "melik" princes in the Middle Ages, and the dominating amount of Armenians throughout the region. For Azerbaijanis, their connection to the region is primarily tied to the khanate centred around the prominent city of Shusha in the 18th century, as well as the rich cultural contributions of composers and poets. In essence, Nagorno-Karabakh represents a culturally affluent border zone, making it a longstanding battleground due to conflicting interests and territorial claims.

Nevertheless, at present, academics have started to identify a fresh factor contributing to the ongoing conflict between the two nations: water security. Studies are now underway to examine the state of water resources and infrastructure in the area, with the hydropolitical dynamics of Upper Karabakh being recognized as a potential pivotal factor in the aforementioned disputes.

The water reserves of liberated territories in Karabakh, which include rivers, lakes, and groundwater, are roughly quantified at 780 million cubic meters, which accounts for approximately one-fifth of Azerbaijan's indigenous water resources. Azerbaijan may have an abundance of oil and gas, however, it consistently suffers from water scarcity. In recent years, the nation has experienced the consequences of diminishing water supplies in the Kura-Araks River Basin. In contrast, Nagorno-Karabakh possesses an abundant water supply. With this in mind, it comes to no surprise that Nagorno-Karabakh can be seen as having strategic significance in addressing and stabilising Azerbaijan's water security concerns. Although it's challenging to determine the precise impact of this water scarcity on the initiation of Azerbaijan's offensive military actions in 2020, it is evident that water has unquestionably evolved into a highly politicized matter.

