



# Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border

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Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

[brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Deadly July 2020 clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces left dozens dead, civilians among them, and forced villagers to flee their homes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border. Shooting across the trenches along the border is more frequent today than anywhere else on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's front lines.

**Why does it matter?** Efforts by Baku and Yerevan, including through limited diplomacy, a communication channel set up in 2018 and an agreement between the two sides to safeguard farmers, have largely failed to create conditions that would deter people from leaving border areas. Violence there also risks permanently damaging wider peace efforts.

**What should be done?** The two sides should use the communication channel to warn each other about planned engineering works or other activities that might be misconstrued and lead to escalation. They should begin talks on limited cooperation to allow farmers to harvest crops, repair water networks and clear mines.

## *Executive Summary*

The mid-July 2020 escalation on Armenia and Azerbaijan's densely populated state border, which killed over a dozen people and sent women and children fleeing, should sound as a warning. Villagers on both sides of the 230km, trench-lined border have long lived in fear of clashes and landmines. Three decades after the 1992-1994 war over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, children go to schools behind ever-thicker cement walls, farmers shun fertile but mine-riddled fields and young people seek their future elsewhere. International mediation efforts have largely ignored the border regions, focused on untangling disagreements over Nagorno-Karabakh itself. But July's violence shows how critical it is to pay attention to the safety of more than 150,000 civilians living there. Yerevan and Baku should keep channels open to find mutually beneficial ways to cooperate along the border. The shooting should not stop them from exploring collaboration on narrow initiatives to allow children to attend school, farmers to harvest crops, herders to put livestock to pasture, and water to flow to taps and fields.

For both sides, the potential cost in lives and property of violence is higher along the border than in other areas. Neither side has a clear military advantage in the border zone. Military positions and front-line trenches are so close in places that residents can shout to soldiers on the other side. The border is at the crossroads of the three post-Soviet states of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. As such, it is criss-crossed by key roads, railways and pipelines pumping natural resources from Russia to the region or from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Europe. Both sides not only have an interest in avoiding disruptions to this infrastructure but also stand to benefit from repurposing and repairing sundered cross-border Soviet-era water supply networks.

Simmering tensions have long choked efforts by both Azerbaijan and Armenia to stem emigration from their border regions. Both sides have built protective walls around public buildings and key roads, dug bomb shelters and instituted crisis training in schools. They have tried a mix of tax incentives, subsidies and other initiatives to spur development and built irrigation works to help farmers. These measures have done little to stop the outflow of people with the means to leave, while some ageing residents have not bothered to repair damaged homes, whose crumbling stands as testament to their fatalism. A looming economic crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic injects even greater volatility into the standoff, making it harder for people in the region to make ends meet. Longer-term climate trends will likely also exacerbate shortages of water and arable land. Only through cooperation can Baku and Yerevan make a lasting difference in the lives of people in the border regions.

The two sides should not now walk away from their breakthrough accords of 2018 and 2019. Those understandings for the first time in over fifteen years reopened direct communication lines between security personnel and political representatives in both capitals. The channels, which have so far only been used in the wake of flare-ups, served in recent days to allow for retrieval of the dead. The 2019 detente also led the parties to agree for the first time to show particular restraint along the border during the harvest, allowing for a modest expansion of farming. The fresh violence

now threatens the livelihoods of many facing the impossible choice of leaving their crops to rot or risking their lives gathering their produce for market. Were the two sides to expand communication to include preventive messaging, such as notification of planned engineering works or dates of harvests, they might avoid future misunderstandings or escalations. With time, doing so may also build good-will to allow for further, limited cooperation on areas of mutual interest, such as fixing critical water infrastructure and demining farmlands.

The July clashes, the most serious between the two parties since 2016, also risk hardening attitudes concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. The death of a popular Azerbaijani general in the border skirmishes pushed tens of thousands of angry citizens into Baku's streets to call for revenge and the return of Nagorno-Karabakh. More violence on the border would only fan those flames. Diplomatic progress on the border not only would be easier to accomplish than progress over Nagorno-Karabakh, but also, at this point, is an essential prerequisite for it.

**Baku/Yerevan/Brussels, 24 July 2020**

# Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border

## I. Introduction

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The Armenia-Azerbaijan border zone was not always a place of entrenched rival militaries and palpable hostility breaking out in periodic shooting. Older residents remember the close ties that bound people across the boundary the Soviet Union had drawn between its two republics. The Azerbaijani side was home to the biggest regional markets, while some Armenians were fluent in Azeri and studied or completed their military service in the republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it is in these once-intermingled border villages that ethnic violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis first erupted in the late 1980s, stirred by irredentism in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1991, upon the Soviet Union's collapse and independence for both countries, the former administrative border between two republics became an international border. Three western Azerbaijani districts lie on one side of the trench-lined divide and the Armenian region of Tavush on the other. The ethnic violence and ensuing 1992-1994 war over Nagorno-Karabakh left hundreds of people displaced from centuries-old settlements on both sides of the border.<sup>2</sup> Though recognised by the UN, the border remains undemarcated, and soldiers from both countries are dug into positions on both sides.<sup>3</sup> More than 150,000 people live close to the front lines, with 26 Armenian and 84 Azerbaijani villages within 10km of the border.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Trade persisted after the 1992-1994 war in neighbouring Georgia, stopping only in 2006, when Georgian authorities closed the Sadakhlo market for reasons unrelated to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. See "From War Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus", *International Alert*, 2004, pp. 218-226. The market was officially shut down in 2007. See "Sadakhlo Neutral Zone for Armenian-Azerbaijani Contacts: Use of Trade as a Tool for Conflict Transformation", *Caucasus Edition*, 1 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Most Armenians displaced from the border area come from Artsvashen – an Armenian village inside Azerbaijan that saw clashes in August 1992. Around 710 families had to flee their homes. See "Artsvashen's fall was due to its location, says village governor", *Tert.am*, 3 August 2013; and Tatul Hakobyan, "Armenian Border: Tavush", ANI Armenian Research Centre, February 2015, p. 10-11 (Armenian). Around 7,803 Azerbaijanis were displaced from seven villages in Gazakh district (Baganis Ayrym, Kheyrymly, Ashaghy Askipara, Barkhudarly, Sofulu, Gyzylhajyly and Yukhary Askipara). See "Consequences of the Aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan", State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Armenia and Azerbaijan never officially delimited their borders after the Soviet Union's demise. Each army controls patches of territory that lie on the other's side of the UN-recognised border, which corresponds to the Soviet-era administrative line.

<sup>4</sup> Today, on the Armenian side, there are 26 villages and one town, which together have a population of more than 38,000, within 10km of the border. Around sixteen of them, with around 14,500 people, are between or right next to the trenches: Chinari, Movses (Mosesgegh), Aygepar, Nerkin Karimiraghbyur, Paravakar, Kirants, Vazashen, Berkaber, Voskepar, Baghanis, Voskevan, Koti, Barekamavan, Dovegh, Berdavan and Kayan. For demographic data, see the de facto population figures in the Tavush region at "Marzes of the Republic of Armenia and Yerevan City in Figures, 2011", Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, 2011 (Armenian). A *marz* is an Armenian administra-

Tensions in the area have remained high for years, reaching a zenith in 2014, when several weeks of clashes drove many locals to emigrate.<sup>5</sup> Another uptick came in 2016, when fighting erupted in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.<sup>6</sup> The Armenian and Azerbaijani armies faced off along the international border, moving heavy vehicles and artillery closer to the trenches.<sup>7</sup> An urgent ceasefire on the fourth day of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh pulled them back from the brink.

While the border regions have seen relative calm since then, tensions have been rising again in the last two years. Even before the July 2020 skirmishes, the international border area had been the most active stretch of the front line. From 2016 to 2018, clashes along the border accounted for only 7 per cent of all soldiers and civilians killed or wounded in the conflict, but in the last two years the proportion has doubled.<sup>8</sup> Most of these have taken place along the northern part of the border, close to Georgia; the latest fighting flared up on 12 July to the south, between Movses in Armenia and Agdam in Azerbaijan – mountain villages on opposite sides of the border, both surrounded by trenches.

What sparked the July escalation remains unclear; each party accuses the other of conducting the first strike.<sup>9</sup> Yerevan's defence minister said an Azerbaijani jeep drove close to an Armenian outpost, catching Armenian soldiers off guard: “[F]or as yet unknown reasons, Azerbaijani servicemen got out of the car and moved toward our position”.<sup>10</sup> Rather than employing “some form of communication” to retrieve the vehicle, which they abandoned after Armenian troops issued a warning, he said,

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tive province. On the Azerbaijani side, there are 84 villages, with a total population of over 110,000, within 10km of the border. The biggest villages, home to some 36,000, are in the Gazakh district. Crisis Group counted the number of villages using the OpenStreetMap database, and completed the population data using the 2009 census. Another census was carried out in 2019, but a thorough breakdown for the border regions is not publicly available. See the “Azerbaijan Population Census 2009”, Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan. Demographic data on Gazakh's border villages is available at the official website of Gazakh district's executive authority.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Berkaber and Nerkin Karmiraghbyur (Armenia), December 2017 and November 2018. See also “Towards a Secure Future: Community Voices in the Border Areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan”, Saferworld, January 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone includes the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and the seven Armenian-controlled adjacent territories. See a detailed map at Crisis Group's *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Paravakar and Berkaber (Armenia), December 2017 and November 2018.

<sup>8</sup> According to official Armenian and Azerbaijani reports, at least nine people were killed and six wounded in violence along the border from September 2018 to the July 2020 clashes. There was one civilian among the dead and two among the wounded. The sides reported at least seven soldiers killed from April 2016 through September 2018. See a detailed database of the relevant official reports at Crisis Group's *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*.

<sup>9</sup> “No. 158/20, Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 12 July 2020; “Comment by the Spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry of Armenia on the ceasefire violations by the Azerbaijani armed forces in the direction of the Tavush region”, official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 13 July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “PM: “Armenia's armed forces keep the situation under full control: no provocative action goes unanswered””, official website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 13 July 2020.

the Azerbaijanis began shelling.<sup>11</sup> Baku rejected this version of events, saying its soldiers were on a routine patrol when they were shot at.<sup>12</sup> “The Armenian side ambushed them in a premeditated attack. ... The soldiers on patrol had to retreat to their posts, and then the Armenians opened fire on our post with artillery”.<sup>13</sup> A few days earlier, Baku’s ambassador to Moscow had stressed that the vehicle was “not a tank. They could have immediately called – got in touch by radio. They have a local way to contact each other, a hotline”.<sup>14</sup>

The mutual accusations of failure to use communications channels before resorting to violence show awareness of these channels’ potential. But in this case the channels availed the sides little: the July fighting wound up being a rare instance in which the sides used heavy weapons before it tapered off. As of 21 July, Azerbaijan was reporting twelve of its military personnel, including a well-regarded general, and one civilian killed, while Armenia was reporting four military casualties and one civilian wounded.<sup>15</sup>

Such violence takes a heavy toll on civilians on both sides of the border. Even in tranquil periods, daily life is constrained by fear of renewed clashes and limited economic prospects. Families keep their children out of school for long periods because several have been hurt on the way there and back. Graves located in no-man’s land or near minefields are left untended – in painful violation of deep-seated traditions. When violence breaks out, as in mid-July, the elderly, women and children are evacuated. Some return within days, but others do not. In the aftermath of the most recent clashes, a villager told Crisis Group that evacuees “are waiting to see what will happen. ... It is not safe here”.<sup>16</sup>

Those who can get out do so, usually to look for work in Baku, Yerevan, Russia or Turkey. It is mostly young men who depart, leaving wives, children and parents of pensioner age behind.<sup>17</sup> Reliance on remittances from male family members has led to selective abortion – families terminating pregnancies if the baby is a girl – in the region.<sup>18</sup> “People leave because they lost their last means of living”, said an Armenian priest.<sup>19</sup> “Even if we were allowed access to all our lands ... there would be no young

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Azerbaijani official, 21 July 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Посол Азербайджана в России назвал провокацией со стороны Армении инцидент с применением артиллерии в Товузском районе”, *Ekho Moskvy*, 14 July 2020 (Russian).

<sup>15</sup> Please see Crisis Group’s *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer* for more details.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, village resident, Alibeyli, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), July 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local officials, international organisation representatives, village residents, Ijevan and Yerevan (Armenia), Tovuz and Gazakh districts (Azerbaijan), October-November 2018, June-July 2019 and September 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village resident, international organisation representatives, priest, Armenia, October-November 2018. For more about the problem of selective abortion, see “Listen to Her: Gendered Effects of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Women’s Priorities for Peace”, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, p. 26; Suzanne Moore, “We lose 1,400 girls a year. Who would our boys marry?: Armenia’s quandary”, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, priest, Berd (Armenia), November 2018. Berd was hit by a drone strike during the July 2020 fighting. See “Comment by the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson on the Shelling of the City of Berd by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces”, official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 14 July 2020.

people to work there”, said a female teacher in neighbouring Movses.<sup>20</sup> Attempts by Baku and Yerevan to improve security and spur growth have done little to alleviate the area’s plight.

In the wake of the July clashes, this report looks at insecurity and ways to reduce it in the Armenia-Azerbaijan border zone. It is based on dozens of interviews conducted in Baku, Yerevan and localities on both sides of the border from November 2018 through December 2019, as well as telephone interviews since then. It includes the views of former and current officials, diplomats, military and security officers, NGO workers, independent experts, clerics and tens of residents in the border regions. In Armenia, field research took place in the biggest towns and border villages of the Tavush region. In Azerbaijan, it took place in four districts – Gazakh, Tovuz, Gadabay and Aghstafa – and approximately 25 villages during June-July 2019. Crisis Group had official permission to travel to these Azerbaijani districts and meet with Border Service officials in other villages. Officials denied a request to visit sensitive outposts in Gazakh and Aghstafa. The report does not cover the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, where greater calm reigns and where the Armenian and Azerbaijani militaries are dug in along a 246km border.

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<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Movses (Armenia), November 2018. See also “Announcement by the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia”, 13 July 2020.

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## II. Efforts to Improve Security, Stem Emigration

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Neither side has a clear military advantage in the border zone, leading to an unstable standoff characterised by frequent ceasefire violations that nevertheless stop short of the fighting seen in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.<sup>21</sup> Settlements in proximity to the trenches render civilians on both sides equally vulnerable. While the prospect of civilian casualties may discourage the sides from using heavy weaponry, it also means that any escalation risks taking a fearsome human toll.<sup>22</sup> The resulting anxiety is an omnipresent feature of life in the area, stunting development and overshadowing steps by both governments to reassure their populations.

Efforts by both sides to bolster their position through security relations with neighbouring states have acted as a mutual deterrent: Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which calls upon members to come to one another's aid in case of outside attack, while Azerbaijan has strengthened its ties with Turkey.<sup>23</sup> Since 2015, the CSTO has issued regular statements of concern about clashes along the border, as it did on 14 July.<sup>24</sup> In the words of a former Armenian official, CSTO membership is "a security umbrella for us, although one with holes in it".<sup>25</sup> Russia voiced "extreme concern" over the flare-up in fighting and said it was ready to mediate.<sup>26</sup> Baku, which is not a member but nonetheless has its own close ties to Moscow and other CSTO members, says only a full-fledged incursion into Armenia by its military – an eventuality it views as unlikely – would trigger CSTO intervention.<sup>27</sup> After the July clashes, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev complained about Armenia's appeal to the CSTO: "What does the CSTO have to do with it?"<sup>28</sup>

While the United States, Russia and the European Union (EU) all called on both sides to show restraint amid the July clashes, Turkey threw its full weight behind Azerbaijan, its statements replete with bellicose rhetoric. Armenia will be "buried under their own plot, drown in it, and will absolutely pay for what they did", Turkey's

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<sup>21</sup> In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, Armenian forces have a clear advantage. They control most strategic hilltops, especially along the northern and north-eastern sections of the front line. Azerbaijani trenches are located close to civilian areas, especially near the middle of the front line. Almost 300,000 Azerbaijani civilians live within 15km of the trenches. On the Armenian side, no more than 7,000 people live so close to the trenches. See Crisis Group Europe Report N°244, *Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds*, 1 June 2017, pp. 4-7.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, military officers, Tavush region (Armenia), November 2018.

<sup>23</sup> The 2012 CSTO declaration does not make clear what kind of support a member state can expect in case of foreign aggression. One line reads, "In case of need the mechanism for joint consultations will be brought into action". The other line contains a commitment from all the member states not to take part in actions that might harm any one of them. See more at "Declaration of the Member States of the Collective Security Treaty", official CSTO website, 26 April 2012 (Russian).

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, expert in Russia-Armenia military relations, Yerevan, November 2019. See also "The CSTO Secretariat commentary on the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border that arose on July 12, 2020", official CSTO website, 14 July 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, former official, Yerevan, November 2018.

<sup>26</sup> "Russia ready to mediate talks between Armenia, Azerbaijan", *Moscow Times*, 17 July 2020.

<sup>27</sup> "Azerbaijan building up forces in Nakhchivan", Eurasianet, 10 August 2017.

<sup>28</sup> "President Ilham Aliyev chairs meeting of Cabinet of Ministers", Azvision, 15 July 2020.

defence minister said.<sup>29</sup> Azerbaijan's ties with Turkey were strengthened by an agreement "on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance", signed in 2010 just days before Yerevan extended Russia's lease for military bases in Armenia.<sup>30</sup> The Baku-Ankara agreement prioritises military cooperation, including mutual assistance in the event of an attack or act of aggression upon either country.<sup>31</sup> In response to Ankara's backing of Baku in July, Armenia accused Turkey of "neo-Ottoman policies" and meddling in the South Caucasus.<sup>32</sup>

Both sides also worry that ceasefire violations along the border might damage strategic roads, railways and energy infrastructure. A major road and a railway linking Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey run near the Azerbaijani side of the border. The 692km South Caucasus pipeline, which transports natural gas from the Shah Deniz field to the Georgian-Turkish border, lies some 15km from Azerbaijan's border districts of Aghstafa and Tovuz. The 1,768km Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline also passes through Aghstafa and Tovuz, carrying oil from Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey.<sup>33</sup> On the Armenian side, the main highway and a railway connecting the country to Georgia, Russia and other parts of Europe pass through the northern Tavush region, as does a Russian pipeline bearing gas to Armenia.

A boast by Azerbaijan's military amid heightened tensions on 16 July that its new missile system had ample range to reach a Soviet-era nuclear power plant near Yerevan highlighted both the strategic importance of critical infrastructure and constraints against further escalation.<sup>34</sup> After the threat made international headlines and prompted outrage in Yerevan, a high-ranking Azerbaijani official walked it back, saying, "Azerbaijan has no policy of targeting critical strategic facilities".<sup>35</sup>

Despite the structural checks on escalation by both sides, residents feel the danger of stray bullets acutely and daily. Efforts by both sides to boost villagers' sense of security with school safety drills and protective barriers around public buildings are no more than a band-aid. "When my son is a minute late [coming home] from school, I fear", a mother of two said.<sup>36</sup> The barriers have eased concerns among some but serve as permanent reminders of insecurity for others. A 70-year-old who bricked up

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<sup>29</sup> "Turkish Defence Minister Akar: Armenia will definitely pay for what they did", Anadolu Agency, 16 July 2020 (Turkish).

<sup>30</sup> "Azerbaijan and Turkey sign agreement on strategic partnership and mutual assistance", *Trend*, 16 August 2010; "Russia secures military presence in Armenia until 2044", Euractiv, 23 August 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Article 2 of the agreement stipulates that the form and volume of such assistance shall be agreed upon without delay. Article 5 demands that neither party take part in alliances and actions that may be directed against the independence, sovereignty or territorial integrity of the other; or allow its territory to be used for acts of aggression or violence against the other. The full version of the agreement is available in Azerbaijani at the E-Qanun database.

<sup>32</sup> "Interview of the Foreign Minister of Armenia Zohrab Mnatsakanyan with Sky News Arabia", official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 19 July 2020.

<sup>33</sup> See the fact sheet about the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline at the BP Azerbaijan website.

<sup>34</sup> "Azerbaijani MoD: our army's missile systems allow us to hit Metsamor nuclear power plant with high accuracy", APA, 16 July 2020.

<sup>35</sup> "Hikmat Hajiyev: Armenia has deliberately turned Metsamor issue, which poses serious threat for region, into show", APA, 21 July 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Haciali and Alibeyli, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

a window 100m from military positions said, “I feel like I am living in a prison”.<sup>37</sup> Residents erect most of the walls themselves, using building materials supplied by the respective governments, sometimes resulting in flimsy constructions that cannot withstand sniper fire.<sup>38</sup> The barriers become useless if troops on the other side move their positions. Residents clamour for more and better protection in the absence of a palpable lowering of tensions. One exasperated Armenian village head said, “One can’t put the whole village behind concrete walls”.<sup>39</sup>

On both sides of the border, security services hold sway and treat outsiders with suspicion. In recent years, Baku in particular has tightened security measures in the region. Amendments to the laws on state secrets and media enacted in late 2014 limit access by journalists and other non-residents. These measures became more stringent after the April 2016 escalation, according to locals, possibly due to a May 2017 presidential decree on “rules for providing an enhanced security regime in residential areas within the front lines”, though the “rules” are not public.<sup>40</sup> Baku has opened new police stations in most border villages and installed new surveillance cameras.<sup>41</sup> Despite the changes, security in the border villages is largely a question of topography. In some villages, Azerbaijani forces are dug into strong defensive positions. In others, the Armenian military holds the higher ground.

In a bid to present a more human face to residents, Baku replaced the military with the State Border Service in the Gazakh district and parts of Aghstafa in December 2018. The change brought new restrictions on movement, especially for farmers and agricultural labourers, who must get daily permission from the Border Service to work in their fields.<sup>42</sup> “We are now unable to secure our daily income because we can only get into our farmlands for part of the day”, a farmer in Qushchu Ayrim in the Gazakh district said.<sup>43</sup> Border guards are also conducting more patrols, including occasional checks of identity documents, in residential areas. The new measures have done little to assuage safety concerns among those living near the front lines and may even have raised tensions, as they provoked alarm on the Armenian side.

Both Yerevan and Baku have also sought to stimulate development in the border villages – as part of efforts to stem emigration. Azerbaijan has repaired roads; increased financial and technical support to small businesses; carried out irrigation

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<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Mezem, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Gazakh and Tovuz districts (Azerbaijan), June–July 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, village head, Koti (Armenia), October 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Presidential decree on “Rules for providing enhanced security regime in residential areas within the front lines”, E-Qanun database, May 2017 (Azerbaijani).

<sup>41</sup> Seymour Kazimov, “New curbs on conflict zone reporting in Azerbaijan”, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 7 October 2014; “13 new police stations built in the border villages of Gazakh district”, AIA, 10 October 2018 (Azerbaijani).

<sup>42</sup> According to Azerbaijan’s 1995 law on the state border, “Persons who do not reside permanently on the border line or in areas between the state border and technical fences of border security agencies are allowed to enter there only when products or services are required. The procedure for the release and temporary stay of such citizens, as well as the rules for water use, agricultural and other activities there, shall be established by the relevant executive authority in consultation with local authorities”. Crisis Group translation from the Azerbaijani.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Quschu Ayrim, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), July 2019.

work; and granted some villages special status making residents there eligible for gas and electricity subsidies. For its part, the Armenian government has introduced subsidies for electricity, natural gas and drinking water.<sup>44</sup> It has spent almost \$40 per person in the area annually since 2015.<sup>45</sup> Yerevan has also abolished two business taxes to attract investors to the area and is considering getting rid of more.<sup>46</sup> “Our soldiers need to see life to understand who they are protecting”, said a military commander in the Tavush region.<sup>47</sup>

But these policies have not succeeded in attracting more investment to the region or slowing emigration.<sup>48</sup> What little money flows into the region comes from the Armenian diaspora, who donate to medical facilities and schools. In a few villages, Armenian expatriates have opened small businesses employing local women.<sup>49</sup> “It’s more about charity than a real business”, said the manager of one such enterprise.<sup>50</sup>

The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic will only make matters worse. In Azerbaijan’s border districts, which account for some 7 per cent of the country’s agricultural production including 35 per cent of its potato crop, locals have faced bureaucratic delays obtaining permission to continue work during lockdowns while their produce rotted.<sup>51</sup> Others lacked the field hands to sow their crops.<sup>52</sup> The collapse in oil prices has also hit Azerbaijan hard: it will likely drive up unemployment and reduce the budget allocations for border areas. In Armenia, the post-Soviet country seemingly worst affected by the coronavirus per capita with more than 35,000 confirmed infections, an economic contraction is also expected.<sup>53</sup> Remittances, which account for some 13 per cent of GDP in Armenia and almost 3 per cent in Azerbaijan, will likely shrink.<sup>54</sup> The economic pressure may push farmers back to precarious farmlands despite the insecurity in many areas.

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<sup>44</sup> See the decree that lists all the subsidies: “Decision by the Government of the Republic of Armenia N 144-N”, 18 December 2014 (Armenian).

<sup>45</sup> The estimate is based on population figures and the amounts allocated by the Armenian government in 2015-2018.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, official, Ijevan (Armenia), September 2019. The cuts came in income and value-added taxes. See “Law on Tax Breaks for Enterprise in the Border Zone”, 20 November 2014 (Armenian). The Armenian parliament is discussing cutting the revenue tax in the border zone from 23 to 10 per cent. See the Tax Code Amendment (Armenian) proposed in November 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, military commander, Tavush region (Armenia), November 2018.

<sup>48</sup> According to 2001 and 2011 census data, the population in four Armenian villages (Movses, Aygedzor, Chinari and Barekamovan) fell by 25-40 per cent; in nine villages (Nerkin Karimiraghbyur, Vazashen, Aygepar, Kayan, Voskepar, Koti, Artsvaber, Verin Karimiraghbyur and Choratan) by 15-24 per cent; and in five villages (Aygehovit, Paravakar, Berdavan, Tsaghkavan and Berkaber) by 10-14 per cent. See “The Results of 2001 Population Census of RA” and “Marzes of the Republic of Armenia and Yerevan City in Figures, 2011”, Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia.

<sup>49</sup> There is a glove factory, for example, and a cannery, both producing for export to Russia. Crisis Group interviews, local businessmen, Movses, Berd and Aygedzor (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local businessmen, Berd (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>51</sup> The Azerbaijani districts of Gazakh, Tovuz, Gadabay and Aghstafa also accounted for 13 per cent of the country’s grapes, 12 per cent of its sugar beets, and 5 per cent of its cereals and beans. “The Agriculture of Azerbaijan”, Statistical Yearbook, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, farmers, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), 1 May 2020.

<sup>53</sup> See the latest updates on numbers of COVID-19 patients on the official website of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia.

<sup>54</sup> See Global Remittances Guide by the Migration Policy Institute.

### III. Preventive Messaging

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In September 2018, the then newly elected Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev agreed to set up a new communication channel amid an international push to lower tensions following clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>55</sup> The leaders reached agreement outside the usual OSCE Minsk Group format, co-chaired by representatives of Russia, U.S. and France, that governs the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Pashinyan and Aliyev clinched what one diplomat described as an unscripted accord on the sidelines of a Russia-led summit of post-Soviet states in Dushanbe. It listed technical steps to reduce tensions; Pashinyan kept the original piece of paper and Aliyev photographed it for the record on his mobile phone.<sup>56</sup> The communication channel they put in place is used to discuss incidents along the front lines. Although the respective defence ministries operate the line, communications through this channel go directly to the top security services personnel who brief the two leaders.

Since then, prospects for resetting the peace process have dimmed, and the July skirmishes further narrowed space for discussion. After the worst of the clashes, Pashinyan urged a resumption of talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs, repeating a call for more rigorous international monitoring of ceasefire violations.<sup>57</sup> In the past, Russia has offered to deploy its troops to the conflict zone to deter any further escalation, but both Yerevan and Baku turned the Kremlin down, wishing for a more international peace monitoring presence in the region.<sup>58</sup>

In any case, officials in Baku said now was not the time for talks.<sup>59</sup> The death of a well-respected Azerbaijani general in the July fighting stirred one of the largest street protests in recent years. Major General Polad Hashimov was the highest-ranking official killed on the battlefield since the 1994 ceasefire. In the wake of his death, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets, demanding that Baku go to war to return Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control, with a small number storming Azerbaijan's parliament in anger.<sup>60</sup> Aliyev praised the demonstrations as "another picture showing the unity of the people and power", though he denounced the incursion into parliament.<sup>61</sup> A day later, he sacked his foreign minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, who had been the country's key emissary in peace talks with Armenia for sixteen years, accusing him of leading "useless negotiations" to allow the World Health Organiza-

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<sup>55</sup> "Release of the Press Service of the President", official website of the President of Azerbaijan, 28 September 2018; Emil Sanamyan, "Agreed to reduce tensions": Aliyev, Pashinyan talk in Dushanbe", CivilNet, 30 September 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, October 2018.

<sup>57</sup> "PM Pashinyan: 'An international system of reliable ceasefire monitoring needs to be established'", official website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 19 July 2020.

<sup>58</sup> See Crisis Group Europe Report N°255, *Digging out of Deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 20 December 2019.

<sup>59</sup> "There were many opportunities before the incident to work on security-related cooperation in the border areas. ... Not now". Crisis Group interview, senior Azerbaijani official, Baku, 21 July 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "Unauthorised procession of thousands of people through streets of Baku lasted all night", Turan Agency, 15 July 2020.

<sup>61</sup> "Azerbaijani opposition hit with new arrests following Aliyev speech", OC Media, 17 July 2020; "Azerbaijan fires foreign minister", Eurasianet, 16 July 2020.

tion access to Nagorno-Karabakh to help its residents deal with the pandemic.<sup>62</sup> Aliyev replaced Mammadyarov with the relatively low-profile education minister.

As noted above, the origins of the escalation remain murky. What is clear is that neither side appears to have availed itself of the existing communication channel.<sup>63</sup> It was only used after calls by the OSCE and EU to do so, and then only in order to allow Azerbaijan to safely retrieve its dead.<sup>64</sup> This is nothing new. The two sides rarely use the channel to relay information on planned activities on the front – such as troop movements or reinforcement of trenches – and thereby to minimise risks of misunderstandings.

Nor was it the first time that the channel could have come in handy. For instance, it could have lowered the tensions that have regularly emerged since December 2018, after Baku replaced soldiers with border guards in Gazakh and a part of Aghstafa bordering Armenia's Tavush region. Baku maintains that it intended the move as an olive branch – but it appears to have backfired.<sup>65</sup> “We wanted the demilitarisation of the border areas. Therefore, we deployed the border guards”, a senior government official said.<sup>66</sup> The border guards began building new bases as they moved in. “The establishment of a border security system requires land clearing and considerable digging”, one border guard official explained.<sup>67</sup> Across the border, however, “no one could understand why they were digging”, said an Armenian commander.<sup>68</sup> The unusual activity may partly account for the rise in tensions. Today, 60 per cent of all clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia occur in the border regions.<sup>69</sup> Thirteen of the sixteen incidents since September 2018 have taken place in the area that the border guards control.<sup>70</sup>

In the last decade, the Minsk Group co-chairs have on occasion floated ideas for strengthening the ceasefire regime along the international border, including by opening a direct line of communication between military commanders.<sup>71</sup> Commanders in trenches on both sides of the border in Nakhchivan have been communicating via hotline since the mid-1990s. But attempts to make similar arrangements along other sections of the border have gained little traction.

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<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°89, *The COVID-19 Challenge in Post-Soviet Breakaway States*, 6 May 2020.

<sup>63</sup> “PM: ‘Armenia’s armed forces keep the situation under full control: no provocative action goes unanswered”, official website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 13 July 2020.

<sup>64</sup> “An Armenian Defence Ministry’s video showing Azerbaijanis collecting corpses of their soldiers from the neutral zone”, Sputnik Armenia, 16 July 2020 (Russian).

<sup>65</sup> “Border guards replace army forces in Gazakh and Aghstafa regions”, Turan Agency, 14 December 2018. According to the OSCE Polis’s Country Profile: Azerbaijan, “the State Border Service is the body of the central executive power and reports directly to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Azerbaijani official, Baku, 21 July 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interview, military commander, Tavush region (Armenia), November 2018.

<sup>69</sup> The estimate is based on official reports from Armenian, Azerbaijani and de facto Nagorno-Karabakh sources. See a detailed database at Crisis Group’s *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> For some ideas, see “Snipers must be withdrawn to avoid further incidents on line of contact, says OSCE Chairperson during visit to Armenia”, press release, OSCE, 18 March 2011; “Joint Statement by the Heads of Delegation of the Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries and the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan”, OSCE, 6 December 2011.

Today, neither side believes it is possible to revive contact when there has been so little for so long. Top brass from the two countries fear that allowing communication between lower-ranking officers on the front lines could lead to explosive misunderstandings. “Azerbaijanis and Armenians are emotional people, and given that both sides have mostly young soldiers and officers, today such a hotline is risky”, a high-level commander in Baku said.<sup>72</sup> Echoing these concerns, an Armenian field officer in the Tavush region said communication should take place at a senior level to protect the chain of command: “If we were to speak with those in the trenches, and their senior commanders were to give conflicting orders, who would they listen to?”<sup>73</sup>

The best way forward could be an agreement between Baku and Yerevan to make greater use of existing communication channels, including to offer updates on planned construction works or other activities along the front lines. Even before the 2018 Dushanbe agreement, some international humanitarian organisations had sought to introduce such preventive messaging. Every summer, the International Committee of the Red Cross seeks information from farmers on the planned harvests near the trenches and shares it in an official letter to both sides in hopes of encouraging restraint.<sup>74</sup> Military commanders along the border, who are closest to the situation on the ground, should elaborate on these messages and give them to superiors, who would then relay them via security agencies to the other side. An expanded communication channel might include updates on mutually acceptable activities such as farming, waterway maintenance and demining (all discussed in detail in sections below). For Baku, expanded communication could allow the complete deployment of its border guard, which it halted amid heightened tensions.

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<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Azerbaijani defence ministry officials, Baku, November 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, military commanders, Tavush region, Yerevan, November 2018 and February 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yerevan, Baku, October 2018 and July 2020.

#### IV. Making Farming Safe

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With farmers now too fearful to venture out, the forthcoming harvest in the border regions may be left rotting for the birds and the worms. Even before the July 2020 clashes, the abundance of unmarked minefields and restrictions on access to land prevented border residents from fully exploiting opportunities for farming, which is often their only source of income. Locals cultivate fruits, vegetables and grains where they can, but much fertile land remains beyond reach. Others raise livestock in the foothills, running the risk of stumbling upon mines or being targeted by snipers.<sup>75</sup> Additional job opportunities are scarce. Some youths serve on the front line, but few remain with the army after completing their compulsory military service.<sup>76</sup> Nor does the military presence in the region bring much commerce to villages.<sup>77</sup>

The Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders underscored the importance of making farming safe in the spring of 2019, when they tentatively pledged to avoid ceasefire violations during that fall's harvest.<sup>78</sup> Two weeks after their first official meeting in March, the two sides formalised their agreement, but no details were made public.<sup>79</sup> Although the agreement appears to have led to a decrease in incidents during the 2019 harvest, farmers were left ignorant of the high-level diplomacy. Officials on both sides say they refrained from commenting on the agreement for fear of being blamed for encouraging residents to cultivate lands close to the border in the event that tensions escalated.<sup>80</sup>

Over the past decade, residents on both sides have lost access to acres of land they once farmed.<sup>81</sup> "We were able to use the fields until 2002, but then the military put up barbed wire in the hills and mined more areas near the border", an Azerbaijani villager in the Gadabay region said.<sup>82</sup> Farmers are reluctant to expose tractors or combine harvesters to gunfire or shelling. Azerbaijani villagers in Asrik-Jirdakhan work their farms at night because almost all their land is within Armenian troops' shooting range.<sup>83</sup> The fear is shared across the border. In the Armenian village of Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, residents have built greenhouses to compensate for the loss of farmland. "Many are still afraid of attacks on greenhouses because they are ... very visible, but greenhouses help us make some money", said one woman, who repaired

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<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Tovuz and Gazakh districts (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interviews, military commanders, Tavush region (Armenia), November 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, official, Ijevan (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>78</sup> "Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group", OSCE, Vienna, 29 March 2019. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 31 October 2019.

<sup>79</sup> "Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia, and the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group", OSCE, 15 April 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Armenian and Azerbaijani officials, Yerevan and Baku, November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, local officials, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, Chinari, Movses, Berkaber, Paravakar, Vazashen, Koti and Ijevan (Armenia), December 2017, November 2018 and September 2019. Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Gazakh and Tovuz districts (Azerbaijan), June-July 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, village residents, Goyalli, Gadabay district (Azerbaijan), July 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, village residents, Asrik-Jirdakhan, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

her house for the first time in 30 years in 2019 when she first felt secure enough to undertake building work close to the trenches.<sup>84</sup> But in July, when at least six houses were damaged and gas supplies cut in her village, she left with her grandchildren.

Before the July clashes, some farmers, out of desperation, had encroached on land closer to the trenches, though most remained wary.<sup>85</sup> On the Armenian side, a modest uptick in enterprise was noticeable amid the relative calm since the 2018 Dushanbe agreement. Some farmers there told Crisis Group they planned to invest in new seeds and technology, which they had previously been reluctant to do due to fears of renewed tensions.<sup>86</sup> No such boldness was apparent on the Azerbaijani side, however, and on both sides, habits formed over years of worry and want are hard to break. Across the border, one Armenian harvester said she could not shake her anxiety from years “when we had to run, hide, lay on the ground ... thinking that, at any moment, any of us can be shot” despite the relative calm of past years.<sup>87</sup> Her home village of Aygepar was rocked by fresh shooting in the recent violence.

In Azerbaijan, disputes over land reform as well as the special fiscal status granted to a few border villages complicate matters. The post-Soviet land reform enables locals to rent land from municipalities for agriculture. Farmers in villages where insecurity halted the reform’s rollout cannot own or plough land.<sup>88</sup> As such, their livelihoods are more precarious, and they take greater financial risks, when renting land, for instance, and stand to lose more when fighting disrupts commerce. The “border village status”, meanwhile, confers tax breaks as well as gas and electricity subsidies.<sup>89</sup> Where villages do not have it, especially in the Gazakh and Gadabay districts, residents are resentful. They are likelier to push for access to farmland in riskier border regions. “If there isn’t enough agricultural production in the village, then we cannot afford the electricity and gas prices”, said a 70-year-old villager in Qaralar. New Azerbaijani legislation could give some relief by allowing farmers access to subsidies via an electronic system.<sup>90</sup> But farmers need to apply well in advance of sowing season, when they may not yet know which land is safe.

As one border resident said in September 2019, efforts to improve farming in the region are like “sand castles”, carefully built only to disappear the moment shots are fired.<sup>91</sup> His words seemed prescient. Activity ground to a halt amid the July clashes, causing people on both sides to suffer. One farmer in the Azerbaijani village of Agdam, which was shelled in mid-July, said he was already having trouble finding people to

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<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Tavush region (Armenia), September 2019. The residents of Chinari, Paravakar and Nerkin Karmiraghbyur said they would try to gain access to around 1,000 more hectares in 2020. Crisis Group interviews, village residents, local officials, Chinari, Paravakar and Nerkin Karmiraghbyur (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Chinari, Berkaber and Nerkin Karmiraghbyur (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Chinari (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Haciali, Vahidli, Agdam and Alibeyli, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interviews, border village authorities, Azerbaijan, June-July 2019.

<sup>90</sup> “Azerbaijan’s e-agriculture system to provide farmers with necessary services”, Azernews, 6 February 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Berkaber, September 2019.

work the fields: “After these clashes, the fear of those people increased”.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, in the Armenian village of Movses, when shooting started near his house, Sargis Arakelyan took his wife and 92-year-old mother to safety at the other edge of the village.<sup>93</sup> Speaking to Crisis Group by telephone, he said his more pressing concern was whether locals would be able to collect the forthcoming harvest: “Some people already try to go to the farmlands, but only a few. The tragedy is that this year the harvest should have been particularly rich”.<sup>94</sup>

Even in areas unaffected by the flare-up, people dare not venture out. “If there is shooting in Tovuz’s Agdam village, I naturally think that if I go to my fields around Gazakh’s Dash Salahli village, they will shoot me, too”.<sup>95</sup>

Yerevan and Baku should redouble efforts to allow farmers to safely harvest crops and herders to tend livestock – all the more so as people in the region feel the pandemic’s financial bite. The two sides have found ways in the past to put aside deeply divisive territorial disputes to cooperate on limited humanitarian measures. At a minimum, they should inform each other of any plans for works on land near the trenches – offering the opposing side a chance to raise security concerns. In the future, they might organise talks among local and military officials on both sides about the tracts of land that residents are eyeing. The evolving security environment, with the deployment of border guards on the Azerbaijani side, will require an especially nuanced approach to allow for effective communication not only with the Azerbaijani military but also with its border guard service. The imminent harvest makes the development of preventive messaging between the sides all the more important.

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<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, village resident, Agdam, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), 17 July 2020. “As a result of artillery fire by Armenia, house and yards damaged in Azerbaijan’s Tovuz”, APA, 14 July 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, village resident, Movses, July 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, resident, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), 17 July 2020.

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## V. Repairing Water Supply Networks

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Water was once abundant in the border zone, thanks to a network of reservoirs and irrigation pipes, but today shortages are chronic.<sup>96</sup> After the 1992-1994 war, it became too dangerous to maintain the water supply system, which criss-crosses the front lines, and it fell into disrepair.<sup>97</sup> Villagers began blocking supply channels to satisfy their own needs.<sup>98</sup> Today, a mere handful of households draw their water from reservoirs fed by mountain rivers. In some places the dams are so outdated they may themselves pose a threat to nearby residents.<sup>99</sup> Many households have access only to unfiltered well water, which they describe as “salty”.<sup>100</sup> In some villages, running water is limited to two to three hours per day.<sup>101</sup> “It’s only enough to prepare dinner”, said a woman from Berkaber, a village sitting next to a reservoir in disuse.<sup>102</sup>

Officials on both sides are under pressure from villagers to fix water shortages, and demand will only grow if farming expands amid long-term climate trends.<sup>103</sup> Already fields are parched, with farmers praying for rainfall in ever-warming summers. “There wasn’t enough rain this year, and I lost all my investments”, one farmer said.<sup>104</sup> While locals are largely unaware of climate dynamics, experts say less rain and higher temperatures due to climate change are exacerbating water scarcity in the region.<sup>105</sup> Aggregate river flows in Armenia and Azerbaijan are projected to decrease by 11.9 per cent by 2030 and 37.8 per cent by 2100.<sup>106</sup>

Armenia and Azerbaijan have both made substantial investments to break dependence on the other side but with limited success. They both lack expertise and capacity to implement adequate solutions.<sup>107</sup> The Azerbaijani government built a reservoir in Tovuzchay with a capacity of 20 million cubic metres.<sup>108</sup> But most residents of the district where it is located still lack water.<sup>109</sup> With the help of donors, Baku has also drilled hundreds of sub-artesian wells.<sup>110</sup> The wells may also soon run dry. Residents

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<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents and officials, diplomat, Koti, Berkaber, Ijevan and Yerevan (Armenia), November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Tatul Hakobyan, “Armenian Border: Tavush”, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, residents, regional officials, Koti, Chinari and Ijevan (Armenia), November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents and regional officials, diplomat, Tavush region, Ijevan and Yerevan (Armenia), November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, Baku and Yerevan, July 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), June-July 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Berkaber, Koti, Paravakar and Chinari (Armenia), November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Berkaber (Armenia), November 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village heads, regional officials, Koti, Berkaber, Chinari, Paravakar and Ijevan (Armenia), November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Agbulag, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>105</sup> “Climate Risk Profile Armenia” and “Climate Risk Profile Azerbaijan”, USAID, June 2017.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, Baku and Yerevan, July 2020.

<sup>108</sup> “Ilham Aliyev inaugurated Tovuzchay water reservoir”, press release, official website of the President of Azerbaijan, 16 February 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Haciali and Alibeyli (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, local official, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

also blame the well water's poor quality for health problems.<sup>111</sup> "When we go to doctors in Baku, and they find kidney stones, they ask: 'Are you from the Gazakh district?'" one woman said.<sup>112</sup> For its part, the Armenian government is mulling an investment of around \$30 million in new pumping stations.<sup>113</sup> It has, however, balked at the cost of a new reservoir.<sup>114</sup> Instead, villages raise funds from the Armenian diaspora to lay pipes coming down from the mountains, but this costly supply is far from enough.<sup>115</sup> Some village heads have rationed water and publicly shamed or cut off supply to residents who exceed their quotas.<sup>116</sup>

A more strategic approach to the water problem in the region would help, but ultimately neither side can resolve the water supply problems without the other. While decades of tensions have prevented cross-border cooperation, some tentative steps might serve the two nations' interests. One might be the resumed use of the Joghaz reservoir. Built in the early 1970s, the Joghaz reservoir once supplied water to almost 30 Armenian and Azerbaijani villages.<sup>117</sup> Now it services only a few nearby households.<sup>118</sup> Trenches stretch along the shores, and soldiers face off mere metres from each other on the dam. Three derelict pumping stations need to be fixed in order to restore water supplies to adjacent Armenian and Azerbaijani villages.<sup>119</sup> Engineering works are impossible, however, without a clear, detailed accord and a commitment from both sides.<sup>120</sup>

Such circumscribed technical talks, avoiding discussion of Nagorno-Karabakh, could be possible with the blessing of the leadership in both countries. An independent international actor such as the Red Cross could help facilitate limited discussions between local representatives and security officials about repair of specific water infrastructure of mutual benefit.<sup>121</sup> Such cooperation could then extend to other areas of the border where water distribution systems are in disrepair but remain inaccessible even for regular maintenance due to minefields or trenches nearby.<sup>122</sup> It would

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<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, doctor, Dash Salahli, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Dash Salahli, Gazakh district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional governor, Ijevan (Armenia), September 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. See also "Armenia decided to construct 12 new water reservoirs", RIA Novosti, 6 February 2018 (Russian).

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village heads, regional officials, Koti, Berkaber, Chinari and Ijevan (Armenia), November 2018, September 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, village head, Chinari (Armenia), October 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, regional officials, diplomat, Berkaber, Koti, Ijevan and Yerevan (Armenia), November 2018 and September 2019. Also see "Berkaber: border village, reservoir, people", CivilNet, 5 May 2020 (Armenian).

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village head, residents, Berkaber, November 2018 and September 2019. Also see Olesya Vartanyan, "Armenia Elections Boost Hopes for Peace with Azerbaijan", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 December 2018.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, regional officials, Ijevan and Yerevan (Armenia), December 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interviews, military commanders, regional officials, Armenia, November 2018 and September 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Yerevan, December 2018.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Aghstafa, Tovuz and Gazakh districts (Azerbaijan), June-July 2019.

also be an important trust building measure that could bolster the peace process and reassure residents in the border areas. “If one starts bringing water from the other side, the message will be clear: ‘We have no intention of fighting with you anymore’”, said Ahmed, an 80-year-old resident of Agdam village in Tovuz district.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, village resident, Agdam, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

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## VI. Clearing Landmines

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Landmines and unexploded ordnance are perhaps the most pernicious and complicated of border residents' concerns. In some villages, mines have turned more than 500-1,000 hectares into no-go zones. There is no reliable data on the number of mines or unexploded ordnance in border villages, but the region is among the most heavily contaminated in Azerbaijan and Armenia.<sup>124</sup> Demining has long been stalled by mutual concerns that it might shift the balance on the front lines and weaken deterrence. The painstaking and thorough nature of mine clearance work also rubs up against military concerns about secrecy.

In Azerbaijan, the state demining agency (ANAMA) clears mines, raises awareness and offers first aid training in partnership with the education ministry and Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society.<sup>125</sup> There have been fewer accidents since 2016, with explosions triggered by cows or disoriented herders straying into no-man's land.<sup>126</sup> "One of our herders stepped on a mine while his cattle were grazing", a farmer said of one accident that led to a leg amputation. "By the time he realised [he was in a minefield], it was too late".<sup>127</sup> ANAMA says it cannot work within 2km of the border at present.<sup>128</sup> "Our workers' safety is also a priority".<sup>129</sup> In Armenia, demining has never taken place in the border region of Tavush, leaving at least twenty contaminated areas.<sup>130</sup> The Armenian Center for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise says it cannot guarantee its employees' safety, as they would need to enter areas close to the trenches. They fear that Azerbaijani soldiers will mistake the hulking demining trucks for military vehicles.<sup>131</sup>

Modest attempts to open discussion on the issue have been tied to diplomacy over Nagorno-Karabakh. An attempt in the early 2000s to put together a survey of where mines lie hidden saw months of detailed talks among local officials and military representatives, before disagreements between the countries' leaders over Nagorno-

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<sup>124</sup> Mine Action Profiles of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, 12 November 2018. After recent clashes, Azerbaijan's state demining agency ANAMA collected artillery and mortar shells from in and around the villages of Agdam and Dondar Gushchu. "ANAMA took action: shells fired by Armenians", Axar, 15 July 2020.

<sup>125</sup> See details about Mine Risk Education at the official ANAMA website. "Operative information of ANAMA", 15 July 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Beginning in 2016 and continuing to January 2020, ANAMA responded to 132 emergency calls on the hotline from locals in Gazakh, Tovuz, Gadabay and Aghstafa districts. See "Operations" on ANAMA's official website.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Asrik-Jirdakhan, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), June 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, ANAMA representative, Baku, July 2020. See also the "ANAMA Principles" published on the agency's official website.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, ANAMA representative, Baku, March 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, demining specialist, Yerevan, October 2018. See also "Dangerous Areas of Tavush Region", Armenian Center for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise working paper (Armenian), shared with Crisis Group in October 2018; and "FSD Non-technical Mine Action Survey", Armenian Center for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise, May 2013.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interview, demining specialist, Yerevan, October 2018.

Karabakh halted progress.<sup>132</sup> “Politics spoiled what should have been only in the hands of professionals”, said a veteran demining specialist in Armenia.<sup>133</sup> In 2017, Azerbaijan blocked the work of the OSCE office in Yerevan, accusing it of going beyond its mandate by engaging in demining activity in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.<sup>134</sup> Armenian officials deny it, saying a detailed investigation showed no evidence of work close to the front lines.<sup>135</sup>

Any new attempts to discuss demining would likely need to occur in tandem with or following improvements in preventive messaging, respect for the ceasefire during the harvest and repairs to essential water supply networks. Even with political will at the top, demining experts say the task at hand is gargantuan, necessitating special security guarantees and additional funds that would likely need to come from donors.<sup>136</sup> The focus, for now, should be on the humanitarian imperative of clearing the mines that pose the greatest danger. Discussions might begin by delineating areas in some border villages where, for example, landmines block access to the only source of water or particularly valuable farming areas. At the very least, the sides should aspire to clearly demarcate where landmines may be buried near farmlands and water sources to prevent accidents.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> “Landmine Monitor Report 2002: Toward a Mine-free World”, Human Rights Watch, 2002, pp. 609-610.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, demining specialist, Yerevan, October 2018.

<sup>134</sup> The issue was discussed at the OSCE Permanent Council in 2017. See the public statements by Azerbaijan and Armenia (made on 19 January 2017) and the U.S. (made on 4 May 2017).

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interview, official, Yerevan, October 2018. Also see “Letter of Azerbaijan’s permanent representatives in OSCE to the Chairperson of the OSCE Permanent Council”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 10 February 2017.

<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview, demining specialist, Yerevan, October 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group interview, demining specialist, Yerevan, October 2018.

## VII. Conclusion

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For three decades, what little diplomacy Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in has sought to reconcile their leaders' intransigent views on Nagorno-Karabakh. Humanitarian projects, especially in the border regions, have fallen by the wayside. It is regrettable that these projects have languished: not only do they arguably offer the clearest opportunities for compromise and mutual benefit, but their focus is also squarely on improving the lives of populations most affected by the daily tensions on the front lines. Residents on both sides of the border share the same fears: "The pandemic has already affected our lives. Water shortages have affected us also, and these clashes have become another burden".<sup>138</sup>

The July clashes should serve as a warning and call to action. As a first step, the two countries should recommit to using their existing communication channel. It should be expanded to include preventive messaging to avoid tensions and apparent misunderstandings like those that developed around Azerbaijan's deployment of border guards to replace its armed forces. Easing tensions could prevent deaths and injuries among farmers and seasonal workers, who are even now readying to collect the next harvest from August to September. Over time, such messaging may also help dispel suspicion between military commanders along the front lines. Repairing water supply networks and demining borderlands will be lengthy and complex processes; that is even more reason to begin discussions on these issues before new pandemic-related economic pressures and climate change worsen conditions for farmers and herders in the region.

Baku and Yerevan have both invested heavily in attempts to mitigate problems related to insecurity and water shortages, with little success. Even minimal cooperation would cost them less. It may be the only way to stop the emptying of villages on both sides of the border, as people who love their homeland nonetheless find themselves forced to seek better, safer lives elsewhere.

**Baku/Yerevan/Brussels, 24 July 2020**

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<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, village resident, Kokhanebi, Tovuz district (Azerbaijan), 17 July 2020.

Appendix A: Map of Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**July 2020**

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## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Europe and Central Asia since 2017

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### Special Reports and Briefings

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

### Russia/North Caucasus

*Patriotic Mobilisation in Russia*, Europe Report N°251, 4 July 2018.

*The COVID-19 Challenge in Post-Soviet Breakaway Statelets*, Europe Briefing N°89, 7 May 2020.

### South Caucasus

*Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds*, Europe Report N°244, 1 June 2017.

*Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Time to Talk Trade*, Europe Report N°249, 24 May 2018 (also available in Russian).

*Digging out of Deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh*, Europe Report N°255, 20 December 2019 (also available in Russian).

### Ukraine

*Can Peacekeepers Break the Deadlock in Ukraine?*, Europe Report N°246, 15 December 2017.

*Ukraine: Will the Centre Hold?*, Europe Report N°247, 21 December 2017.

*"Nobody Wants Us": The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine*, Europe Report N°252, 1 October 2018 (also available in Ukrainian).

*Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, Europe Report N°254, 16 July 2019 (also available in Ukrainian and Russian).

*Peace in Ukraine I: A European War*, Europe Report N°256, 28 April 2020 (also available in Russian and Ukrainian).

### Turkey

*Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin*, Europe Report N°243, 2 May 2017 (also available in Turkish).

*Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions*, Europe Report N°248, 29 January 2018 (also available in Turkish).

*Turkey's Election Reinvigorates Debate over Kurdish Demands*, Europe Briefing N°88, 13 June 2018.

*Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, Europe Report N°250, 28 June 2018.

*Mitigating Risks for Syrian Refugee Youth in Turkey's Şanlıurfa*, Europe Report N°253, 11 February 2019.

*Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters*, Europe Report N°257, 30 April 2020 (also available in Arabic and Turkish).

*Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees*, Europe Report N°258, 29 June 2020 (also available in Turkish).

### Central Asia

*Uzbekistan: The Hundred Days*, Europe and Central Asia Report N°242, 15 March 2017.

*Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries*, Europe and Central Asia Report N°245, 27 July 2017 (also available in Chinese and Russian).

*The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan*, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86, 9 October 2017 (also available in Russian).

*Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan*, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°87, 14 March 2018 (also available in Russian).

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