

## **Nagorno-Karabagh (Artsakh): *Historical Background***

Karabagh in ancient times lay in the ancient Armenian province of Artsakh, on the eastern edge of the Armenian plateau. Its people converted to Christianity with the rest of Armenia in the 4th century A.D., and from that time many churches and monasteries were established. For centuries, Artsakh (like the rest of Armenia) faced foreign invasions and occupations, but the mountainous terrain allowed for local autonomy even in the worst of times. Only in the late 18th century did a Muslim principality, centered in Shushi, emerge in Karabagh, and lead to an influx of Turkic and Kurdish tribesmen. In the 19th century, the Russian Empire seized control of the region, and after the onset of Soviet rule in the 20th century, Karabagh was placed under the control of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, with its borders drawn so that they were no longer contiguous with those of the Soviet Republic of Armenia.

Soviet rule allowed Azerbaijan to assert their dominance over the local Armenians, who despite declining numbers still constituted more than 75% of Karabagh's population by the end of the 1980s, when the crumbling of the Soviet Union inspired the Karabagh Armenians to appeal for Karabagh's governance to be transferred to Soviet Armenia. Demonstrations by Armenians both in Karabagh and Soviet Armenia led to violent reprisals in Azerbaijan – the worst of which included pogroms in the Azeri cities of Sumgait, Baku, and Kirovabad, which resulted in thousands of Armenians being killed, and still more exiled.

Outright warfare began in 1991, in the course of which Karabagh Armenians held a referendum for independence, and elected a Nagorno-Karabagh parliament in January 1992. Despite several reversals, the Karabagh Armenians emerged victorious in the 1990s war, having taken control of most of the territory of Karabagh as well as a “buffer zone” to its west, connecting the region with the Republic of Armenia. A ceasefire agreement signed in May 1994 endured, despite minor incidents, for nearly 30 years.

During this period, international mediation efforts involving the major powers of the region – Iran, Turkey, and Russia – went forward, with the United States, Western European countries, and the United Nations, also involved. Ultimately, it was the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that provided the framework for the major mediation effort. Throughout this period, many international organizations provided assistance to Karabagh. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Britain's “Halo Trust” de-mining program, the International Red Cross, and Baroness Caroline Cox's Christian Solidarity International, all brought various forms of aid to the Nagorno-Karabagh Republic.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic crisis of 2020 provided Azerbaijan an opportunity for an unprovoked resumption of war on Karabagh and Armenia. On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a surprise attack on Karabagh, shelling population centers, employing drone strikes, and mounting a full-scale invasion to seize territory. With Turkey supporting Azerbaijan militarily with equipment and mercenaries, the conflict erupted into a major humanitarian crisis – with Armenians bearing the most bitter cost. Thousands of casualties mounted: Armenian soldiers and civilians alike, including women and children. Azerbaijan shelled Armenian religious sanctuaries, and sent drones into Armenia. International authorities denounced Azerbaijan and Turkey for their aggression. After 44 days, a ceasefire agreement on November 9 halted the conflict, ceding vast territories to Azerbaijan, including the major city of Shushi. The Azeri military immediately began vandalizing historic Armenian monuments, which was only stopped by the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces. Now, tens of thousands of displaced Karabagh Armenians resettling in the Republic of Armenia has caused a major humanitarian crisis in a country still reeling from the pandemic. Armenian POWs and MIAs still remain unreturned from captivity. And Azerbaijan has renewed attempts to erase the evidence of the centuries-old Armenian presence in Karabagh.