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A Listening Tour of the Azerbaijani Front Lines

A new communication channel has sparked hope for negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. But as Crisis Group Analyst Zaur Shiriyev found talking to Azerbaijani soldiers and villagers living near the front, decades of conflict mean that the path to peace will be rocky.

BAKU – I am standing among the mourners at the grave of my friend Eldar's mother, who died suddenly of cancer. She was born in Fizuli, a town controlled by Armenian forces since the 1994 ceasefire with Azerbaijan. Eldar's mother fled her home in 1993, along with many others. Several of these other displaced people have come to pay their respects, and though many of them have lived in Baku for decades, they retain a deep connection to their place of origin: when I arrive at the mosque for the ceremony, all I have to say is "the one from Fizuli" before the caretaker points me in the right direction. His mother's last wish, Eldar tells me, was to be buried in her native town. That's not possible – Azerbaijan lost control of that territory more than 25 years ago and remains at loggerheads with Armenia seeking to recover it – but I tell Eldar I'm going to the front lines in the coming days, so I'll carry her wish with me.

I have a rare opportunity to see the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict's realities up close. With a long-awaited permit from the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence, I'll be touring the Azerbaijani side of the Line of Contact around Nagorno-Karabakh, the territory over which Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a brutal war in the early 1990s resulting in a loss of Azerbaijani control. I'll visit the Azerbaijani army units stationed along the Line of Contact, as well as military installations along the international Armenia-Azerbaijan border. My trip will last five days.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war was one of the bloodiest ethnic conflicts to erupt after the Soviet Union's demise. Moscow had placed the majority-Armenian region, which was also home to hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis, under the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic's administration. The war, which lasted from 1992 to 1994, ended with Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts wholly or partially controlled by Armenian forces. The conflict forced more than a million people from their homes, including Azerbaijanis from throughout Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent territories, and Armenians from throughout Azerbaijan. Years of negotiations after the 1994 ceasefire led nowhere. Fighting broke out again in April 2016, followed by more diplomatic deadlock.

Of late, however, hope of progress has risen slightly, thanks to political changes in Armenia. These began with an April 2018 popular revolt that toppled the long-time leader in Yerevan, leading to elections and a new prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan. In a real breakthrough four months after the uprising, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders meeting in the Tajikistani capital of Dushanbe agreed to create a communication channel at the Line of Contact to reduce the risk of accidental escalation and build confidence.

In January, the two countries' foreign ministers met in Paris where each agreed to take on the task of "preparing the population for peace".

At Eldar's mother's burial, the mourners from Fizuli start asking me questions when they hear where I'm going. They get contradictory reports about the conflict. One day, the media tells them that Pashinyan is eager to make peace; the next day, the same outlets call for more war. The mourners' confusion drives home to me how badly people on both sides of the conflict need reliable, unbiased information. That kind of reporting is lacking in local languages.

I meet the Defence Ministry's spokesman for a last briefing before my journey. He tells me that ceasefire violations at the Line of Contact have fallen dramatically since the Dushanbe meeting. A violation can be anything from a single shot to a one-minute volley. The Azerbaijanis publish a tally every day: from September 2018 to 2 April 2019, the total is 5,018. During the same time span in previous years, the number was 10,000 or higher. My trip, however, coincides with an uptick in violations, beginning after an Azerbaijani soldier's death on 26 March. At the end of our meeting, the spokesman assigns an officer to accompany me on my trip, a major named Ramin. A man of modest demeanour in his thirties, Ramin represents the army's best and brightest.

"Preparing the population for peace"

After a five-hour drive, we arrive in Shamkir, where an army corps is situated. In order to visit the military positions on the international border with Armenia, we have to talk with the corps commander.

Entering the city, I see posters advertising a chess tournament in which grandmasters including world champion Magnus Carlsen faced off against Azerbaijani internally displaced (IDP) schoolchildren. The tournament was held in memory of Vugar Gashimov, an Azerbaijani grandmaster who was ranked sixth in the world at his peak and died in 2014. No Armenian competed, though both Armenia and Azerbaijan now have a player among the world's top ten. The Armenian is Levon Aronian, symbol of a new generation; the Azerbaijani is Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, whom his compatriots call a "shah" or king. In chess, the two countries have long maintained a sharp rivalry, as they now do on the battlefield, but without the lethal consequences. These days, no Armenian or Azerbaijani player visits the other's country to match wits.

> *"The phrase "preparing the populations for peace" has been circulating among Armenians and Azerbaijanis [...] but no one has explained what it means, leaving it open to interpretation."*

The corps commander in Shamkir, a middle-aged colonel, expresses some optimism regarding prospects for peace. A few months before my trip, the Azerbaijani state border service took over a short stretch of the international border – from Kazakh to Aghstafa – from the army. The colonel sees this as a positive step. "If you give control over the border to the border service", he says, "it means that you don't want war in this particular place". Regardless, wartime restrictions still apply at this section of the border. Anyone seeking to visit the villages there – including journalists and researchers – must get special permission from the government, as I did. The process takes months, which could be one reason why the Azerbaijani public lacks information about the front and the opinions of their compatriots who live there.

But the colonel soon tempers his optimism, commenting that is it is hard to imagine "preparing the population for peace", as politicians on both sides have pledged to do. "People in border villages witness first-hand every loss and every small move", he says. Only those living near the front lines in Azerbaijan and Armenia fully grasp the importance of reductions or surges in ceasefire violations. More than anyone residing in the safety of capital cities, they know

Road sign shows Jojug Mercanli and also Armenian controlled territories, and Nagorno Karabakh itself. Jojug Mercanli, Fuzuli. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shiriyev

the fear of being shot or their kid being killed by a sniper while coming home from school. Only they know the relief when the fear lessens. But the locals have also lived through lulls in the shooting before. They know it usually restarts.

The phrase "preparing the populations for peace" has been circulating among Armenians and Azerbaijanis since the two foreign ministers' January meeting. But no one has explained what it means, leaving it open to interpretation. Some analysts think it indicates bilateral agreement to move quickly toward resolving the conflict; others see it as public relations, a way of delaying negotiations while giving the impression that they're on the right track.

I am not shocked to hear a front-line officer voicing the latter opinion. For years, the societies in both countries have cast the respective armies as champions of national security. With memories of the April 2016 fighting still fairly fresh, the words "preparing the populations for peace" might sound to the colonel's ears as though they diminish the importance of the army's role. He may have institutional interests as well as patriotic sentiment at heart.

In Azerbaijan, the government has spent heavily on modernising the army, buying $10 billion in arms from Russia and Israel just in the last decade. The army's stature has grown considerably since 2016, when for the first time in the war it made some battlefield gains, convincing more of the population that the lost territories could be recouped through military means. Since then, the government has upped its military spending again. It will be difficult for the army – and the country – to shift gears if and when peace comes.

Better food, better discipline

The colonel grants us permission to visit the military posts under his command, and we head for the highlands of Gadabay. It's April, but it's still cold and snow lies on the ground. We arrive at a place called Nova Saratovka to meet the brigade commander. Ethnic Russians from Saratov, a town on the Volga River, settled

this area in the mid-19th century; the villagers were known as "milk drinkers" for their refusal to observe Orthodox Christian fasts. Most of the Russians left during the 1992-1994 war, however, and today only Azerbaijanis live here. Soldiers are everywhere.

At the first post in Nova Saratovka, the soldiers show us their barracks. They serve us tea and ask me to compare their food to what I ate during my military service ten years ago (Azerbaijan mandates military service for all able-bodied males at the age of eighteen). My expectations are low. The army delivers rations to these outlying locales only once every six months. I remember media reporting in 2013 and earlier about low-ranking officials selling rations for extra money rather than distributing them at the front. But when I taste the food, I have to admit that it's incomparably better than what I had eaten a decade earlier. One soldier, pointing to the olive oil and canned fish, says he never enjoyed such fare as a civilian.

Though I only visit part of the front line, army morale seems better than it was when I served. The officers I speak to credit the defence minister appointed in 2013. During his tenure, the ministry has digitised the conscription system, which, by limiting opportunities for manipulation, has made it harder for those who can afford it to bribe their way out of service. The new minister has also worked to reduce the number of non-combat deaths due to hazing, which was widespread before he took office. In early 2013, before his appointment, thousands poured into the streets of Baku to protest hazing under the slogan, "No more dead soldiers". Lastly, he has helped the army hone its fighting skills by hiring contractors to perform non-military duties like cooking and cleaning on base. The new minister has not solved all the army's problems: media reports still suggest some hazing and bribery to avoid service. But these phenomena appear to be far less common than in the past.

Here in remote Gadabay, the army's professionalisation is noticeable. The new generation of officers, made up of men like my guide Ramin, appear far superior to their

Gadabay military positions, Gülüstan fortress. Gadabay District, Nagorno Karabakh. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shiriyev

predecessors in both knowledge of military tactics and the techniques of command. In the early 1990s, when Azerbaijan established its own standing army, there were few such professional officers. The Soviets had routinely assigned Azerbaijanis to construction battalions and given them minimal military training.

I am pleasantly surprised to see other improvements. Conscripts eat the same food that the officers do – jam, cheese and a delicious, hot bread that wards off the cold – sitting at tea tables that are set close together. Later, as I chat with soldiers about the conditions in their unit, I ask one quiet young man from the mountainous Quba region if he would like to say something. "A few days ago, I celebrated my birthday", he replies shyly. "My family couldn't reach me here, for obvious reasons, but I got a call from the general of the army corps, who wished me a happy birthday". I am astounded. No top commander would have made such a gesture in my day.

Talking politics

At my first stop in Nova Saratovka, the officers try to avoid discussions about the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and are more comfortable talking about how to conduct the war. They would rather point out what they believe to be Armenia's weaknesses than their own. They try out an argument I will hear frequently on my trip – that Armenia is economically incapable of waging a long war, should major combat erupt again. They cite Azerbaijan's burgeoning military budget and weapons spending. But Armenia has been modernising its army as well. De facto Nagorno-Karabakh forces – loyal to the local Armenian self-declared entity – control most of the mountain heights, strategic positions that are more important than armaments.

The commander interrupts the conversation to ask my opinion of a speech in March by the Armenian defence minister, Davit Tonoyan. Speaking to an Armenian diaspora audience in New York, Tonoyan said he had "reformulated" the longstanding concept of "territories for peace" to "new territories in the event of a new war". He meant that the Armenian side will advance into lands it does not now control if it feels threatened by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani politicians have long seen the Armenian side's withdrawal from areas it now controls as the necessary prelude to any lasting settlement. The commander thus perceives Tonoyan's rhetoric as aggressive. Armenians, however, perceive statements by Azerbaijani military leaders as equally threatening. For instance, the Azerbaijani defence minister Zakir Hasanov said, "If the Armenians go on the offensive, I'll have the chance to meet Tonoyan in Yerevan".

"The Armenian side will advance into lands it does not now control if it feels threatened by Azerbaijan."

At my next stop in Gadabay, I find the same sense of determination to fight on. The commander allows me to ask the soldiers questions about the peace process. A young man named Elnur from Baku says he doesn't believe in conflict resolution. "No one will give back our territories peacefully", he declares. I am sure that Elnur is saying what the officers want him to say. But I don't know what he really thinks: the soldiers treat me as if I am an international inspector of army morale, and they are careful not to send the wrong political message. I recognise the mindset. I thought much the same way in my army days.

Other soldiers give clipped answers. But it is clear they are well informed about the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations. They say they watch the television news daily and read digests prepared by officers of politicians' speeches and interviews, as well as articles about the peace process, all in Azerbaijani. The commander says the army distributes these materials to shield the conscripts from outside propaganda.

Up close and impersonal

Army life may have changed since my time in uniform, but what hasn't changed is the regular shooting across the front lines. In Tovuz, to the north west of Shamkir, the fighting is

more intense – or perhaps the officers are more candid about it – than in Gadabay. Part of it is sheer proximity: from the village of Agdam, I can see the Armenian troops' positions. Seven Azerbaijani villages are nearby – Alibayli is 600m and Agbulag 800m from the front – and all are vulnerable to rifle fire.

The local commander, Emil, says he has seen a decrease in ceasefire violations since the Dushanbe agreement. At night, however, "Armenian soldiers shoot toward our position just to show us they are here". It's a sort of unspoken language – "don't dare cross the line" – used in any conflict where mere tens of metres separate the sides. Azerbaijani soldiers do it, too. Every day the soldiers peer at each other across the front, but they never speak, much less learn their counterparts' names. This language has historically had strict and ruthless rules: if a soldier is killed on one side, the other side can expect to suffer a loss the next day.

Yet when I ask another officer about the rules of engagement for Azerbaijani forces after the Dushanbe agreement, I hear a somewhat different response. An officer says there are three: first, no shooting at Armenian residential areas; secondly, no artillery; and thirdly, no heavy return fire unless the Armenian side mounts an attack meant to overrun Azerbaijani positions. The officer swears that "on the president's orders" his unit has never exceeded these instructions. If an Armenian sniper kills or wounds an Azerbaijani soldier, he always awaits orders from his superiors before he reacts. (Previously, front-line commanders had more leeway to determine the response themselves.) Risks of civilian casualties are too high for both sides if a firefight breaks out over every gunshot.

The rose garden

From Tovuz we head south to the Line of Contact for a few days. We arrive first in the Goranboy region.

I'm looking forward to one Goranboy destination in particular, Gulustan. Every Azerbaijani knows the village's historical significance. In 1813, Russia and Persia concluded their war at Gulustan's fortress, signing a treaty that divided Azerbaijan in two. One half is now the independent nation and the other is part of Iran, where millions of Azerbaijanis live. Ironically, the fortress itself is now divided, controlled partly by Azerbaijani troops and partly by Armenian forces. It is one of the most dangerous places along the Line of Contact.

Nonetheless, I have high hopes of seeing marvellous sights – Gulustan translates literally as "rose garden". I sense it could become a major tourist attraction. But upon arrival I can view the fortress only from atop a nearby hill. The Armenian surveillance cameras make it dangerous to get closer. The castle itself is only an abandoned hulk with a few of its towers left standing. According to the officers, the Armenians installed the surveillance cameras after the April 2016 war; they say they know exactly where every one of them is. Gulustan is also one of the front-line locations that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe visits on occasion as part of its limited monitoring role.

The soldiers here take a dimmer view of peace prospects than their comrades at the international border. The reason, according to one officer, is that "we are not shooting at their position, yet they are carrying out engineering works to strengthen it". They feel powerless to stop the Armenian side from digging in. Before the Dushanbe agreement, more regular exchanges of fire helped them slow the Armenians' projects. I later learn that the Armenian soldiers similarly suspect Azerbaijani troops of using breaks in the fighting to reinforce their positions.

Back in Goranboy, I meet the middle-aged colonel who commands the nearby units, including the one in Gulustan. He shares his subordinates' scepticism about the ceasefire. A number of Turkish- and English-language books on military history in his office catch my eye. I notice one of his volumes, Ian Morris's 2014 book War: What Is It Good For?, which I know contains the line "war makes the state

and the state makes peace". It's essentially an excursus of Thomas Hobbes' reasoning in Leviathan that the rise of a strong central authority tempered a state of nature that was a war of all against all. Morris argues that violent deaths globally have declined over five thousand years (albeit with peaks and valleys) as central government has become stronger and spread to more places. I wonder during my conversation with the colonel which passage of the book he finds most compelling.

The April 2016 war

From Goranboy we go to nearby military posts bunched together, all operating surveillance cameras. There are two Azerbaijani villages in this district, Qazaxlar and Tapqaraqoyunlu. The first has been abandoned since the 1990s, but people still live in the second. Both were sites of heavy fighting in April 2016.

The villagers show me the trenches where Armenian soldiers were dug in before fighting broke out three years ago. Local media said this "Ohanyan line", named after Armenia's former defence minister Seyran Ohanyan, was supposed to be impregnable. But the officers here say proudly, "We crossed it in eighteen minutes". From here, I can see the village of Talish, where another 2016 battle took place. The commander explains that only a few of its houses light up at night, suggesting that Armenian officers, rather than civilians, bunk there. After Talish comes Mataghis (Madağiz), located on the main road to Martakert, a major town. Capturing this road would allow Azerbaijan to open the gorge leading to the Armenian-populated areas of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Mataghis also sits near the dam holding the Sarsang reservoir, the only source of water for the Tartar, Aghdam and Barda regions of Azerbaijan.

As I talk to the commander about resolving the conflict, he says: "Hold on. Answer my question: if they are preparing to give back our territories through peace, why are they strengthening their military positions?" He adds that renewed artillery fire would destroy Tapqaraqoyunlu in a minute. The good news is that people in Tapqaraqoyunlu do not seem to feel that they are in the firing line – at least not imminently. They are renovating their homes, saying "the danger is far away", though they're aware that war could return to destroy the village again.

Peace and justice

From Goranboy, we go further south to Beylagan, where I meet another colonel. He's in a hurry, so we talk as we walk. He asks about my organisation's purpose. I repeat the tagline printed on my Crisis Group business card: "Preventing war, shaping peace". He stops abruptly. "Where is the justice in peace, if it makes us surrender?" While I believe that both peace and justice are attainable, I see his point. Peace and justice are abstractions, and when it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijanis and Armenians have very different understandings of the terms. For Azerbaijanis, the return of territories to Azerbaijani control and displaced Azerbaijanis to their homes is the foundation of peace and justice. For Armenians, justice for the area's Armenian population – their self-determination and security – is the key to peace. Given these contrasting stances, it is perhaps not surprising that in more than 25 years, negotiators have yet to find a formula that meets everyone's definition. For peace, everyone may have to give up some of what they see as justice.

From Beylagan, we head further south west to the end of the Line of Contact. A military post sits there, at the entrance to the village of Jojug Mercanli. A poster-sized map shows the village and the distance from it to other places in Nagorno-Karabakh. Before the April 2016 war, only one family lived here, but now there are 150 houses and a school under construction, with many children already in its playground. The villagers have built a replica of a mosque in Shusha, the city some call "the Azerbaijani Jerusalem". Shusha – a cultural centre and musical hub within Nagorno-Karabakh – has a special place in Azerbaijani history and identity. The city's mosques, especially Yukhari Govhar

Jojug Mercanli, Alakhanli, Fuzuli. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shiriyev

Agha and Ashagi Govhar Agha, are symbols of its importance.

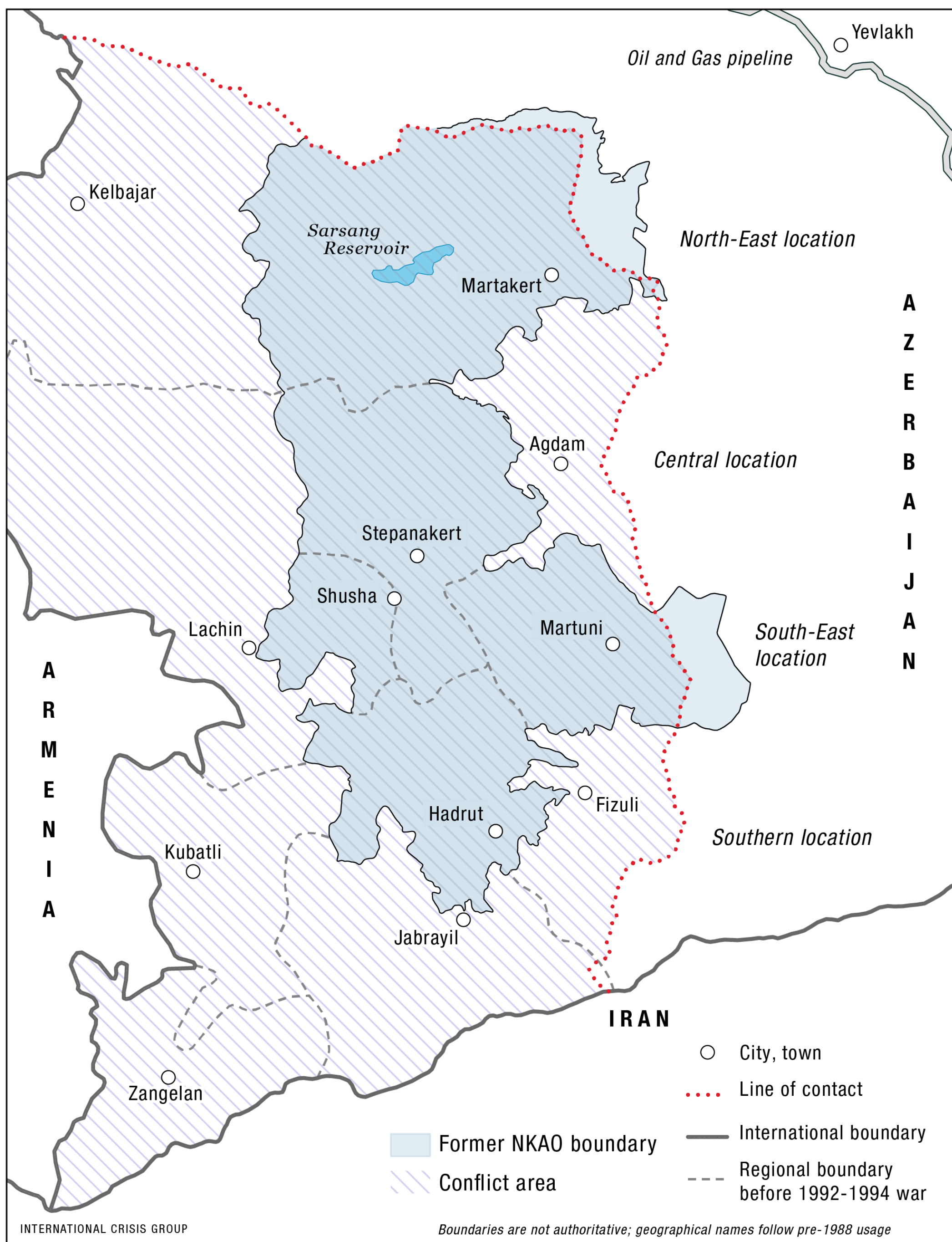
My childhood memories of the day Azerbaijan lost Shusha in 1992 are still vivid. I recall one old man weeping because Armenian forces had captured the city. Looking at the replica mosque in Jojug Mercanli, I remember when, the year before, on 20 November 1991, an Azerbaijani helicopter carrying a peace mission – Azerbaijani, Kazakh and Russian officials set to discuss an early end to fighting – was shot down in Nagorno-Karabakh. The crash, I believe, altered the conflict's trajectory – and maybe that of Azerbaijan itself. At the time, there may have been a chance of resolving the conflict without further bloodshed. But it was not to be. One of the dead was Ismet Gayibov, the public prosecutor general and my father's colleague. He was a remarkable man, an intellectual of strong character. In a single incident, the country lost several such high-quality politicians and thinkers only a month after it regained independence.

Leaving Jojug Merjanli, we move on to Lalatapa, a strategic hilltop now under Azerbaijani control. The military sees regaining it as the biggest success of the April 2016 escalation. When we arrive, the post commander says I have twenty seconds, no more, to take photos of the Armenian positions, because we are in sniper range. While we were on the road, he had received a warning not to allow any civilian – me, in other words – to look out from the position. He opens the window, and I snap a few shots. Flowers bloom on the hillside, portending spring, if not an end to hostilities.

I return home with a better understanding of why it will be hard to bring peace to Nagorno-Karabakh any time soon. It's no wonder that people living along the front lines doubt all the talk of "preparing the population for peace". Ceasefires are welcome to everyone, but without substantive movement in the negotiations, this phrase makes little sense to people who experience conflict and its consequences every day.

My friend Eldar, whose mother's funeral I attended before my trip, is in his late twenties and works on a Nagorno-Karabakh peacebuilding project. He believes that peace requires genuine empathy between the two nations. As Eldar's mother's dying wish reminds me, the hundreds of thousands of IDPs still long to return to where they came from. My main takeaway from this trip and past trips to the front lines is how easy it is to forget the imperative of empathy and that Armenians affected by the conflict have their own aspirations, felt as keenly as we feel ours.

If greater empathy is critical, finding a path forward everyone can live with requires the two sides to talk to each other. If the two governments can take advantage of the thaw in relations between Baku and Yerevan to pursue negotiations, there might be some hope, even if slim, that fewer mothers, whether Armenian or Azerbaijani, will be buried with their wishes unfulfilled.



Map of Nagorno-Karabakh