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Friday 29 September 2023, by [SAMADOV Bahruz](#) (Date first published: 28 September 2023).

As thousands of ethnic Armenians flee Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan looks victorious. But this is not the end

On 19 September, Azerbaijan launched a long-expected attack on the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has been suffering a worsening humanitarian crisis since being blockaded by the country almost ten months ago.

Azerbaijan's "[anti-terrorist operation](#)" against the ethnically Armenian enclave was announced hours after several Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians were [reportedly](#) killed in a landmine explosion in Nagorno-Karabakh. Over the next 24 hours, [hundreds](#) died in intense fighting before a Russian-brokered ceasefire was announced.

Fearful that violence could erupt again, tens of thousands are [now fleeing](#) from Nagorno-Karabakh – which is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani territory, but home to many ethnic Armenians – to Armenia.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been a source of dispute between the two countries, both ex-Soviet republics, for more than a century. The fact that the enclave remained an autonomous entity and did not surrender to Azerbaijan after the country's mass offensive during the Second Karabakh War of 2020 caused anger and irritation among authorities in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital.

Since the end of the 2020 war, there has been little sustainable communication, let alone inclusive dialogue, between the two sides. While Karabakh Armenians agreed to [negotiations](#) via international mediators, Baku's coercive approach denied agency for the enclave, with Azerbaijan's official propaganda pushing ideas of a "victorious nation", an "iron fist" and the "great return" of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Baku insisted the dispute was an "internal issue" and unequivocally rejected the option of autonomy – even refusing to refer to the region as 'Nagorno-Karabakh'. Instead, Azerbaijani officials used the term "Karabakh Economic Region" (a reference to the government's plans to develop it) or "the zone of responsibility of Russian peacekeepers" (who were deployed after the 2020 war to observe and maintain a ceasefire).

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's paralysed civil society [failed](#) to come up with any alternative solutions or policies of reconciliation. Any peaceful or critical narratives that appeared, such as a nascent '[no-war](#)' [movement](#) and a [feminist peace initiative](#), were marginalised and targeted by state-sponsored media campaigns.

Indeed, those who questioned Azerbaijan's coercive methods were accused of treason. Any significant criticism of the Azerbaijani government disappeared. Those who spoke out were

imprisoned – including, in July, [Gubad Ibadoglu](#), a democracy advocate and an academic at the London School of Economics, who had been investigating the dark side of Azerbaijani state spending in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia repeatedly raised the issue of the safety of Karabakh Armenians, but slowly gave up and, in May this year, [accepted](#) Azerbaijan's narrative that Nagorno-Karabakh was an "internal issue". Ongoing tensions between Russia and Armenia strengthened Azerbaijan's appetite to take complete control over the region.

Sensing the right moment, Azerbaijan actors [blocked](#) and isolated the region in December 2022 – repeating the methods of blockade and bombardment used in 1991-92, during the First Karabakh War. Back then, more than 100 civilians [died](#).

The aim of the recent blockade, along with [skirmishes](#), was to generate a constant existential fear in Nagorno-Karabakh. [Facing starvation](#) as food, fuel and medicine began to run out, both the enclave's leadership and ordinary Karabakh Armenians became more sceptical and anxious about dialogue with Azerbaijan.

The lack of international mechanisms to stop Azerbaijan's escalation demonstrated a dangerous example of coercive conflict management

Thirty years later, history has repeated itself. The first time, it led to tragedy for both nations and ongoing resentment in Azerbaijani society over the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories; the second time, it has ended in the exodus of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and trauma for Armenia.

The lack of international mechanisms to stop Azerbaijan's escalation demonstrated a dangerous example of coercive conflict management, in which Azerbaijan's leadership resolved conflict with violence and non-inclusive dialogue – a template that could be followed by other autocrats. In effect, if a country's 'territorial integrity' is at stake – Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani land – then state violence cannot be stopped.

In a public speech this week, Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan vaguely [mentioned](#) the need for "international mechanisms to guarantee the rights and security of Karabakh Armenians" – but none have been forthcoming. Instead, thousands of ethnic Armenians are fleeing the region, in an exodus that the European Commission [described](#) as a "decision" by Armenian residents.

No alternative to antagonistic nationalism

Communication between Baku and Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, was minimal in the decades between the First (1988-94) and Second Karabakh Wars (2020). One notable exception was the [visit](#) of Azerbaijani intelligentsia to Stepanakert in 2009, when the two sides agreed on the importance of dialogue and cooperation. But the years that followed brought the opposite.

As authoritarianism took hold in Azerbaijan under president Ilham Aliyev, the regime realised that nationalism is one possible way to neutralise contradictions within society. The state monopolised the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations process, and pro-peace discourses became marginalised, promoted only by the NGO sector. Protest was delegitimised by connecting the country's 'internal enemies' (opposition activists) to its 'external enemy' (Armenia).

The 2012 '[rescue](#)' of an Azerbaijani military officer who killed an Armenian soldier abroad from a Hungarian prison created a new image of Aliyev as a leader who would take risks for the sake of national ideas. Similarly, in 2016, after regional [protests](#) over the economy in Azerbaijan, a [four-day](#)

[war](#) flared up in Nagorno-Karabakh. Many consider that war to have been an attempt at distracting Azerbaijanis and is remembered by many in the country as a [shameful](#), near-defeat situation.

When Nikol Pashinyan became prime minister of Armenia in 2018 following the country's revolution, there was some hope in Azerbaijan for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But in the absence of face-to-face communication between the two countries, at least by the leaderships, the public 'debate' between Aliyev and Pashinyan continued and merely stoked pro-war sentiment in Azerbaijani society.

For several years, Azerbaijan's pro-peace communities and activists were marginalised rather than targeted. But after the recent escalation, authorities for the first time [arrested](#) those who criticised the war online. This new authoritarian shift demonstrates that Azerbaijan will not tolerate any alternative discourse to militarist nationalism and statism.

Another bloody September?

Nagorno-Karabakh declared its independence in September 1991, the Second Karabakh War started in September 2020, last September saw another huge escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and now there has been another offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh this week.

Is this likely to be the last bloody September between Azerbaijanis and Armenians? The Armenian exodus and de-Armenianisation of Nagorno-Karabakh will strengthen the legitimacy of Aliyev's rule and homogeneity in Azerbaijan, while official victory narratives will keep the nation 'united', preventing the emergence of democratic demands.

One question that bothers many is the future of those Armenians who decide not to leave Nagorno-Karabakh. In theory, they will have certain cultural rights, but it would be naive to assume that the official narrative in Azerbaijan will change from antagonistic nationalism to peaceful co-existence.

After this authoritarian 'solution' to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the idea of the 'Zangezur corridor' – a transport road that would cut across Armenia, connecting Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhchivan, which is located between Armenia, Turkey and Iran – is even more present. Baku has repeatedly called for the "return of Azerbaijanis" to their ancestral lands in southern Armenia.

If the current Armenian leadership does not agree with Azerbaijan's subsequent demands, the world will witness new bloody Septembers. The Azerbaijani authorities will continue to use this century-long territorial conflict to bolster their own rule in years to come.

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