

# NAGORNO-KARABAKH:

A Humanitarian Perspective

An International Christian Concern Investigative Trip Report

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INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

# **NAGORNO-KARABAKH: A HUMANITARIAN PERSPECTIVE**

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN  
INVESTIGATIVE TRIP REPORT



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## KEY OBSERVATIONS

*ICC urges the international humanitarian and religious freedom community to further investigate this situation. Awareness, assistance, and advocacy are the three greatest needs. ICC makes the following humanitarian observations:*

- International, third-party access is a crucial ongoing need, in large part because the conflict continues despite the November 9th ceasefire statement.*
- International recognition of the religious freedom components of this war is an immediate necessity.*
- Peacekeepers are not police. They inherently cannot and are not those responsible for responding to kidnappings, shootings into Artsakh from conquered territories, and other types of criminal activity. These activities remain ongoing.*
- Artsakh's residents remain under threat to their physical integrity, which has created an absence of safety and stabilization that ensures that the consequences of the war are ongoing.*
- Humanitarian needs are immediate and ever-growing. Current solutions are not long-term, and require the presence of multiple humanitarian groups working in coordination to address key assistance issues.*
- Azerbaijan and Turkey's seizure and presumed destruction of personal properties includes that of personal identification papers for displaced persons, further isolating them from humanitarian solutions.*
- Relocation to permanent housing and livelihood development are essential humanitarian needs. This includes vocational training, as several IDPs come from a "white collar" background that is not likely to be reestablished quickly.*

## INTRODUCTION

In most religious freedom cases, there is a level of intimacy involved in the chaos and violence. The incident, and quite often subsequent judicial neglect, comes from within one's own community. It is the neighbor across the street, it is the policeman on the corner, it is the teacher in the school, and sometimes even, it is the family member in one's own home. It is a domestic issue, and for that reason the pain of persecution comes from within and thus carries with it the traits of betrayed intimacy.

This is not the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenian: Artsakh), a majority Armenian Republic who has lived there as Christians since 301 AD. The intimacy of persecution is missing from the current situation. It is not perpetrated by one's spouse, nor by the neighbor one grew up with, nor the teacher in the school. Before this level of intimacy of persecution can be achieved, there is another stage, a stage where two completely different outsiders and their worldviews met one another. It is the stage where a decision is made, can we be together or not? Can we protect and respect each other's diversity? And if the answer is no, then the path is set towards the types of religious persecution we know so well.

The invasion and domination of a community must first happen before persecution comes from within. This is the stage, the question, which is before the religious freedom community regarding Nagorno-Karabakh.

That this question can be newly asked in the 21st century, when in most other religious freedom cases we are responding to the answer already long-established, shows the uniqueness of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Today we are presented with an opportunity to seek a solution before the problem becomes so intimate that we can only respond with assisting one never-ending individual case at a time. Nagorno-Karabakh

needs international help now, today while the question of diverse community is still being asked, because tomorrow is too late. The protection of diversity must be proactive, otherwise, there is no true protection.

For this reason, International Christian Concern (ICC) visited Nagorno-Karabakh in May 2021 and conducted a field investigation, the results of which are contained in the following report. Quite often, we were met with wordless grief as residents struggled to understand why

they are left alone in their hardships and how it is that they have come to be completely surrounded by Turkic nations (Azerbaijan and Turkey) who seek only their complete annihilation.

Every single home visit included tears from men, women, and children as they struggled to explain their own story. They had lived peacefully. They had good lives. So how could this war

have happened? How could they have lost 70% of their homeland? How could have tens of thousands be displaced? How could they have lost their churches, their spiritual center? For what reason? Why?

With long pauses, groans, and tears, they would eventually answer their own questions. Artsakh is where humanity was reborn following Noah's flood; it is where Christianity as a way of existing as a community (rather than merely internally believing) was born. The recent challenges exist because this is who they are, and their existence is not acceptable to Turkey and Azerbaijan. This is persecution at the most fundamental level. This is how persecution starts.

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For additional reading, ICC recommends the following reports:

[The Anatomy of Genocide: Karabakh's Forty-Four Day War](#)

[Turkey: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020](#)



Credit: The Economist

## CONTINUOUS POLICY OF DOMINATION

Nagorno-Karabakh is an isolated enclave of Christianity, an inherent situation because of the harsh mountainous geography sequestering locals from the outside world. Before the 44-day war and subsequent loss of Artsakh territory, locals at least had safe access to Armenia and through it, the outside world. However, territories were captured that left Artsakh mostly surrounded by a nation whose policy is one of complete subjugation, isolation, and eventual elimination of Artsakh's local Armenian Christian population. Such an event is a continuation of Turkey's 1915 genocide against Christians, including Armenians.

Although the peacekeeper presence has improved security, nothing is certain, and many locals expressed a fear that what exists is not reliable long-term. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan (with the support of Turkey, who also provided Syrian mercenaries) is making every attempt to manipulate the situation so that they maintain a posture of dominance towards Artsakh.

One of the most obvious examples is Azerbaijan's limitation of telecommunications for Artsakh's residents. For instance, the city of Stepanakert was not taken by Azerbaijan at any point during the conflict and is the capital of Artsakh. Many IDPs currently reside in Stepanakert. However, Azerbaijan's cyber army controls, attacks, and limits the communication of residents. Assuming there is even a cell signal, the default provider immediately switches to Azerbaijan. Some residents complained of frequent cyber attempts to hack the country's telecommunications systems. Outside of Stepanakert, in other areas which remain under Artsakh control, cell service can be nearly impossible. By preventing residents from

having reliable access to phone and internet services, Azerbaijan is ensuring that locals are rendered voiceless and disconnected from those who would otherwise provide assistance.

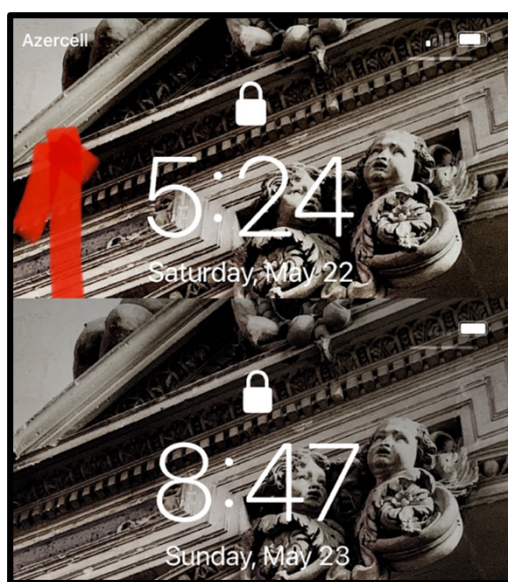
Intimidation tactics towards residents are also frequently displayed and used to ignite fear amongst locals that the war could start again. At the end of Ramadan, on May 16th, Azerbaijan and Turkey hosted a

festival celebrating the capture of Shushi. A [Grey Wolf Cultural Center](#) was opened, and the festival closed with fireworks. Many IDPs from Shushi are now residing in Stepanakert, which is located downhill and only a few minutes away. Many are struggling with the daily pain of seeing their captured city from the windows of their displaced homes, but this struggled turned to paralyzing fear when the fireworks began. *"I did not know if the war had begun again,"* said

one IDP. *"It was kind of making me have a heart attack,"* added another. These sentiments were repeated by many IDPs about the broad range of intimidation tactics used by Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Shushi residents were surprised by the capture of the city by Azerbaijan, and most did not have time to gather their paperwork when they fled. No efforts have been made by Azerbaijan to return this documentation, further handicapping displaced persons and limiting their ability to receive help. They are thus left dominated by the invaders even while displaced.

*"When we were told they were bombing Shushi, we thought it is ok, we will rebuild again. We didn't think that we couldn't be there anymore. We escaped from*



*Azerbaijan attempts control of Artsakh's telecommunications*



our house without taking any documents with us,” said one Shushi family. “Now we don’t have even photos. Of course, we will forget about those memories. Besides stealing and robbing, they destroyed everything.”

Another further explained, “I used to work in Shushi in the Art College. I was teaching theory. Now I am going to lose my job because the government will keep my position only until the end of May, afterwards I will be unemployed. I don’t know what I will do. [When displaced] I just took my passport and went out. I left all of the documents at my

house there. I should be a pensioner, but I don’t have any paper to prove it.”

She added, “I want to become crazy because I live here, but can see Shushi. I left my house, my work, everything.

I came out of there without anything, like being naked. After all of this, I just got disappointed in everything.”

In short, the outcome of Azerbaijan and Turkey’s policy of domination of Artsakh is one which sows continuous fear, shame, and helpless amongst those they displaced.



Living space for a displaced family of 4  
Credit: International Christian Concern

## EXPLOITED ISOLATION SUFFOCATING CHRISTIANITY

Artsakh's geographical isolation has been exploited by Azerbaijan and Turkey in a way that suffocates Christianity. Recommendations from foreign governments that their citizens avoid travel to Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as Turkey and Azerbaijan's attempts to prevent the entry of foreigners, further ensures that the persecution which residents are experiencing remains hidden from view.

According to locals, this geography is where God first repopulated the earth following Noah's flood. It is historically proven that Armenians were the first nation to fully accept Christianity. The integration of this history permeates the modern life of every local resident. Many expressed a special vocational calling to remain in this land as long as possible because it is so intricately tied to the expression of their Christian faith as a community.

Even young children exhibited this desire. For example, a 10-year-old displaced boy, when asked why he misses his home of Shushi, silently left the room and changed into a t-shirt of Gazanchetsots Cathedral. Upon his return, he immediately recited a poem he had written. *"We left you, but be strong we will return. You were given to our enemy in a betrayal without anything, but be strong and patient, we will come again."*

On some level, the land and Christianity have become inseparable, evolving into a distinct culture. Most IDPs expressed a sense of overwhelming sadness at how no one came to their aid during the conflict, and how they are left alone in their subsequent displacement. It is a situation that has caused many to spiritually struggle with their faith identity even while doing everything

possible to protect their faith expression as individuals and as a community.

As one priest shared with ICC, *"We are people of culture, and the cross is our culture. Christianity started here, and it will end here. The silence of the international community is not understandable. Where were you*

*when we were in danger? How often can you get this wrong? The Christian world should wake up."*

During the field trip, ICC frequently asked why displaced persons felt they could not return home. It was a question that always prompted tears from every family member: men and women, adults and children. The essence of the answers was always the same. *"We will not be protected." "We cannot pursue our culture." "They will make us to become Muslim."*



War victims pray at a monastery that remains under Artsakh's control  
Credit: International Christian Concern

A sense of profound isolation permeated every statement. Most displaced persons had led flourishing lives before the 44-day war. Overnight, it was gone. The process of understanding why was a struggle. A different priest shared with ICC that his parishioners *"now always come to me asking, 'Father, is this what God meant by persecution? What did we do to deserve this? Is this because we sinned?'"* Clergy members expressed pastoral difficulties with how their flocks have displaced everywhere, and how if geography is not enough to keep their congregation's members from finding each other again, the ongoing uncertainty ensures it.

Nagorno-Karabakh's residents were already isolated from outsiders before the war. But since September, the sense of isolation has only grown, with devastating humanitarian and religious freedom consequences.



## CHRISTIAN CULTURAL SITES AT RISK OF ELIMINATION

A challenge expressed by clergy members was that because 70% of Nagorno-Karabakh's territory was lost in the war, most of their churches were also lost. As a result, there are not enough churches left in Artsakh to physically support the number of people who were displaced. *"The organization of liturgies is difficult, there are no longer enough churches for all of the people,"* said one priest. A clergy member confirmed that for captured churches exhibited by Azerbaijan as a so-called example of religious freedom, such as Dadivank, access is more often denied than permitted.

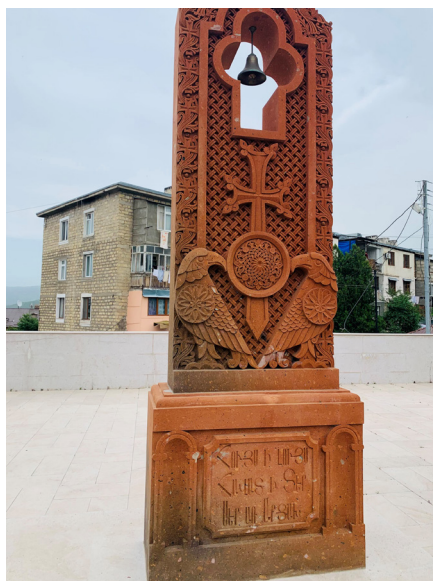
On a congregational level, the impact of this is also felt. Some IDPs expressed how having lost their home church, where in several cases they had spent most of their lives, they are struggling to attend church in their area of displacement. The pain of having the physical heart of their Christian faith violently removed from them is too easily triggered by attending new churches. Other IDPs expressed how losing their home church makes them more convinced to attend new ones, recognizing that this conflict began because of their Christian identity and they are determined to keep that at all costs, or else it feels as if the war was completely lost.

A unique aspect of Artsakh is how infused Christian sites are into the landscape. Even in the more rural areas, it is difficult to drive anywhere without passing a cross, cross-stone, or other Christian symbol every 15 minutes. In many cases, someone is there, praying. The symbol of eternity is frequently paired with in the artwork, further highlighting how this land has been historically Christian for centuries. Churches and monasteries often sit upon a hilltop, making them physically challenging to reach.

Taken collectively, this means that the Turkic destruc-

tion of Christian sites involves a significant amount of work-effort and resources. It is an intentional action, not a causal second thought. A clergy member explained the significance of the destruction of these sites, *"the Christian monuments are our passports, they prove we have been here since the beginning. If there is no history, there is no present nor future."*

Since Azerbaijan and Turkey deny access to the captured territories, it is impossible to know the full fate of the Christian monuments. Numbers vary, but local researchers estimate approximately 161 registered churches and monasteries as well as 591 registered cross-stones are captured. The numbers could be higher when factoring in unregistered and other types of Christian sites.



*An example of a cross-stone in Stepanakert*  
Credit: International Christian Concern

The destruction or alteration of these sites are likely. These actions are often documented on social media by the perpetrators themselves. The most high-profile example is that of Gazanchetsots Cathedral, whose bell tower has been removed as well as the angels guarding the gate. Normally, the cathedral is visible from Stepanakert. *"But now they've covered the church,"* said an IDP. This cathedral was directly hit during the war with precision missiles while people were hiding in it for shelter.

One IDP who previously lived next to the cathedral predicted that they will keep but remodel it, instead "building a mosque next to it" so that the mosque is more visible. Since the removal of the bell tower, it is difficult to locate. ICC attempted to view the cathedral from 3 different locations in Stepanakert with the help of displaced Shushi residents. No attempt was successful. Throughout the time of ICC's visit, something was burning from Shushi which caused a large amount of smoke that covered the entire valley.

## LACK OF PROTECTED STATUS INCREASES UNCERTAINTY

During the Soviet Union period, this was the only regional area where religious worship was forbidden (Christianity for the majority Armenians, Islam for the minority Turks). Indeed, several priests shared how during the past 30 years, much of their pastoral ministry has been devoted to teaching residents how to live their faith publicly given that this was forgotten during the Soviet period. They shared that this is a successful ministry and that many locals are hungry for more opportunities. The same could perhaps be said for the other side.

However, several of Artsakh middle-aged and elderly IDPs shared with ICC how the suppression during the USSR days were better than the experience of genocide which they are currently living. While they felt disconnected from their faith during the USSR period, Armenians and Azeri Turks were equal in this experience. So long as the rules were followed, the Soviets ensured a degree of personal protection of Armenian life and property. Though somewhat disconnected from the practice of Christianity, they were still Christians and at least could live a comparatively safe life.

No interviewed IDP expressed a sense of safety and protection in the current situation. Many of the men, when asked if they believed they were protected, became so emotional that they had to excuse themselves from the room. Upon their return, they expressed with tears that they felt no safety for their families and that their futures were uncertain. Others simply lowered their heads and groaned, unable to answer.

An elderly villager whose adult children were displaced back to his home further explained this. He also shared his concerns that he personally could experience displacement if the current situation continues.

He said, *"Spiritually, we are suffering. We are waiting to see what status they will give us. Maybe we will leave because it is impossible to live with them [Azeris]. On*

*the other hand, how can I get displaced, because I invested thousands of millions of drams into wood working, I built this house myself in 1978. How can I leave all of these things and get displaced? But it is impossible to live with them."*

Another resident more succinctly clarified, *"The result of Gorbachev was the genocide against Christians."* Even uneducated villagers were clear that the origins of this ongoing genocide stems from Turkey and Azerbaijan's "One Nation, Two States" policy. Most framed the recent war using a vocabulary of *"the Turks came"* rather than the *"Azeri came."* They further emphasized that this current genocide cannot be understood without a firm foundation in history. A Turkish citizen further explained the connection, highlighting how Turkey can push Azerbaijan from behind

the scenes, *"Azeris are originally Turks also. But Turks from Turkey are more aggressive."*

Every resident interviewed by ICC shared that their living situation remains uncertain because of the ongoing aggression by the Azeris and Turks. Several expressed a desire for an international peacekeeper presence, often specifically wishing for American and French peacekeepers in addition to the Russians.

They further stated that a lack of an international peacekeeper presence ensures a lack of international awareness about the ongoing challenges faced by residents, thereby ensuring a lack of protection from current and future rights violations by the invaders. Without a strong sense of protection and interest from the international community, the uncertainty grows and leaves residents with little hope and re-traumatization.

*"I now feel desperate. I found out that my relatives are all alive, I had come to doubt that a bit. But now I am desperate about the uncertainty. Like when I need to clean the wall, I can't do it because I don't have the strength. I was connected to my home,"* said one displaced woman.



*A home where the displaced are gathered*

*Credit: International Christian Concern*

## IT'S NOT OVER

Although a ceasefire was signed in November, most IDPs shared that they have kept their luggage packed, as they feel that the war could start again at any minute. Many pointed out that in the best-case scenario, the war would be delayed for five years. This references the length of the ceasefire agreement; it is uncertain whether the peacekeepers would stay beyond that time.

Military service is mandatory in Artsakh at 18 years old. However, the 44-day war was unique in that because Azerbaijan was militarily supported by Turkey through the use of foreign mercenaries (mostly former terrorist members from Syria), most men in Artsakh were called into service. Even some of those who were ineligible for age or health reasons choose to join the service in order to defend their homes. Nonetheless, they were militarily overwhelmed and 70% of Nagorno-Karabakh was lost.

*"I am from Shushi and an invalid from the first war. I got wounded. My problems are with my spine. Now I need to go to Yerevan for [regular] rehabilitation. But there are so many wounded people there that there is a big que. So, I am waiting,"* said an elderly IDP.

He continued, *"I should not have taken part in this war, but I was there, protecting. When they asked us in November to leave our arms and to go out of Shushi, I knew that it was finished. I have no right to leave this place, I have so many friends who passed away [in this war]."*

Every family interviewed by ICC was personally impacted by the war through either a loss of life or loss of communication with a loved one who was defending their home. For example, one IDP shared, *"If I look at this situation, I think I will not stop being in the army. [But] it means being separated from my family. During the war, I couldn't manage to come home for two months... They started the war. There was no communication [with my family], then it was recovered in two months."* During those

two months, his wife and children were displaced. They did not know whether the other was alive.

It was a frequently repeated story, and one consistently framed within the language of self-defense. Even the women who were left behind during the war expressed no regret at having to manage their families' displacement alone, saying that their male relatives were defending their families, their homes, their villages, in the hopes that displacement would not happen. Some of the women were pregnant at the time, giving birth while fleeing and while her husband was protecting their home. A sense of hopelessness for peace penetrates many of their thoughts. As one woman tearfully said, *"I have three grandchildren: a boy and a girl, and a boy is soon to come. Another soldier is going to be born. His name will be David."*

On a separate but related note, ICC frequently encountered Syrian and Lebanese Armenian refugees during the field trip. Particularly in the case of Syrians, most



A memorial in Stepanakert of those killed in the war. Young boys and the elderly died defending their homes  
Credit: International Christian Concern



of whom were from Aleppo, they had fled their homes because of persecution only to discover it in a different format within the past year. One refugee woman interviewed by ICC shared that *“people here in Karabakh don’t get it. We [Syrians] experienced persecution from within, from our neighbors, from the policeman. Here, the persecution comes from the outside, it’s different. But they’ve never experienced that alternative.”* She further commented that the observation is often made

that she had fled one war only to encounter another. She did not feel that it was necessarily a fair comparison because the type of persecution was so different.

But Artsakh’s residents often observed that this other type of persecution is not so far away if the situation continues along this trajectory, and that is why they must cling to their faith.



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