



Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh

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Principal Findings

What's new? A Russian-brokered ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended a six-week war in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, but skirmishes on the border point to unresolved tensions. On the post-war front lines, a scramble to dig new positions, mass displacement and a humanitarian crisis make for a fragile situation.

Why does it matter? Already frictions along the new front line, which lies close to civilian settlements, threaten renewed violence. The longer it takes for Nagorno-Karabakh residents to return home and resume some semblance of normal life, the harder it will be to jump-start future peace efforts.

What should be done? Russian peacekeepers need a clear mandate for their long-term deployment. The parties should build upon ad hoc contacts to create a regular channel for addressing urgent problems. They must stop holding international humanitarian aid hostage to the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh's status that lies at the conflict's core.

Executive Summary

More than half a year since Armenia and Azerbaijan halted their war over Nagorno-Karabakh, fundamental questions remain about who will provide security and services for the region's residents, how to manage humanitarian aid and whether the ceasefire will hold. Baku won the war, with the Armenian side losing significant territory in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Over one third of the population was uprooted from areas formerly in de facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities' hands but now in Azerbaijan's. Many who have returned have found homes reduced to rubble or farmlands no longer reachable. Both sides are reinforcing positions along a new front line where the armies are within shooting range of each other, near important roads and so close to civilian settlements that sleepless villagers say they can hear the talk in the trenches. Some 4,000 Russian soldiers and emergency services staff keep an uneasy peace. To avert renewed conflict, the peacekeepers need a clear and detailed mandate, the parties need formal channels for resolving disputes at the front and aid agencies need access to affected areas.

With so many alternately traumatised or triumphant after the fighting, the climate is not propitious for dialogue needed to resolve post-war problems, let alone the question of Nagorno-Karabakh's status that lies at the heart of the conflict. Since the war, Armenia has been in political crisis. The night of the 9 November 2020 ceasefire, angry mobs stormed government buildings and ruling-party figures went into hiding. The authorities are lame ducks ahead of snap parliamentary elections slated for 20 June. Nagorno-Karabakh dominates the campaign, as politicians assign blame for the wartime losses and make promises for the future. All the main candidates want closer ties with Russia as a security guarantee. In Baku, by contrast, the mood is victorious. At a military parade on 10 December 2020, the Azerbaijani president, flanked by his Turkish counterpart, said Baku was not alone and called the conflict a just war. Tensions flared at the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in May 2021, when the two sides' forces exchanged fire. That border is not policed by Russian peacekeepers but the violence complicates Moscow's efforts to mediate.

Those peacekeepers have had their hands full but need a clearer mandate. They arrived within hours of the agreement's signing on 10 November, as residents were still fleeing with hastily gathered belongings. A week later, they saw some of these displaced people home. Since then, peacekeepers have done everything from escorting villagers to visit graves or tend crops to fixing water pipes and mediating disputes. While they have set up checkpoints along Nagorno-Karabakh's main thoroughfares and along the mountain road linking it to Armenia, they are based far from the front line. How long they can keep acting as troubleshooters of everyday problems is unclear. How they would react to a front-line escalation is murkier still, given that the ceasefire agreement did not spell out their mission precisely. Moscow should consult with the conflict parties and then give its troops clear rules of engagement. The parties themselves should devise, potentially with Russian mediation, a formal mechanism for resolving urgent issues, be it residents' detention or access to water.

Getting more aid into conflict-affected areas is critical. Neither Stepanakert nor Yerevan has the resources to deal with the post-war chaos alone, risking a protracted

humanitarian crisis and long-term displacement of people. For now, Armenia is doing what it can for residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, whether they were able to return to their homes or not. But its funds are limited, as is the de facto authorities' capacity to handle the war's fallout. UN agencies, NGOs and foreign governments could help shoulder the burden of aiding the displaced – but, at present, most are blocked from doing so. The only international organisation working in Nagorno-Karabakh is the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has been there since the 1990s. The rest remain hamstrung by the central debate over the region's political status. Russia says it is ready to help facilitate such aid if and when outside agencies gain access. In the meantime, these organisations should find creative solutions to allow minimal support at least to their local counterparts on the ground.

If the local and international actors make no attempt to address the post-war issues – security, basic needs and displacement – Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to remain an area of low-intensity tensions for decades to come. Such strains will weigh not only on relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan but also on the South Caucasus as a whole, including plans as part of the ceasefire to rebuild interrupted trade and infrastructure links in the region.

**Yerevan/Stepanakert/Baku/Tbilisi/Moscow/Istanbul/Brussels,
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Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh

I. Introduction

Six weeks of fighting from 27 September to 9 November 2020 took over 6,000 lives in and around the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh and fundamentally changed the situation on the ground.¹ During this period, Azerbaijan regained control of a key town, Shusha, along with some of Nagorno-Karabakh's mountainous areas and most of seven adjacent territories it had lost to Armenia in the 1990s.² Immediately after the 9 November ceasefire statement, Russian peacekeepers deployed to the Lachin corridor that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, which allowed most Armenians displaced by the war to return.³ Within two weeks of the ceasefire, Armenia withdrew its troops from the remaining adjacent territories, leaving them in Azerbaijan's hands, and halted its military supply of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴

Russia is the main foreign mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It helps settle many problems, but not all of them. In January, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted the first post-war summit between his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts.⁵ They launched talks about resuming joint use of regional transport routes, which should lead to greater interdependence between Azerbaijan and Armenia and ease tensions in the long term.⁶ Despite plans to complete technical discussions by 1 March, talks have deadlocked, leading to heated statements threatening renewed fighting in southern Armenia, where a road important to Azerbaijan is located.⁷ Ten-

¹ The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone includes the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and seven adjacent territories that the Armenian troops controlled before the 2020 war. See the breakdown of the 2020 war's death toll at Crisis Group's Visual Explainer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.

² "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation", official website of the President of Russia, 10 November 2020.

³ Around 110,000 residents left Nagorno-Karabakh during the war. In the past six months, about 70,000 have returned. The remainder are still in Armenia. Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March-April 2021.

⁴ Before the mid-2020 war, Armenian forces in the conflict zone consisted of local troops as well as recruits coming from Armenia. After the 9 November ceasefire, Armenia withdrew almost all its troops and stopped sending weaponry to the conflict zone. The local troops were thus left to their own devices. Stepanakert and Yerevan sustain regular contacts at the command level, primarily to transfer messages coming from the Russian peacekeepers or the Russian-Turkish observation centre, which coordinate between the Armenian and Azerbaijani general staffs. Crisis Group interviews, Armenian and de facto officials, analysts, Yerevan and Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁵ "Meeting with Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan", official website of the President of Russia, 11 January 2021.

⁶ "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation", official website of the President of Russia, 11 January 2021 (Russian). Crisis Group online interview, Russian analyst, April 2021.

⁷ See the Russian foreign minister's remarks about difficulties in the talks on the transport routes, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news confer-

sions flared in mid-May as Armenia and Azerbaijan disputed new positions established by Azerbaijani forces close to the state border.⁸ The standoff highlighted the ceasefire's fragility.

This report describes the post-war situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is based on field research and dozens of interviews in the region's key cities and towns, as well as Yerevan, Baku, Moscow, Ankara and European capitals. Azerbaijan also sustained losses in the war, and it is facing its own post-conflict problems, including how to manage the return of Azerbaijanis displaced in the 1990s to territories regained by Baku in 2020. A forthcoming report will look at these issues.

ence with Acting Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Ara Ayvazyan", official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 6 May 2021. Also see "Ilham Aliyev's Interview with Azerbaijan Television", official website of the President of Azerbaijan, 20 April 2021; "Russian military in Armenia reinforce areas near Azeri border", Reuters, 3 May 2021.

⁸ "Azerbaijan captures six Armenian soldiers in latest border incident", RFE/RL, 27 May 2021.

II. Problems Old and New

The Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the fighting but left Nagorno-Karabakh short of a stable peace. Though it altered ground realities considerably to Azerbaijan's benefit, the 2020 war did little to resolve the conflict's underlying question: Nagorno-Karabakh's political status. Diplomacy is stuck. Meanwhile, both sides are digging new trenches and building new fortifications – along lines closer to each other than ever before and often within sight of civilian settlements. A renewed flare-up would likely cause more casualties among soldiers and civilians than those in the period before the war.⁹ Meanwhile, Russia's peacekeepers have found themselves mediating disputes over mundane matters from access to water to stray cows, without a clear mandate for how to handle tensions along the front.

A. Diplomatic Deadlock

Talks on Nagorno-Karabakh's political status are nowhere in sight. In November, Russia proposed to delay discussions on final status to make room for other conversations (foremost on economic cooperation) that might help rebuild a measure of trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁰ But Baku and Yerevan are doubling down on maximalist rhetoric about status. Baku has publicly ruled out self-rule for the de facto entity, various forms of which it has discussed in the past.¹¹ Instead, it has floated the idea of "cultural autonomy", whereby Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev says Armenians could observe cultural traditions, use their language in schools and have some poorly defined representation in the region's local self-government.¹² Along with the de facto authorities, Yerevan demands independence for the region, within its Soviet-era borders, including some parts of Nagorno-Karabakh that Azerbaijan now controls.¹³ Neither side is ready to hold a substantive discussion about status, meaning that this central dispute hijacks progress on anything else.

No conflict party seems to have a long-term plan for Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is consumed with the domestic political crisis that followed its capitulation in the war. In snap parliamentary elections on 20 June, all three of the nation's post-Soviet presidents will challenge incumbent Nikol Pashinyan. All call for closer relations with

⁹ About 150,000 Armenians and Azerbaijanis have been living in a similar situation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border since the conflict began in the late 1980s. The lack of security guarantees and absence of cooperation between the sides have led many civilians to leave the border zone. For details, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°259, *Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border*, 24 July 2020.

¹⁰ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Russian and foreign media on current international issues", official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 12 November 2021.

¹¹ "President Aliyev: There can be no question of any status", ABC.az, 17 November 2020.

¹² "President Aliyev was interviewed by Japan's *Nikkei* newspaper", Azerbaijan State News Agency, 22 October 2020.

¹³ "Artsakh Republic National Assembly Statement", official website of the National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), 1 March 2021; "Statement by the Foreign Ministry of Armenia regarding the consistent violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by Azerbaijan in the occupied territories of the Republic of Artsakh", official website of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 18 March 2021.

Russia, which they hope can help sustain the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh and provide a security guarantee for the region's remaining Armenian-populated areas.¹⁴

Azerbaijan, meanwhile, declares the conflict resolved. It plans to gradually integrate the rest of the Armenian-populated areas of Nagorno-Karabakh under Baku's direct rule, but has yet to elaborate on how it might do so in light of the presence of Russian peacekeepers.¹⁵ In private, some Azerbaijani officials call for taking the interests of Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh into account – by, for example, offering them social benefits and consulting with them on local security provision – so as to at least try to lessen their hostility to Baku.¹⁶ Most public figures, however, including opposition politicians, want to see the region isolated; they call for tough controls, including on communication between the region and Armenia and de facto officials' contacts with diplomats and international organisations. Some hardliners argue in favour of curbing all foreign material support, saying only then would local Armenians be truly dependent on Azerbaijan.¹⁷

For its part, the de facto entity in Stepanakert is too busy coping with immediate post-war crises to think about the long term. Its economy has shrunk to one quarter of its former size.¹⁸ Agriculture, once the second largest employment sector after the military, is no longer sustainable; almost half of Nagorno-Karabakh's farmland, most of them in the adjacent areas, is now under Baku's control. "We are already slaughtering our cows because there is nowhere to put them out to pasture", said a resident of Mkhitarishen village.¹⁹ The de facto leadership hopes to replace farming with greenhouses, orchards and enclosed livestock breeding, enterprises suitable for the mountainous lands that comprise the majority of the territory Stepanakert now administers.²⁰ But this effort will take time. Mining, which was the entity's largest source of tax revenue, may restart faster.²¹ The resultant taxes should help the de facto government cover salaries and expenses for reconstruction of roads and electrical grids, both badly damaged in the war.

International diplomacy is likewise in a holding pattern. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group format, co-chaired by representatives of Russia, the U.S. and France, has managed the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process for almost three decades. Of late, Russia has taken the lead. During the war, all three co-chairs made attempts to broker a ceasefire by convening the sides or sending delegations to the respective capitals, but only Moscow had traction. Over weeks of fighting in which Azerbaijan seized swathes of territory, Moscow increasingly pressured both capitals to push for an end of the fighting. Both France and the U.S.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Armenian politicians and officials, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Azerbaijani MP, Baku, March 2020.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Azerbaijani officials, Baku, March 2021.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Azerbaijani politicians, public figures, Baku, February and March 2021.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, former de facto officials, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, resident, Mkhitarishen village, March 2021.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, former de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

²¹ Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°91, *Improving Prospects for Peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh War*, 22 December 2020, p. 11. Baku has long complained that mining companies in Nagorno-Karabakh operate illegally, but it has not stopped transport of metals from the region to Armenia since the war ended. Crisis Group interviews, current and former de facto officials, Stepanakert and Martakert, March 2021.

backed the Russian-brokered 9 November ceasefire statement.²² Such support is important to Moscow, which wants international recognition of its mediation role, and to Yerevan and Baku, which share misgivings about Russia exerting too much influence over their own domestic politics.

Since the ceasefire, however, the OSCE Minsk Group has struggled to resume its mediatory role. In December 2020, the French and U.S. co-chairs visited Baku and Yerevan without their Russian colleague, who said he had fallen sick and could not join, raising concerns among Western co-chairing states about Russia's disengagement with the OSCE Minsk Group format.²³ Subsequently, the co-chairs, including Russia, have been unable to reach an agreement with Baku and Yerevan allowing them to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁴ Russian officials nevertheless say they want the OSCE to remain engaged and stressed the importance of Paris and Washington remaining neutral enough to maintain an effective role as mediators.²⁵

Turkey is broadly satisfied with the war's outcome. Ankara supported Baku during the fighting and plans to continue close military cooperation.²⁶ Turkey is helping with demining and ready to take part in construction works in territories previously controlled by Armenian troops.²⁷ In February, Russia and Turkey opened a joint ceasefire-monitoring centre in Azerbaijan, using drones to track violations.²⁸ Ankara has arguably gained greater clout in Baku's decision-making, but beyond the presence of monitors, Turkey is not directly involved in mediation efforts. "The current situation on the ground isn't 100 per cent ideal, but it is the best that was possible", said a Turkish official.²⁹ This source said Ankara would prefer greater Western involvement in diplomacy, humanitarian aid for displaced populations and plans to build new regional transport and trade links.³⁰ "The West is absent", said another Turkish official. "They may not have hard power capabilities or resolve but there is a lot of soft power potential".³¹

Amid the diplomatic deadlock, recriminations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over other unresolved issues are on the rise. For over six months, they have failed to settle the most immediate post-war questions, from the release of prisoners of war to roping off mined areas and access for international aid organisations to the conflict zone. Every issue – down to UNESCO access to cultural heritage sites – has become a political bargaining chip. For instance, Yerevan wants the release of dozens of its

²² "Joint Statement by the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries", OSCE, 3 December 2020.

²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian official, April 2021.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, April 2021.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, April and May 2021.

²⁶ "Azerbaijan, Turkey discuss military-technical cooperation", TASS, 30 January 2021.

²⁷ Hamdi Çelikbaş, "Turkish team begins clearing mines in upper Karabakh", Anadolu Agency, 17 December 2020; Gökhan Ergöçün, "Turkish contractors to help rebuild Nagorno-Karabakh", Anadolu Agency, 4 April 2021.

²⁸ "Russian-Turkish centre opened in Azerbaijan to control ceasefire", official website of the Defence Ministry of the Russian Federation, 31 January 2021 (Russian).

²⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, April 2021.

³⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Turkish officials, March 2021.

³¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, April 2021.

soldiers and civilians who remain in custody in Azerbaijan.³² Baku calls them “terrorists” and “saboteurs” and has set free only a handful, under pressure from the Russian military, European Union (EU) leaders as well as senior U.S. officials.³³ In exchange, Azerbaijan wants Armenia to share maps of the location of mines in areas previously under Armenian troops’ control, which should allow faster, safer demining as well as quicker reconstruction in the conflict zone.³⁴ Both Yerevan and Stepanakert say they have no such maps.³⁵ Russian officials have been deeply frustrated by the horse trading over humanitarian aid (see below).³⁶

Skirmishes in May 2021 at the Armenia–Azerbaijan state border were a stark illustration of the need for diplomatic engagement on immediate post-conflict issues. One Armenian soldier was killed and six captured, with each side blaming the other for incursions across the border.³⁷ The escalation came despite Russian-proposed talks to demarcate the border and following shuttle diplomacy by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov between the two capitals.

B. *The Balance of Forces*

If the conflict’s fraught politics are familiar, the front has several new features. Before the war, Azerbaijani and Armenian troops were facing off where fighting stopped in 1994; today, they are joined by Russian peacekeepers and, at a distance, Russian and Turkish monitors. Azerbaijani soldiers have established new posts on territory now under Baku’s control. The de facto Nagorno-Karabakh entity’s troops, for their part, have taken up defensive positions along a new line of demarcation dividing Azerbai-

³² Crisis Group interview, Armenian official, Yerevan, March 2021.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, foreign diplomats and Armenian officials, Yerevan and Moscow, March and May 2021. Also see “EU Statement on captives from the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, Delegation of the European Union to the Council of Europe, 28 April 2021.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, March 2021.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Armenian and de facto officials, Yerevan and Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

³⁶ “These are different issues, and the humanitarian issues should be resolved as soon as possible”, a Russian official said. Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials and Russian expert close to Azerbaijani authorities, 12 May 2021.

³⁷ On 25 May, the Armenian defence ministry said fighting with Azerbaijani forces along the border of Armenia’s eastern Gegharkunik district killed one Armenian soldier. Baku said the death had “nothing to do with the Azerbaijani side”. “Azerbaijan denies firing at Armenian positions”, Al Jazeera, 25 May 2021. On 27 May, the Azerbaijani defence ministry reported detaining six Armenian soldiers who were allegedly attempting to cross into Kelbajar district. “Armenia Committed a Provocation in the Direction of the Kalbajar Region of the State Border”, Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence, 27 May 2021. Yerevan said the detentions took place in territory it controls. The next day, the Azerbaijani defence ministry reported one soldier wounded in an exchange of fire with Armenian soldiers at the state border with Azerbaijan’s exclave Nakhchivan. Yerevan denied involvement. On 2 June, the Azerbaijani defence ministry and State Border Service said in a joint statement that a group of about 40 Armenian soldiers had crossed 400m into Azerbaijan. They said that Azerbaijani troops reacted immediately and forced the Armenian soldiers to leave, but no weapons were used. “Information of the Ministry of Defense and the State Border Service”, Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan, 2 June 2021. The Armenian defence ministry denied the Azerbaijani report as “disinformation”. See “The ministry of defense denies information about Armenian servicemen crossing the Azerbaijani border”, Armenpress, 2 June 2021 (Armenian).

jani-controlled land from the part of the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast that was still in Armenian hands on 9 November (with a few small adjustments since). Russian peacekeepers are stationed at the main roads throughout the latter territory and along the Lachin corridor that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, although, for the most part, far from the front lines. Finally, Turkish and Russian military personnel keep watch from a centre located 20km from the front, next to the Azerbaijani village of Qiyamedinli.

The front line itself is literally solidifying, as it did after combat halted in 1994. The tents that first housed troops on both sides have given way to barracks of wood, concrete and metal. In the valleys, soldiers are digging the new trenches longer and deeper. In the 1990s, too, what began as tents and holes in the ground became a complex network of trenches and installations along a 240km line of contact, making the region one of the world's most militarised.³⁸

The new front line is more volatile than before. Opposing military positions are separated from one another by only 30-100m, whereas before the 2020 war, they were hundreds of metres apart. Before, soldiers needed binoculars to observe one another, but they now need no visual aid. Soldiers are so close that they can sometimes hear their foes' conversations echoing across the front. "One hand grenade is enough to kill us all and advance [their forces]", said a soldier at one of these positions.³⁹

No one doubts that the Azerbaijani military has a clear advantage along the new front. Its troops moved rapidly to establish their positions on high ground.⁴⁰ Baku's forces have clear views across almost all the valleys and gorges in territory traditionally populated by ethnic Armenians along the front line. Armenian positions, on the other side of the line of contact, tend to be less advantageous, with interrupted views from lower elevations. But Armenian forces have not yet created outposts on all the heights available to them; they could yet gain strength by doing so. To date, they have worked instead to reinforce the immediate front line to prevent Azerbaijan from taking more territory.⁴¹

The war cost the Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh dearly: the region lost more than 3,000 back-up personnel from Armenia itself, who left in December.⁴² The troops manning the front line on the Armenian side are residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, with limited kit, under the command of the de facto government in Stepanakert. Yerevan, which had previously sent soldiers and armaments to the front lines, ceased doing so once Russian peacekeepers set up in the Lachin corridor.⁴³ Stepanakert is exploring alternative ways to bolster its capacity. Some propose to replace the conscript-dominant army with professionals on contracts and to recruit in Armenia

³⁸ See Crisis Group Europe Report N°244, *Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds*, 1 June 2017, pp. 4-6; Max M. Mutschler and Marius Bales, "Global Militarisation Index 2019", Bonn International Center for Conversion, p. 6; and Thomas de Waal, "The Two NKs", Carnegie Moscow Center, 24 July 2013.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Armenian soldier, Taghavard village, March 2021.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁴² See the breakdown of the 2020 war's death toll in Crisis Group's Visual Explainer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

as well.⁴⁴ Others suggest mandatory military rotations for all male residents of the entity.⁴⁵ “Four days a week, I will be at the office, and the rest in the trenches”, a de facto official suggested.⁴⁶

The new topography of the front line also presents a problem for Azerbaijan, despite its relative strength. In two locations – the town of Shusha and Kelbajar region – its soldiers are disconnected from the rest of the country.⁴⁷ Several times a week, they have to use roads that run through Armenian settlements. Russian peacekeepers serve as escorts on the condition that the trucks transport only construction materials and food, no weapons. De facto Nagorno-Karabakh’s military says it has the right to check the trucks, but Baku denies this.⁴⁸ In one instance, its troops found a pistol on the driver’s seat of an Azerbaijani truck, holding up the convoy for several hours until senior Russian peacekeeping officers arrived to resolve the impasse.⁴⁹ Azerbaijan is now building a new road to Shusha and considering another route via the Murovdag mountains to Kelbajar.⁵⁰ But roadworks in the steep, windy mountain terrain will take time, and some in Baku worry the finished route might be suitable for light vehicles only or be frequently blocked by snow.⁵¹

The Russian peacekeeping mission’s headquarters are deep inside the region in the towns of Stepanakert, Askeran and Martakert. The mission’s outposts, which often consist of a few barriers and a tent or a plastic shed, are deployed along the main roads in Armenian-populated areas of Nagorno-Karabakh. They are kilometres away, 20 to 40 minutes by car, from the new front.⁵² The mission does not patrol the front line or nearby settlements.⁵³ Sometimes, peacekeepers briefly stop cars to ask if passengers have any problems.

Russian peacekeepers are also deployed along the main artery between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh: 8km of mountainous road, known as the Lachin corridor, that runs from Armenian-controlled territory through Azerbaijan’s Lachin district to Azerbaijani-controlled Shusha and Armenian-controlled Stepanakert. Eleven of the 27 peacekeeper outposts scattered throughout the conflict zone lie along this road.⁵⁴ At these posts, Russian personnel check identity documents and inspect all passing

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021. For details on the population of different parts of Nagorno-Karabakh before the war, see “NKR de facto and de jure population (urban, rural) by age and sex” at “The results of the 2015 population census of the republic of NKR”, National Statistical Service of the Artsakh Republic, n.d.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Martakert, April 2021.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Azerbaijani diplomat, Baku, June 2021.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Martakert, April 2021.

⁵⁰ “Azerbaijan lays a road to Shusha”, APA, 17 November 2020.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, local experts, Baku, March 2020.

⁵² See the locations of the observation posts and headquarters on maps published daily by the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh on the Russian defence ministry’s website (Russian).

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, residents of front-line villages, de facto officials, Nagorno-Karabakh, March and April 2021.

⁵⁴ On the first map it published after deploying to Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian peacekeeping mission marked only six observation posts along the road through the Lachin corridor. The number of posts had increased to eleven by 11 January 2021.

vehicles. No soldiers and no weapons except those belonging to the peacekeepers themselves are permitted on this route.

Since January, Russian peacekeepers have been checking documents of travellers trying to enter Nagorno-Karabakh. They do so apparently in accordance with a new regime imposed by the de facto authorities, which requires a visa for all foreign citizens, except Armenian and Russian passport holders, coming from Armenia. Those visas are issued in coordination with the peacekeepers.⁵⁵ Since the regime came into force, many foreign citizens, including those of ethnic Armenian origin who are engaged in humanitarian projects, have been refused entry to the region.⁵⁶

The final new feature is the joint Russian-Turkish monitoring centre established in Azerbaijani territory next to the village of Qiyamedinli, about 20km from the front line, in February 2021. Separate from the peacekeeping mission, the centre is currently staffed by 47 Russian and 45 Turkish military personnel, though, according to an Azerbaijani official, those numbers could increase by up to 60 people per country.⁵⁷ Drones deployed daily by the centre observe the situation along the front line.⁵⁸ In the event of a ceasefire violation, Russian staff are responsible for immediately notifying the Armenian and Azerbaijani defence ministries, while Turkish staff inform only the Azerbaijani side.⁵⁹ “Armenians trust the data because there are Russian drones; Azerbaijanis trust the data because there are Turkish drones”, a Russian official said, describing the centre as an effective tool for monitoring the position and movement of soldiers from the air.⁶⁰ None of the centre’s reports were public at the time of writing.

C. *Post-war Life at the Front*

Conditions for civilians living near the front have changed as well. Before the 2020 war, the line of contact was dozens of kilometres away from Armenian civilian areas, but only a few kilometres from Azerbaijani villages.⁶¹ Today, the situation has flipped. Most of the territory newly under Azerbaijani control is empty, as any ethnic Armenians who had lived there have fled, and Azerbaijan has yet to develop plans for resettlement. Baku is surveying people displaced during the 1990s war to assess their needs, while building roads, communication links and other infrastructure to facilitate their return.⁶² The front line’s movement has placed Armenian military positions all but inside or right next to civilian settlements. Dozens more Armenian villages, and most of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian-populated towns, including Stepanakert, are within sight of Azerbaijani troops based in Shusha or nearby. Soldiers on each side can hear their enemies talking on the other. Azerbaijani soldiers are also within earshot of

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Armenian and de facto officials, Yerevan and Stepanakert, March-April 2021.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March 2021.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, March 2021. Also see “Russia and Turkey will establish centre to control ceasefire in Karabakh”, RBC, 11 November 2020.

⁵⁸ “Joint Russian-Turkish centre continues implementing tasks to monitor ceasefire regime in Nagorno-Karabakh”, official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 11 April 2021 (Russian).

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, March 2021.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, 31 May 2021.

⁶¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Nagorno-Karabakh’s Gathering War Clouds*, op. cit., p. 6-7.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, officials working on the IDP return plan, Baku, March 2020.

Armenian civilians. “They are so close that at night we can hear them laughing”, said one villager.⁶³

Residents feel least safe along the new front’s southernmost sections. This area saw fierce fighting, and while in many places missiles and drones did most of the damage, here, soldiers and volunteers squared off, guns in hand, within firing range of civilians.⁶⁴ Roughly half the homes in nearby villages were damaged or destroyed.⁶⁵ Most of the Armenian population fled, and locals say only about half have returned, as the rest continue to fear for their safety.⁶⁶ The front cuts one village, Taghavard, in half. Elmira, a long-time resident, finds her home surrounded by Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers, their trenches crossing her backyard apple orchard roughly 30-40m apart. On the other side of the line, 300m from her front door, an Azerbaijani flag flies on the hillside. Elmira is the only woman in the neighbourhood who stays home overnight. “Sometimes I go to bed in my clothes”, she told Crisis Group. “Just in case something happens, and I need to run away”.⁶⁷ Others come to the village in the daytime, but only because the local school is still operating, albeit with less than half the students attending classes.

Along parts of the front line that extend into mountain villages, Armenians have different worries. They are unlikely to be in the line of fire, but some have been briefly detained by Azerbaijanis when they have accidentally wandered over the line of contact, which is not yet clearly demarcated in these areas. Since November’s ceasefire, Azerbaijani soldiers have apprehended a handful of residents who, on their way to tend orchards or cattle in pastures, had no reason to think they had left Armenian-controlled territory.⁶⁸ The soldiers released them all within hours after family members or neighbours raised the alarm with de facto authorities and Russian peacekeepers. A senior Azerbaijani official told Crisis Group that the detentions were errors: “Our door should remain open to any unarmed Armenian”.⁶⁹

With military positions now so close to their farms, some Armenian villagers are also nervous about returning to plant or harvest crops. In April, as planting season began, shots fired from nearby Azerbaijani trenches hit a tractor operated by two residents of Sarushen village.⁷⁰ Since then, other villagers have stayed away from their farmland. Hasmik, from Khramort village located metres from the front line, is letting her fields lie fallow. “My house is only 500m away and the land is right next to the Azerbaijani post. I am scared to work with them watching”, she said.⁷¹ Instead, Hasmik has rented a smaller plot to farm deep in Nagorno-Karabakh. Others who cannot afford to go elsewhere try to mitigate risks. Samvel, from Vardadzor village, has used wire to separate his pomegranate orchard from the Azerbaijani barracks nearby. He has faced no problems so far but is afraid the soldiers will spoil his harvest. “If they

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, resident, Khramort village, March 2021.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Taghavard and Krasniy Bazar villages, March 2021.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Taghavard, Krasniy Bazar and Martuni villages, March 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Taghavard and Krasniy Bazar villages, March 2021.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, resident, Taghavard village, March 2021.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Khatsi and Khramort villages, March 2021.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, March 2021.

⁷⁰ Marianna Mkrtychyan, “The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Artsakh issued explanations in connection with the shelling of Sarushen residents by the Azerbaijani armed forces”, ArmInfo, 12 April 2021.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, resident, Khramort village, March 2021.

set my trees on fire, I will lose everything and there will be no one to hold accountable”, he said.⁷² In the past, some locals with farms close to military positions did see crops burned.⁷³

The proximity of trenches also makes it difficult for villagers to repair infrastructure damaged in the fighting. Taghavard village has no water supply, not only because pipes were destroyed, but because in order to fix them plumbers would have to enter an area controlled by Azerbaijani soldiers.⁷⁴ In Khatsi village, residents have given up on plans to build a new water supply line because its route would run directly in front of military positions.⁷⁵ All along the front line, residents talk about irrigation canals that need repair or cleaning, but which now lie partly on Azerbaijan-controlled territory.⁷⁶ Most residents would prefer to build new channels from Armenian-controlled territory over trying to figure out how to make the old ones work. “[Piping in water from Armenian-controlled lands] costs money. But we would rather have our own water and not depend on Azerbaijan”, a villager said.⁷⁷

As they alone can travel safely along and across the front, the Russian peacekeepers are in high demand for both reassurance and help with the disruption brought by war. Apprehensive about having Azerbaijani soldiers so close to home, one Khatsi villager begged: “Can we at least have a small Russian peacekeeper post here?”⁷⁸ Some villagers call peacekeepers via a telephone hotline advertised on social media, while others approach observation posts in person. A few groups have written petitions asking, for example, for help visiting graves at cemeteries behind Azerbaijani military positions.⁷⁹ Others have asked for assistance with retrieving errant cattle, removing shards of missiles stuck in orchards, fixing the water supply and providing secure transport to farmlands.⁸⁰ According to villagers and local officials, the peacekeepers generally do their best to help.⁸¹ “The peacekeepers told us to dial their hotline if we lost a cow again”, one Mkhitarishen villager said after Azerbaijani soldiers made dinner of one that had drifted away from the herd.⁸²

⁷² Crisis Group interview, resident, Vardadzor village, March 2021.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Martakert, March 2021.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Taghavard village, March 2021.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, resident, Khatsi village, March 2021.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents and de facto officials, Taghavard, Krasniy Bazar, Khatsi, Berdashen, Khramort, Vardadzor and Martakert, March 2021.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, resident, Vardadzor village, March 2021.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, resident, Khatsi village, March 2021.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, residents and de facto officials, Taghavard, Krasniy Bazar, Berdashen, Vardadzor, Martakert and Stepanakert, March 2021.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents and de facto officials, Taghavard, Krasniy Bazar, Khatsi, Berdashen, Vardadzor, Mkhitarishen, Martakert and Stepanakert, March 2021. The Russian peacekeeping mission publishes daily reports on its website with details of what they have done to support agriculture works, restore water supply or clear mines from farms.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, residents and de facto officials, Taghavard, Krasniy Bazar, Khatsi, Berdashen, Vardadzor, Mkhitarishen, Martakert and Stepanakert, March 2021.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, resident, Mkhitarishen village, March 2021.

D. *A Mandate for Russian Peacekeepers*

The Russian peacekeeping mission deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh even as the ink was drying on the 9 November trilateral statement that imposed the ceasefire. The statement set the force's maximum size at 1,960 personnel and limited their equipment to small arms, 90 armoured personnel carriers and 380 other motor vehicles. The force is due to rotate every six months. The ceasefire statement also gave the force a five-year term, to be renewed automatically provided that neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan demands its withdrawal.⁸³

The statement covered the mission in just three sentences, without detailing a mandate, but the peacekeepers soon found plenty to do. They arrived on 12 November to find Nagorno-Karabakh's main city, Stepanakert, blanketed in thick fog, dark and almost entirely empty.⁸⁴ The few remaining residents were in a hurry to leave, loading trucks with furniture and other belongings. One man was throwing what he owned from a second-floor balcony to speed things up. Peacekeepers set to work establishing observation posts, and within a week they were escorting buses filled with people – including some families who had just fled – returning home.⁸⁵

The peacekeepers have also helped residents rebuild. They had arrived in a city badly damaged by weeks of war, with bombing having reduced entire blocks to ruins. Few windows had glass. Telephones did not work – neither mobiles nor the landlines in destroyed houses. The peacekeepers worked with Russia's emergency service personnel, who had delivered tonnes of construction material, to fix roofs and windows.⁸⁶ These efforts made it possible for thousands to spend the first post-war winter in their own homes.⁸⁷

The question now is what peacekeepers will do as time goes by. Are Russian soldiers to not just prevent military escalation but also track down stray cows in Nagorno-Karabakh for the next five years or more? However good their intentions, peacekeepers cannot do everything. Their numbers, divided evenly into field and support staff, are limited by the ceasefire agreement.⁸⁸ They are not the only Russians de-

⁸³ "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation", official website of the President of Russia, 10 November 2020.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group observations, Stepanakert, 12 November 2020.

⁸⁵ See the Russian peacekeeping mission's daily reports in November and December 2020 (Russian). See in particular the first report about escorting buses from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. "First refugees return to Stepanakert", official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 11 November 2020 (Russian).

⁸⁶ "Ministry of Emergency Situations: Humanitarian aid fully delivered for population of Nagorno-Karabakh via railroads", official website of the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, 24 December 2020 (Russian). According to the deputy foreign minister, Russia spent more than \$15 million on direct humanitarian aid to Nagorno-Karabakh in the first five months after the ceasefire. See "Interview of the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation A. Y. Rudenko with the Armenian newspaper *The New Time* in relation to the 29th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and Armenia", official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2 April 2021 (Russian).

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian analyst, December 2020. Also see "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the

ployed, as Moscow has also sent a variety of government personnel to help with immediate post-war needs, including emergency services workers. Together, the full Russian mission is likely nearly 4,000 people.⁸⁹ But Russia intends only the peacekeepers to stay for the long haul.

With no formal mandate, observers near and far are left guessing as to what the peacekeepers will do in the event of an escalation. The mission's small size implies observation only, but the range of its activities to date would seem to say otherwise.⁹⁰ Most of the force's members are soldiers from the 15th Separate Guards Motorised Brigade, specialised in UN and other international peacekeeping operations.⁹¹ Some also served in Syria.⁹² How much of a deterrent the force poses is a question. True, no local forces will want to pick a fight with Moscow. In an oblique warning to Baku a week after the 2020 ceasefire, President Vladimir Putin said Russia had decided to recognise Georgia's breakaway regions after Tbilisi attacked its forces deployed to South Ossetia.⁹³ But the mission is too small to enforce the ceasefire and protect civilians throughout Nagorno-Karabakh.

Moscow has been seeking a clear mandate for its peacekeeping mission. Back in December 2020, it shared an outline of the peacekeepers' roles and tasks with Baku and Yerevan.⁹⁴ Azerbaijan requested changes, including that peacekeepers should take responsibility for passport control at entrances to the Lachin corridor.⁹⁵ In February, Moscow presented an updated version of the draft mandate. Baku was ready to endorse it, but only if Russia did not treat Armenia as an equal party in its terms.⁹⁶ "They want Russia to clearly state that the territory on which the peacekeepers are stationed is in Azerbaijan and to excise reference to the trilateral ceasefire statement, which bears Armenia's signature", an official in Yerevan said.⁹⁷ Yerevan and Stepanakert balked. "I don't know how we would explain to the population that the peacekeepers are impartial if their mandate comes only from Baku", a senior de facto official said.⁹⁸

Despite its second failure to reach agreement on the mandate, Moscow continues to push for it, though an official said Russia does not need the document "at any

Russian Federation", op. cit.; "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 695", official website of the President of Russia, 10 November 2020 (Russian).

⁸⁹ The estimate of how many Russian personnel are in Nagorno-Karabakh comes from diplomats, Armenian and de facto officials. Crisis Group interviews, Yerevan and Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian expert, December 2020.

⁹¹ "Subdivisions of the 15th Separate Peacekeeping Brigade, transferred by airplanes to the airport of Erebuni, continue to implement marches from Yerevan to Stepanakert", official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 18 November 2020 (Russian).

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, Armenian and de facto officials, Yerevan and Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

⁹³ "Replies to media questions on developments in Nagorno-Karabakh", official website of the President of Russia, 17 November 2020.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Armenian official, Yerevan, March 2021.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Baku, March 2021.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, March 2021.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Armenian official, Yerevan, March 2021.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

cost”.⁹⁹ The Kremlin thinks that the peacekeepers are succeeding in their mission, even if it remains undefined. It would prefer to wait for Baku to soften its position before renewing the talks. “Russia has enough patience”, the official said, adding that it would “happen sooner or later”.¹⁰⁰ The official and others said Moscow will continue to press for “a clear mandate, with clear rights and responsibilities” endorsed by all three parties: Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁰¹ Some in Moscow say the clarity is needed to shield Russia if things go awry. “You will see, the moment something goes wrong in Karabakh, Russia will be blamed for that and more. As the usual suspect, Russia is always a fall guy”, said an analyst with Russian government connections.¹⁰² Another expert agreed that if problems arise, “everyone will blame Russia, both in the region and abroad”.¹⁰³

Moscow has not invited other outside powers to weigh in on the mandate, saying the consent of the parties involved is sufficient under international law. Should they eventually make formal arrangements with Baku and Yerevan, Russian officials told Crisis Group, they are not planning to seek UN Security Council approval in any case.¹⁰⁴ As both Armenia and Azerbaijan invited the deployment, Russia does not view international endorsement of the peacekeeping mission as necessary.¹⁰⁵ Nor does it feel pressure from elsewhere: the two Western countries that co-chair the OSCE Minsk Group along with Russia, France and the U.S., signed a joint statement welcoming the 9 November ceasefire, complete with its peacekeeping provisions, the following month.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, Moscow knows that its peacekeepers will almost certainly continue to be the only foreign guarantor of the ceasefire. Talks among Western states about an international civilian presence to complement Russian efforts were stillborn.¹⁰⁷ In December 2020, during their post-war trip to Baku and Yerevan, the French and U.S. co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group broached various options with Armenian and Azerbaijani officials.¹⁰⁸ For instance, they proposed enlarging the staff of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, a position established over 27 years ago to facilitate OSCE efforts with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Such proposals had been floating around since 2016, with no real results.¹⁰⁹ This time, the co-chairs pressed their case by stressing that a larger team could visit Nagorno-Karabakh more often. At first, Baku said no, but it later made a counter-

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, April 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, April and May 2021.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, April and May 2021.

¹⁰² Crisis Group online interview, Russian analyst, April 2021.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group online interview, Russian analyst, April 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, April 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, April 2021; Crisis Group online interview, Russian analyst, April 2021.

¹⁰⁶ “Joint Statement by the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries”, OSCE, 3 December 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group online interviews, diplomats, December 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, December 2020.

¹⁰⁹ For more about the mandate of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, see his “Who We Are” page on OSCE’s website. Also see Crisis Group Europe Report N°255, *Digging out of Deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 20 December 2019, pp. 17-18.

proposal: more staffers would be allowed at the international border and in the Lachin corridor, but with no permanent base in Nagorno-Karabakh or the adjacent areas.¹¹⁰ Armenian officials say they have not yet heard about or had a chance to consider Baku's proposal.¹¹¹

For all the difficulties in negotiating, all parties could benefit from a more formal mandate for the peacekeeping force. For now, the front is calm, and the peacekeepers can make do with being reactive. But if frictions emerge, all involved will have their own expectations, which may conflict, and be beyond the mission's capacity. Residents expect the Russian peacekeepers to protect them, while officials on both sides had more questions than answers about the peacekeeper's rules of engagement. The resulting frustration could exacerbate front-line tensions. A clear mandate, which outlines when and under what circumstances peacekeepers are to intervene, whether they can shoot only in self-defence or also to protect civilians, what assistance they are meant to provide to whom, what their administrative responsibilities are, if any, and so forth could prevent such a breakdown. It would also help build trust, not just of officials, but among residents who interact with the peacekeepers on a daily basis.

E. *Talking It Out?*

In the absence of a clear mandate for Russian peacekeepers, much confusion remains over who is responsible for solving the multitude of everyday problems along front lines. Ad hoc contacts, spurred by crises, are taking place between the sides. But these contacts occur only at the behest of one side or the other and often depend on Russian peacekeepers' good graces. Putting in place a more formal problem-solving mechanism could go a long way toward easing tensions present and future.

On the military side, Russian peacekeepers facilitate discussions listed in their daily reports as "permanent cooperation" with the Armenian and Azerbaijani general staffs. These are meant to coordinate day-to-day activities and resolve incidents.¹¹² Since the war's end, the Russian mission and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have helped the de facto emergency service and the Azerbaijani military carry out dozens of search operations to recover remains of Armenian war dead from territories controlled by Azerbaijan.¹¹³ At least twice in recent months, de facto officials have also met Azerbaijani authorities to provide information regarding graves or remains of Azerbaijanis killed during the 1990s war.¹¹⁴ In addition, according to press reports, Azerbaijani and Armenian security service representatives maintain

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, analysts close to Azerbaijani government, Baku, December and March 2021.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Armenian officials, May 2021.

¹¹² See the peacekeeping mission's daily official updates on the official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (Russian).

¹¹³ See the regular updates on search operations by the Emergency Service of the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh entity (Armenian).

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, April 2021. Also see "Information of the State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons", official website of the State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 13 February 2021.

regular telephone contact with one another.¹¹⁵ Finally, regional water and electricity experts have met at least once to discuss supply gaps.¹¹⁶

Contacts of this sort are important but ad hoc. When the 1990s fighting ended, similar meetings fizzled out when political tensions rose. Moreover, these impromptu contacts cannot resolve the broad range of challenges facing the region. Representatives meet only for specific reasons and without delineation of rights or responsibilities. One de facto official who participated in meetings said the conversations often turn into “market-style bargaining” over demands ranging from repairing water pipes to locating dead bodies.¹¹⁷ “Each meeting feels like the last one”, said a diplomat familiar with conversations in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹¹⁸ He said participants often make maximalist demands: “Both sides are in a rush and want to achieve as much as possible before the cooperation collapses”.¹¹⁹

A more formal program of coordination could help. Similar formats exist in other post-Soviet conflicts. For instance, since the early 1990s, Moldovan officials have been meeting de facto Transnistrian representatives, with OSCE mediators, to discuss security, education, roads, farming, ecology and many other issues.¹²⁰ Since the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, the UN, OSCE and EU Monitoring Mission have mediated comparable meetings between Georgian officials and the de facto Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities.¹²¹ Since 2015, participants in the Ukraine-related Minsk process have convened in four working groups to discuss topics ranging from security to humanitarian relief.¹²² While these forums have their problems, they have helped improve the security and daily lives of the people living in affected areas.

With respect to Nagorno-Karabakh, efforts to set up consistent contacts have failed in the past, partly because of deep distrust between the parties but also for political reasons. Those involved worried that such arrangements could run counter to their positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh entity’s political status. In 1995, a year after the first war’s ceasefire, Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert confirmed to Moscow that they were ready to launch a cooperation mechanism to respond to incidents that threat-

¹¹⁵ “Heads of security services of Armenia and Azerbaijan met a month ago – Melkonyan”, Sputnik Armenia, 29 April 2021 (Russian); Naira Badalyan, “Besides meetings in person, the heads of the Armenian and Azerbaijani security services also connect over the phone”, ArmInfo, 29 April 2021 (Russian).

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March and April 2021.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, April 2021.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹²⁰ Since 2007, the de facto Transnistrian officials and their Moldovan counterparts have engaged in fourteen working groups. But the cooperation was in place even before that, as part of formats mediated by the OSCE Mission to Moldova. For details, see “OSCE Mission to Moldova”, OSCE, n.d.; and “List of Working Groups’ Coordinators from Chisinau”, Government of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.

¹²¹ For details, see “Proposals for joint incident prevention and response mechanisms”, Civil.ge, 2 March 2009.

¹²² See “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”, OSCE, 12 February 2015 (Russian); “Joint press statement of Trilateral Contact Group: Trilateral Contact Group launches activities of working groups advancing implementation of Minsk arrangements”, OSCE, 6 May 2015.

ened the ceasefire.¹²³ This agreement was never fulfilled. Later efforts met similar fates.¹²⁴

The fundamental disagreement over status is unchanged today, if public statements are anything to go by. Baku will likely continue to oppose formats that include anything resembling a formal role for de facto authorities, even documents requiring their signatures, lest that be seen as granting them political standing or legitimacy.¹²⁵ Stepanakert, for its part, will not agree to anything that describes Nagorno-Karabakh's residents as part of the "Armenian community of Azerbaijan".¹²⁶ Yerevan will be hesitant to agree to any format that lacks Stepanakert's blessing.¹²⁷

Yet the two sides have found workarounds for the impasse over status in the past – and they could do so again. The Russian peacekeepers could mediate in establishing such a format, whether as part of their push for clearer delineation of roles or in cooperation with the other OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs. Given Baku's opposition to any document that includes de facto authorities' signatures, the mediators would need to find alternatives allowing for formal communication.¹²⁸ The sides might look to build this format into the existing ceasefire agreement or agree to a joint statement prescribing its modalities with the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs. The Russian security services, for instances, reached an agreement for joint use of the roads that cross the border between southern Armenia and Azerbaijan by signing two identical, but separate documents with Yerevan and Baku.¹²⁹

¹²³ Vladimir Kazimirov, "Peace for Karabakh", in *International Relations*, 2nd edition (Moscow, 2015), pp. 363-365 (Russian).

¹²⁴ "Joint Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Secretary of State of the United States of America and State Secretary for Europe Affairs of France", OSCE, 16 May 2016; "Joint Statements of the Presidents of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Armenia and Russian Federation on settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh", official website of the President of Russia, 20 June 2016 (Russian).

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, March 2021.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Armenian official, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹²⁸ The ceasefire agreement that ended the 1990s war was known as the Bishkek protocol. The signatures of de facto officials on the protocol allowed them to declare that Baku recognised them as party to the agreement. This claim has always worried Azerbaijan, and it does not want de facto figures' names on any future agreement. In this regard, Azerbaijani authorities consider the November 2020 agreement – signed only by Baku and Yerevan – an achievement. Crisis Group interviews, Azerbaijani experts and civil society members, Baku, May 2021.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Armenian and Azerbaijani officials, Yerevan and Baku, March 2021.

III. Humanitarian Crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh

More than three quarters of Nagorno-Karabakh's population of 145,000 left for Armenia during the war, including most of the women, children and elderly residents.¹³⁰ Of those, more than 70,000 returned in the first six months after the war ended.¹³¹ Some 40,000 remain in Armenia.¹³²

The returnees have come home to a housing shortage. Not only were many homes wrecked by fighting, but among the returnees are some 20,000 people who had lived in places that were controlled by Armenians but are now in Azerbaijani hands. Unwilling or unable to return there, they are now, in effect, displaced to Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh. Undamaged apartments for rent are in short supply. In the region's largest towns, Stepanakert and Askeran, people have taken up residence in basements and attics. Some, including families with children, have found makeshift quarters in shops and gyms, which lack proper facilities.

Many are in dire circumstances. Angela, 56, lived in a small Armenian settlement called Jivani in the Fizuli region adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh before the 2020 war. There, she and her husband kept bees and farmed fish on a large property.¹³³ When the fighting started, they fled with only their passports, leaving all their belongings behind. They now live in a basement in Stepanakert, furnished with a single metal bed; their new neighbours donated a blanket, linen and a small stove. With no toilet or bathing facilities, they make do as they can, relying on the stove to cook and to keep themselves warm. Once a month Angela receives a package of basic groceries and hygiene products from the ICRC. "This is our main source of food", she says. "We buy the rest with money that my daughter sends from Russia".¹³⁴

In total, around 30 per cent of Nagorno-Karabakh's pre-war population remain displaced.¹³⁵ Of the displaced who remain in Armenia, some can afford to rent apartments. Others live in hotels or in temporary housing set up by the Armenian government in kindergartens.¹³⁶ Some have little to go back to. Mkrtych's family shares a house with two other displaced families in northern Armenia.¹³⁷ Before the war, he was a schoolteacher in an Armenian settlement in Kubatly, another region adjacent

¹³⁰ See details of wartime displacement at "Armenia – People in a Refugee-like Situation (from NK) Registered by Migration Service", Coordination Steering Group Armenia, 15 December 2020. For a detailed breakdown of the displaced population, see the UN High Commissioner for Refugees portal on Armenia. For details of Nagorno-Karabakh's pre-war population, see "2015 Population Census Results", National Statistical Service of the Artsakh Republic, n.d.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, diplomat, Stepanakert and Yerevan, March 2021.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, diplomat, Stepanakert and Yerevan, March 2021.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, displaced person, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, displaced person, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹³⁵ For details on the population in different parts of Nagorno-Karabakh before the war, see "NKR de facto and de jure population (urban, rural) according to administrative-territorial division and residence status" at "The results of the 2015 population census of the republic of NKR", National Statistical Service of the Artsakh Republic, n.d. Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials and displaced people, Stepanakert and Yerevan, March 2021.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, displaced person, March 2021.

to Nagorno-Karabakh now reclaimed by Azerbaijan. He fled in his slippers. The de facto authorities, who administered the adjacent territories when they were under Armenian control, still pay him a monthly salary although he has not seen his students for months. “They are spread out, in all different places. One of our graduates died in the war. We buried him at Yerablur [a military cemetery near Yerevan]”, Mkrtych said. He is ready to start a new life in Nagorno-Karabakh but does not know when that might be possible. “There is no space for us to live there now”, Mkrtych said.¹³⁸

Many of the displaced also suffer from psychological trauma. Across Nagorno-Karabakh, funerals fill each weekend, as more remains of war dead are identified. Every settlement has its own cemetery with fresh tombs. Some men are already turning to alcohol and narcotics to cope with flashbacks to combat or the pain of losing friends and relatives.¹³⁹ Women also suffer greatly, according to a specialist working with the displaced, though they generally were kept from the fighting. “[Women] are constantly asking me: ‘Are we raising our kids for the next war?’”, the psychologist said. “They can’t understand the meaning of so many losses”.¹⁴⁰ Children, too, are dealing with loss and displacement, as well as the adult trauma around them. “They become emotional and often aggressive when speaking about their future”, said an NGO representative who works with Armenians displaced from Shusha, adding that the children talk constantly of returning home.¹⁴¹ Two Armenian NGOs have registered a spike in domestic violence and say the problem is particularly prevalent in families where adults lack regular employment.¹⁴²

A. *Helping Those in Need*

As the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh government is strapped, Yerevan has committed to support the displaced as well as all others who stayed in the region during the war or went back to their homes after the fighting ceased. It has disbursed a one-time subsidy of \$480 per person to displaced people who registered online and another \$570 to each person who lost a home.¹⁴³ All women and elderly people registered in Nagorno-Karabakh receive around \$130 a month.¹⁴⁴ In addition, Yerevan runs a number of small programs to subsidise families with children and firms that hire people from Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴⁵ Armenia has made medical assistance free of charge for all Nagorno-Karabakh residents and also provides funds to cover rent and

¹³⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, displaced person, March 2021.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, local NGO founder, Goris, April 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, psychologist, Yerevan, April 2021.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, local NGO representative, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁴² Domestic violence has not always been well monitored in Nagorno-Karabakh. The NGOs are nonetheless confident that the incidence is rising because of the sudden, severe change in the lives of the locals, who may have lost property, jobs or both. Crisis Group interviews, NGO representatives, Yerevan and Goris, March and April 2021.

¹⁴³ See the list of support programs at the Armenian government’s website (Armenian).

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ See “15 social assistance programs to mitigate the effects of war”, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 25 December 2020 (Armenian); and “Categories for beneficiaries applying for employment programs for the people of Artsakh have been expanded”, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 21 January 2021 (Armenian).

gas and electricity bills.¹⁴⁶ The amounts are small, but they make a difference. “If it were not for this money, we would have to live in the street”, said Nazik, who used to live in Kubatly and now rents a room in a village near Yerevan.¹⁴⁷

All displaced people also receive direct food aid, whether from the government, NGOs or private groups.¹⁴⁸ The town of Goris, located in southern Armenia on the main road from Nagorno-Karabakh, has the largest population of displaced people per capita in the country.¹⁴⁹ Some have found jobs there, mainly at the local textile factory, and plan to stay. Many more are still in need of basic assistance.¹⁵⁰ Twice a week, women displaced by the war stand in line for meat and dairy products distributed by a local NGO, supplies they cannot afford to buy.¹⁵¹

It is unclear how long the Armenian government can pay for these programs. Today, the government’s costs are covered mainly by donations from Armenians in the country and the diaspora, which have been transferred to the state budget.¹⁵² The cash helps not only to feed displaced people, but also to keep the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh entity’s economy going.¹⁵³ Since January, Armenian and de facto officials have been planning for possible cuts in payments.¹⁵⁴ They are likely to announce their plans after the Armenian parliamentary elections scheduled for 20 June. The first to lose support will probably be those with property in Nagorno-Karabakh that was untouched in the 2020 war.¹⁵⁵ A few de facto officials favour ceasing payments to those displaced who plan to stay in Armenia.¹⁵⁶ But authorities are committed to continuing to provide for those who lack sustainable housing, a senior de facto official told Crisis Group. “They will receive payments until the moment we provide them with [permanent] housing”, another de facto official said.

Authorities are looking for ways to solve the housing problem. The Armenian government is paying via direct transfer to Stepanakert for each person registered online for subsidies to rebuild damaged homes. It is up to the de facto authorities to hire companies for the actual reconstruction.¹⁵⁷ In November 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged aid to build housing in Nagorno-Karabakh. A senior de facto official said this assistance is on track: Russia is set to deliver some 1,200 pre-fabricated houses in the coming weeks.¹⁵⁸ In March, Armenia promised to provide \$220 million

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials and residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, March 2021. Also see “15 social assistance programs to mitigate the effects of war”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, displaced person, March 2021.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, local NGO founder, Goris, April 2021.

¹⁴⁹ See data on the displaced population at the UNHCR portal on Armenia.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, local NGO founder, Goris, April 2021.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, displaced people, Goris, April 2021.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Armenian official, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, former de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁵⁴ “Minister Mesrop Arakelyan took part in extended consultations”, press statement, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 7 January 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert, March 2021. Also see “250 thousand drams will be provided to the residents of Artsakh who lost their real estate due to the destruction”, press statement, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 10 December 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, April 2021. In May, during a visit to Yerevan, the Russian foreign minister mentioned the plan to deliver houses to Nagorno-Karabakh. See

to construct houses for the displaced in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁵⁹ Over the course of three years, officials expect this support to house around 6,000 of the 9,000 displaced families, about half the displaced population from the 2020 war.¹⁶⁰ The de facto authorities have also started construction of multi-storey residential buildings. Perhaps in frustration that these endeavours are moving slowly, some de facto officials have proposed that the entity seize the homes of people who moved abroad years ago and donate them to the displaced.¹⁶¹

Compensation is another route. In April, the de facto authorities started reimbursing displaced people for lost property.¹⁶² Later, Stepanakert plans to launch a similar process for private companies that lost facilities in the territories now controlled by Azerbaijan.¹⁶³ Some de facto officials are considering a possible law to guarantee subsidies and accommodation for the displaced for years to come.¹⁶⁴ “I know that we are not perfect, and we make mistakes”, said a de facto official. “But none of us was ready for such a big humanitarian crisis. We have to learn as we go”.¹⁶⁵

Housing subsidies and promises of compensation alleviate anxiety for some of the displaced, but not all. Margarita rents an apartment in Yerevan and has no plans to return to Nagorno-Karabakh. “No money can replace my own home in Hadrut”, she said. “I can’t go back and become displaced once again in the next war. Enough is enough”.¹⁶⁶

B. Access for International Organisations

Financial and advisory support from international organisations and foreign governments could facilitate aid to the displaced – if they were able to provide it. As of now, the only international organisation working in Nagorno-Karabakh is the ICRC, which has been there since the 1990s. The rest remain hamstrung by debates over status.

The 9 November ceasefire statement makes explicit mention of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which, it says, is to oversee displaced persons’ return to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.¹⁶⁷ Moscow, Yerevan and Baku did

“Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s opening remarks at talks with Acting Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Ara Aivazyan”, official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 6 May 2021.

¹⁵⁹ “Programs worth 110 billion drams to be implemented in Artsakh, co-funded by the Government of Armenia and Hayastan All-Armenian Fund: the Security Councils of Armenia and Artsakh hold joint meeting”, official website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 26 March 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, de facto officials, Stepanakert and Martakert, March 2021.

¹⁶² “President Harutyunyan approves government decisions on providing state financial assistance to persons who suffered material damage”, official website of the president of the Artsakh Republic, 21 April 2021.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, displaced person, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁶⁷ “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation”, official website of the President of Russia, 10 November 2020.

not consult the UNHCR before including it in their statement.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, this and other UN agencies have voiced readiness to engage, assuming they can do so in a way that offers support to both Azerbaijanis uprooted during the 1990s war and Armenians displaced in the 2020 war.¹⁶⁹ To jump-start this process, in mid-November 2020, the Russian president tasked his foreign minister with consulting the UN agencies and defining a way forward with Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁷⁰ Russia sent letters to several UN agencies to request support in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁷¹

But the Russian initiative soon ran into problems. As negotiations began, Yerevan proposed that international organisations function as Russian agencies have, with unfettered access to both Armenian- and Azerbaijani-controlled areas of the conflict zone from both Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁷² Baku saw things differently. It wanted the UN agencies' Azerbaijan offices firmly in charge, with staff travelling to affected areas, including those that are Armenian-populated, from Azerbaijani territory only.¹⁷³ Such an arrangement would give Baku a full picture of these organisations' activities and would be in line with its position that the region is part of Azerbaijan. In turn, Yerevan hardened its stance. Now, it is insisting that international agencies travel to Armenian-populated parts of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia only.¹⁷⁴ Moscow sought to mediate at first, but then backed away. "If international organisations have problems with access, they should solve them with Baku and Yerevan", a Russian official said.¹⁷⁵

Given the climate of deep mistrust and the implicit link to the status issue, compromise will be hard to broker. Officials in Baku believe that the involvement of international organisations in territories policed by Russian peacekeepers is not urgent and that those organisations should discuss the issue directly with Azerbaijan, given that the territory is de jure Azerbaijani. Azerbaijani officials want international aid groups to plan their activities in an ad hoc manner, with no office in Stepanakert, and to report on their activities in Nagorno-Karabakh directly to Baku.¹⁷⁶ Yerevan and Stepanakert insist that Baku be more flexible. They fear that it will try to exert control via stipulations placed on international organisations. More than that, they now see this question as part of the long-term status negotiations and they are loath to give ground. "The hope for status is all we have left", a senior de facto official said. "We can't barter it away".¹⁷⁷

Despite Russia's frustration with trying to resolve this issue, it remains a post-war priority. In their first detailed statement since the ceasefire, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group listed humanitarian aid access among the matters for Armenian

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group Statement, "Getting from Ceasefire to Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh", 10 November 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group online interview, diplomat, December 2020.

¹⁷⁰ "Meeting to review humanitarian problems in the Nagorno-Karabakh region", press statement, official website of the President of Russia, 13 November 2020.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group online and telephone interviews, diplomats, December 2020 and January 2021.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Armenian and de facto officials, Yerevan and Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Baku, February 2021.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Armenian official, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, March 2021.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani official, Moscow, May 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

and Azerbaijani leaders, who have not met face to face with co-chair mediators since 2019, to address when they next convene.¹⁷⁸ High-level visits could help things along. The Russian foreign minister was in Yerevan and Baku in May and mentioned international organisations' access during his meetings.¹⁷⁹ "Negotiations on this issue are ongoing", a Russian official said.¹⁸⁰ The Russian and French leaders also are also planning consultations on the post-war situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, though details of what that will entail have yet to emerge.

Assuming that Baku and Yerevan do not budge, foreign mediators should propose interim solutions. A de facto official said the international agencies could start by offering funding and expertise to local organisations already working in Nagorno-Karabakh. "For instance, if they support ... rehabilitation of the water system, we will be able to make use of the freed funds to construct more houses [for the displaced]", they said.¹⁸¹ Another de facto official proposed that international organisations carry out online assessments to learn what they will need to do when, down the road, they do obtain access on the ground. "We can ... film whatever they need in the region to understand the situation", they said. "After all, the whole world now works online. Why can't we start with this?"¹⁸² Aid agencies say they are open to remote management, though they would prefer to be on the ground to monitor projects.¹⁸³ In the past, some had given funds to local NGOs before the issue of status got in the way. "Access is killing everything", said a senior representative of an international organisation based in Yerevan.¹⁸⁴

In the meantime, Moscow is putting infrastructure in place to facilitate the work of international organisations if and when they do gain access. In November 2020, the Russian president established the Inter-agency Centre for Humanitarian Response in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁸⁵ It consists of several agencies, including the defence ministry, foreign ministry, and emergency and security services. According to a Russian presidential decree, the centre is also meant to assist international organisations in working with Baku and Yerevan. It could become a mechanism for coordination among international organisations, Russian peacekeepers, de facto authorities, and Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives. "We would only need a guarantee of non-interference in our work from all of the other actors, including Russia", an international agency representative told Crisis Group. "Because we need to keep our impartial status. This is our red line".¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁸ "Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group", OSCE, 13 April 2021.

¹⁷⁹ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks during a meeting with President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev in Baku", official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 10 May 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, 31 May 2021.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, de facto official, Stepanakert, March 2021.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, foreign diplomat, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior representative of an international organisation, Yerevan, March 2021.

¹⁸⁵ "Decree about inter-agency centre for humanitarian response", official website of the President of Russia, 13 November 2020 (Russian).

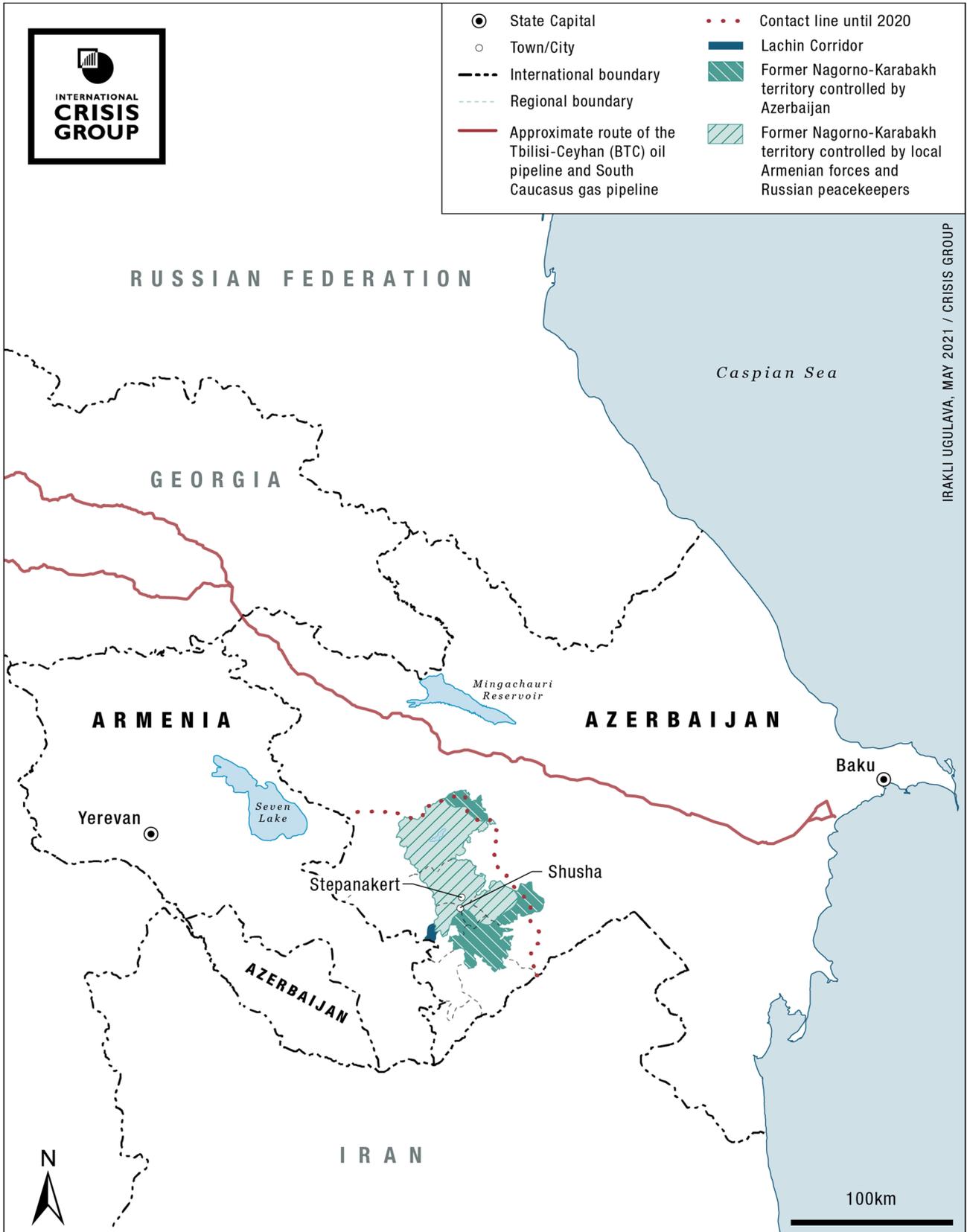
¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Yerevan, March 2021.

IV. Conclusion

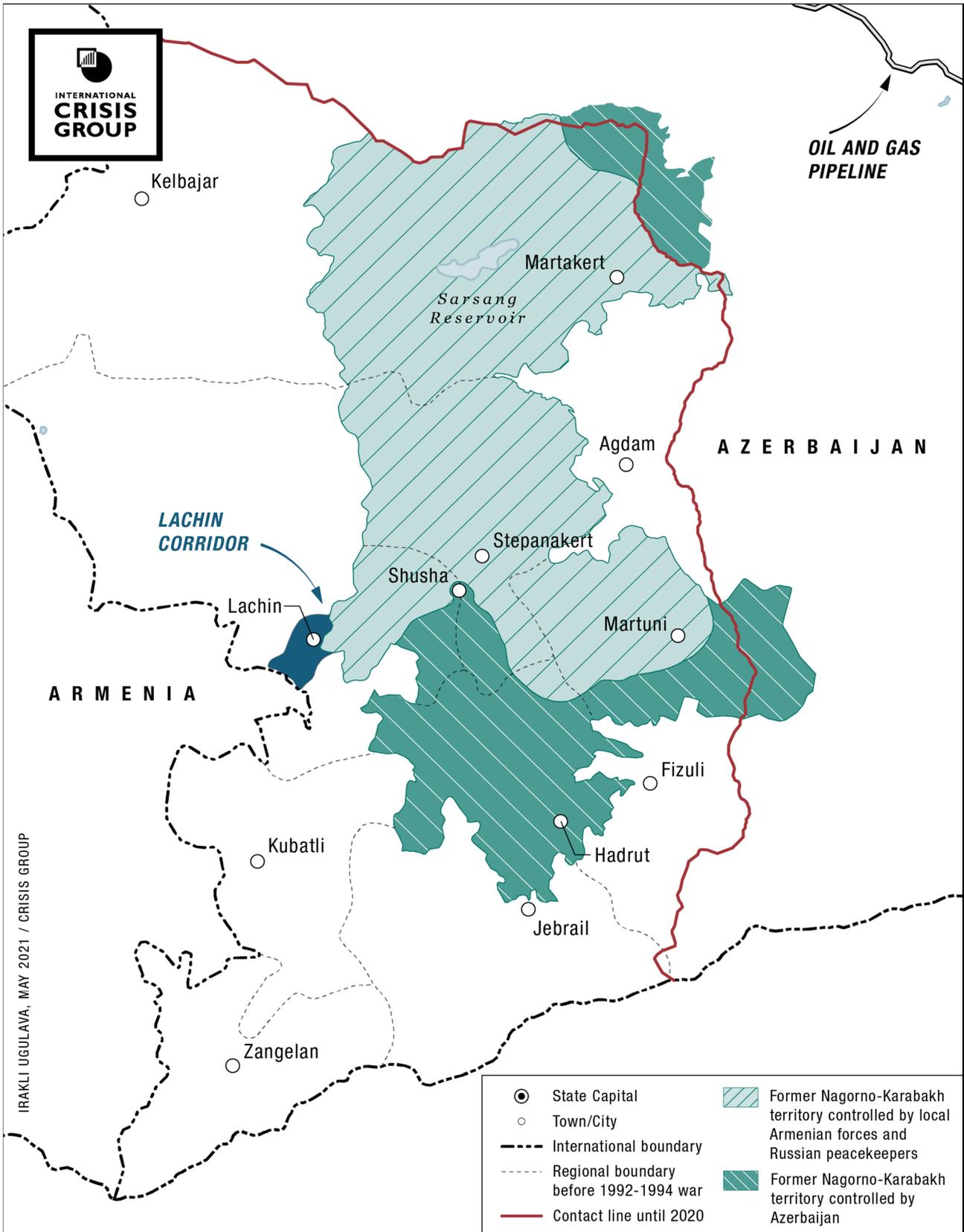
The ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains fragile. The proximity of troops on the front lines to each other and to residential areas, daily disputes over post-war issues from demining to access to farmlands, and the dependence of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis on key roads crossing the front are all sources of tension. The flare-up in May shows how volatile the front line remains. A clear mandate for Russian peacekeepers, a regular communication channel for resolving urgent disputes and access for international aid organisations to the Armenian-populated areas of Nagorno-Karabakh would each go a long way to helping bring a measure of security and stability that is in the interest of all sides.

**Yerevan/Stepanakert/Baku/Tbilisi/Moscow/Istanbul/Brussels,
9 June 2021**

Appendix A: Map of the Conflict Zone in a Regional Context



Appendix B: Detailed Map of the Conflict Zone



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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. 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 Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

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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James Blake	Gillian Lawie	Rahul Sen Sharma
Thomas Cunningham	David Litwak	Chloe Squires
Matthew Devlin	Madison Malloch-Brown	Leeanne Su
Sabrina Edelman	Megan McGill	AJ Twombly
Sabina Frizell	Hamesh Mehta	Theodore Waddelow
Sarah Covill	Clara Morain Nabity	Zachary Watling
Lynda Hammes	Gillian Morris	Grant Webster
Joe Hill	Duncan Pickard	Sherman Williams
Lauren Hurst	Lorenzo Piras	Yasin Yaqubie

SENIOR ADVISERS

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

Martti Ahtisaari Chairman Emeritus	Christoph Bertram Lakhdar Brahimi	Aleksander Kwasniewski Ricardo Lagos
George Mitchell Chairman Emeritus	Kim Campbell Jorge Castañeda	Joanne Leedom-Ackerman Todung Mulya Lubis
Gareth Evans President Emeritus	Joaquim Alberto Chissano Victor Chu	Graça Machel Jessica T. Mathews
Kenneth Adelman Adnan Abu-Odeh	Mong Joon Chung Sheila Coronel	Miklós Németh Christine Ockrent
HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal Celso Amorim	Pat Cox Gianfranco Dell'Alba	Timothy Ong Roza Otunbayeva
Óscar Arias Richard Armitage	Jacques Delors Alain Destexhe	Olara Otunnu Lord (Christopher) Patten
Diego Arria Zainab Bangura	Mou-Shih Ding Uffe Ellemann-Jensen	Surin Pitsuwan Fidel V. Ramos
Nahum Barnea Kim Beazley	Stanley Fischer Carla Hills	Olympia Snowe Javier Solana
Shlomo Ben-Ami	Swanee Hunt Wolfgang Ischinger	Pär Stenbäck