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## ANALYSIS

# Great Return: How Azerbaijani IDPs portray future coexistence with the Armenian community in Karabakh

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## Introduction

The former Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was launched due to the territorial claims of Armenia towards the former Nagorno-Karabakh Oblast of Azerbaijan. This conflict, which commenced in the 1980s, represents the most extended-standing dispute in post-Soviet Eurasia (International Crisis Group, 2023). The intensification of this dispute was triggered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, eventually leading to a full-fledged war by Armenia against Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. Despite the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 1994, intermittent episodes of violence and tension persisted within the region. The principal causes of this conflict are multifaceted, encompassing a range of historical, cultural, political, and geographical factors.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict led to considerable human loss and displacement, with hundreds of thousands of individuals being affected. The total count of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan has been estimated to surpass 600,000 (UNHCR, 2009). The conflict precipitated the displacement of these individuals from their homes in Karabakh and its environs, with many being forced to flee to temporary settlements, including refugee camps. In these settings, they have encountered difficult living conditions, restricted access to essential services, and an unclear outlook for their future.

Undoubtedly, the displacement of Azerbaijani people has had a significant impact on their social, economic, and mental well-being. Over the course of decades, the government of Azerbaijan, in conjunction with international organizations, worked to offer essential support and aid to these affected individuals.

The conflict was resolved in 2020 when Azerbaijan liberated its territories during and following a 44-day war (27 September – 10 November, 2020). This war concluded with a tripartite Statement signed on November 10, 2020, involving both parties and the Russian Federation. As per the statement, Armenia returned the Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin districts in addition to other occupied territories that had been liberated by the Azerbaijani armed forces during the war. Subsequently, the Azerbaijani government initiated the “Great Return” program aimed at facilitating the return of IDPs to their native lands<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication of the Republic of Azerbaijan, November 17, 2022 (accessed on March 01, 2023)

The objective of this research is to evaluate the potential expectations and apprehensions of Azerbaijani IDPs regarding the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. The study seeks to explore their standpoint by responding to the question: What are the expectations of the Azerbaijani IDPs towards the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in the framework of coexistence possibilities with the Armenian community? The primary focus of this analysis will revolve around scrutinizing their perspective with respect to plausible conflict resolution outcomes, their yearning for repatriation, and their prospects for future interactions with the neighboring Armenian community.

The methodology adopted for this research paper is desk research, as it enables a comprehensive analysis of existing data and literature related to the topic. Special emphasis will be placed on reports, statements, and interviews involving IDPs.

The paper's structure consists of the following elements: a literature review concerning the topic, background information on the state of IDPs in Azerbaijan, an analysis of available and pertinent materials such as reports, interviews, and statements, a discourse on the acquired findings, and a synopsis of the generated viewpoints; lastly, a conclusion that highlights the results and outcomes of the research.

## **Literature Review**

Numerous academic investigations and scholarly publications have been devoted to addressing the predicament of refugees and IDPs arising from the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. These endeavors have entailed conducting interviews with affected individuals, thereby shedding light on their dire circumstances.

A study conducted by Shamkhal Abilov and Ismayil Isayev (2016) presents a chronological account of the displacement of Azerbaijanis from the Karabakh region. Additionally, it includes data concerning the Khojaly massacre, which is one of the tragic events that committed by Armenia against peaceful Azerbaijani citizens during the conflict.

In his study, Azer Allahveranov (2011) outlined various scenarios for the repatriation of Azerbaijani IDPs and examined their views on this issue, as well as the potential for peaceful coexistence following conflict resolution. The research identified crucial factors that should be

taken into account during the implementation of this process. It was discovered that facilitating ethnic tolerance and mobilizing communities can lead to the successful integration and coexistence of two nations.

To fully understand the needs and potential expectations of IDPs, it is necessary to analyze the situation from a political perspective as well. A study by S. Neil MacFarlane and Larry Minear (1997) provides a comparative case analysis of the refugee and IDP situations in Armenia and Azerbaijan, evaluating the role of international organizations in resolving the conflict and providing assistance.

Similarly, an assessment of the role of international organizations in this conflict, with a specific focus on the UNHCR, was conducted by Teresa Cierco and Maria Raquel Freire (2005). In the meantime, the study also evaluated the involvement of internal and external factors in enhancing regional security and stability.

Whilst the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict remained in a protracted state for nearly three decades, the plight of IDPs was continuously addressed by the government of Azerbaijan and various external actors acting as mediators. In his research, Emil Souleimanov (2005) describes the approaches and measures taken toward resolving the conflict and highlights legislative measures adopted concerning internally displaced persons.

When analyzing the situation of refugees and IDPs, it is imperative to adopt a gender-sensitive approach. Numerous studies have focused on the experiences of women who have been directly affected by the conflict, including those living in surrounding areas and those who have lost their loved ones. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2019) has published a comprehensive examination of the perspectives of women affected by the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

The study by Kifayat Jabi Aghayeva (2018) provides valuable insights into the experiences of female IDPs from Karabakh, shedding light on their living conditions following the eruption of the conflict, including wartime sexual violence perpetrated against Azerbaijani women. Notably, the study devotes a specific section to the Khojaly massacre, and the war crimes committed during this massacre.

Mehrangiz Najafizadeh (2015) analyzed the role of poetry in the experiences of internally displaced persons and refugees, with a specific focus on the narrative analysis of stories shared by women refugees from Azerbaijan.

Despite the wealth of literature about IDPs and their experiences during the conflict, there exists a dearth of sufficient documentation regarding their potential expectations for resolving the dispute. These expectations pertain to their views on repatriation, the improvement of relations with the Armenian community, and their overall perspective on a future where justice is restored.

The objective of this research is to fill this gap in knowledge by conducting a preliminary analysis of the expectations of IDPs regarding the resolution of the conflict from their perspective.

### **Background on IDPs and refugees in Azerbaijan**

Following the definition presented by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), internally displaced persons refer to individuals or groups of people who are compelled or coerced to flee or abandon their customary homes or places of abode, primarily due to armed conflict, pervasive violence, human rights violations, or natural or human-made calamities, and who have not traversed an internationally recognized boundary.

Azerbaijan exhibits one of the highest per capita concentrations of internally displaced persons in the world due to the war that transpired in the 1990s. The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict forced approximately 600,000 individuals to flee the area, as per estimations. Within the context of the occupation of 20% of Azerbaijani territories in Karabakh and seven contiguous regions, individuals were rendered without permanent residence and subsequently displaced. As a result, they sought refuge in 62 towns and regions, which encompassed approximately 1,600 living stations throughout the republic.

Based on data obtained from the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, it can be observed that the overwhelming majority of internally displaced persons, numbering approximately 90%, originate from the seven regions surrounding Karabakh. The sex distribution

of the IDPs reveals that the population is relatively equally divided between women (50.4%) and men (46.6%), with a notable proportion of children (40.8%) and elderly people (10.1%)<sup>2</sup>.

Upon examining the status of internally displaced persons throughout the 30-year period of the “frozen conflict”, it is important to acknowledge that in Azerbaijan, those individuals have enjoyed equal rights as other citizens without experiencing any apparent discrimination. Furthermore, the country has demonstrated significant economic growth during this period and has dedicated considerable resources towards enhancing the living conditions of IDPs while also fostering continued engagement with international organizations in this regard<sup>3</sup>.

Given the recent developments in Karabakh and the surrounding seven districts, the repatriation of internally displaced persons from these regions has become a fundamental concern arising from the Statement, signed on November 9, 2020, which marked the end of the second Armenia-Azerbaijan war. As per Article 7 of the Statement, internally displaced persons, along with refugees, shall return to the liberated territory under the supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees<sup>4</sup>.

In July 2022, a total of 58 individuals returned to the recently liberated territories of Zangilan. Notably, the entire ethnic Azerbaijani population of Zangilan, which amounted to more than 30,000 individuals, had fled the area in 1993. The returnees represent the initial phase of the ambitious "Great Return" initiative launched by the authorities of Azerbaijan, aimed at the repopulation of the liberated territories with its former Azerbaijani inhabitants<sup>5</sup>. As per the "Great Return" strategy, about 16,000 people are supposed to return to the different settlements of the Zangilan district from 2022 to 2026.

At the beginning of March 2023, Azerbaijan held a dialogue with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), intending to support refugees and internally displaced persons. IOM

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<sup>2</sup> State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (accessed on March 20, 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Internal Displaced Monitoring Center, IOM Director General António Vitorino visits Azerbaijan for high level meetings and Non-Aligned Summit, December 2010 (accessed on March 15, 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation, November 10, 2020 (accessed on March 15, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Sabah*, The Great Return' of Azerbaijanis to liberated Karabakh begins, July 19, 2022 (accessed on March 15, 2023)

Director-General Antonio Vitorino expressed the determination of the organization to provide continuous support to the Azerbaijani government concerning the issues of IDPs.

Currently, the government of Azerbaijan is implementing all necessary strategies and steps to ensure the return of IDPs to the liberated territories of Karabakh and adjacent areas. The process requires a step-by-step approach consisting of the reconstruction of essential infrastructure destroyed during the 30 years of occupation. De-mining of the territories, restoration of the infrastructure, and promotion of the socio-economic development of Karabakh require not only financial investments but also huge efforts. Social, political, and economic factors that could strengthen the process of return, along with socio-psychological factors, refer to the important components of this process.

### **Analysis of the statements and interviews with refugees**

To conduct a preliminary analysis of the perspectives of refugees regarding the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, I analyzed a range of official reports and publications that included interviews and statements from IDPs and refugees. These documents included statements and opinions of refugees from different age groups and occupations. Some of them indicated only experiences, while others covered expectations, desires, and needs.

To start with, an interesting observation was mentioned by all interviewed refugees aged more than 40, which highlighted the positive attitude and relationship between Azerbaijanis and Armenians living together in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and related districts. The majority of respondents, former residents of the villages located near Azerbaijan's border with Armenia, stated that the economic situation united the two nations together. These people were involved in agriculture and cattle, sharing work with each other. One of the common questions shared by interviewed people referred to their misunderstanding of how and why, all of a sudden, the centuries of Azerbaijani-Armenian coexistence fell apart so quickly. Many respondents often referred to "stable" lives in Soviet time, a timeframe when their relations with Armenians were comparatively peaceful. Another significant point highlighted from the interviews was that



positive feelings toward some Armenians presented with respondents recalling that not all Armenians behaved badly toward Azerbaijanis<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that Azerbaijanis and Armenians had a lot in common before the conflict erupted is also supported by the work of Thomas de Waal, a journalist, and author of "Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War".

Nevertheless, stories told and shared differed considerably in accordance with the origin of refugees/IDPs. Perhaps, the worst cases were described by the survivors of the Khojaly massacre. The Khojaly genocide took place on February 26, 1992, in the town of Khojaly, Azerbaijan. The tragedy resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians, including women, children, and the elderly, who were trying to flee the town during the military operations Armenia launched.

For the victims of Khojaly, this event is not just a part of history but a lived experience for those who survived and a life-changing reality for those who lost their loved ones. From the interviews and documentaries, it becomes clear that for them, it is personally important not to forget that dreadful chapter, even though it brings so much pain. To have a clearer insight to Khojaly genocide, I suggest referring to the statement of one of the survivors of the massacre: *"I saw what human beings could be capable of doing when they lose every trace of humanity and are filled with hatred. I still have nightmares"*<sup>7</sup>.

Although the majority of the survivors interviewed expressed their strong desire to return home, some were uncertain about the prospect of coexisting with Armenians in the future. This may be easily explained through the impact of a traumatic experience that they went through.

Another traumatic episode for the Azerbaijani people refers to the invasion and loss of Shusha, the historic capital of the Karabakh region. Following the invasion of Armenian troops in 1992, around 40,000 Azerbaijanis living in Shusha became refugees, while Armenia illegally settled in their homes. Respondents stated that they lived peacefully with their Armenian neighbors and were not aware of what was coming. They had no guns or arms to defend themselves and their home<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Karabakh.org, Witnessing the War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Shusha's IDPs Testify (accessed: March 20, 2023)

<sup>7</sup> Aztv. Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees: Stories of Loss, Survival & Hope. November 24 (accessed: March 25, 2023)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Perhaps the most poignant testimonies expressed the sentiment that for the respondents, "time stood still" when Shusha was seized on May 8th. They described their current living conditions as being like a waiting game, where they hope that things will eventually return to normal.

As a result, it goes without a doubt that people experiencing considerably strong traumatic experiences are less willing to imagine a future where they can communicate with Armenian neighbors.

Upon reviewing various reports and interviews published by the International Crisis Group, it has become apparent that the majority of the former population of Karabakh reminisces about their shared life prior to the outbreak of war. Despite the immense pain associated with their memories, these recollections include fond memories of a multiethnic Karabakh and Azerbaijan. It was observed that IDPs and refugees, who were the most affected by the war and military activities, also tend to be more open to prospects of coexistence. The results of these interviews suggest that Azerbaijani IDPs commonly express a willingness to live together after the initiation of the return process<sup>9</sup>.

### *Gendered perspective on peace and its outcome*

I am certain that there is a specific need to focus on the perspective of women while describing a state of conflict. Women's voices need to be heard as they are the best sources of information on issues of livelihoods, education, health, and security, something that comes after establishing "peace".

Following the surveys and interviews conducted with Azerbaijani female refugees and IDPs from Karabakh, we can observe interesting dynamics in a shift of their perspectives and feelings towards conflict resolution.

Firstly, it is important to note that all the female respondents reported that their stress and worries were not primarily focused on their own security and well-being but rather on the security and well-being of their male relatives serving in the army.

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<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group. Nagorno-Karabakh: Viewing the Conflict from the Ground, September 14, 2005 (accessed: March 25, 2023)

Furthermore, the conflict that lasted for more than 30 years had a profound impact on the daily lives of people, especially those living close to the border regions. In this regard, women from these areas reported constant stress from regular gunfire and military activities.

Interviews reveal that women have differing views of peace, shaped by militarized patriotism and the prolonged conflict situation. The despair expressed by many elderly women is a result of their prolonged exposure to conflict, with no significant progress toward resolution despite the fact that they have seen their children and grandchildren experience the same situation.

It was noteworthy to find that empathy played a significant role in the perception of the conflictual situation. Many Azerbaijani women expressed that they felt a shared experience with Armenian women as mothers and showed empathy towards all women affected by the conflict, regardless of their nationality or ethnicity. This is because women, as mothers, often see beyond national and ethnic differences and can empathize with other mothers affected by conflict, regardless of their background. It can lead to a greater understanding and willingness to seek a peaceful resolution to conflicts, as they understand the shared experience of maternal love and the desire for safety and security for their children.

The perspective on the possibility of coexisting with the Armenian population in the future varied among female respondents of different age groups. Middle-aged and elderly respondents were suspicious, while the majority of young respondents, who were interviewed between 2020-2022, believed that the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was due to internal problems in both countries and saw a lack of initiatives to facilitate negotiations or promote diplomacy. Some of the young respondents also shared their personal experiences of meeting Armenian peers at exchange programs or conferences, which they felt contributed to promoting dialogue and peace at a community level.

### *Obstructions to conciliation*

While it is important to acknowledge that the perceptions of those impacted by the conflict may vary, there are common trends among IDPs regarding the potential for future integration and coexistence with Armenians. I believe that it is essential to prioritize identifying significant barriers to fostering dialogue and building relationships between the two nations and the inhabitants of the Karabakh area.

First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of traumatic events and their impact on the mindsets and well-being of those experiencing them. From the statements of interviewed IDPs, I can derive a sense of feeling that many of them find it hard to forget and move on toward constructive dialogue with those who, in their perception, were the reasons for the suffering and pain carried through 30 years.

Further, during the years of deprivation from living at home, the Azerbaijani people developed a sense of victimization, which could be fairly justified by the traumatic experience of the Khojaly massacre and other violence committed by Armenia. As a consequence, the younger generation in Azerbaijan has been encouraged to remember the events of 1992 in Khojaly, which portrayed Armenians as capable of committing evil acts that undoubtedly hindered the formation of unbiased opinions among the younger generation.

Last but not least, it is worth noting that both sides have resorted to a strategy of attributing blame to each other for initiating the war and the resulting tragedies. This approach of portraying the other side as the aggressor against innocent civilians does not contribute positively to the prospects of initiating dialogue and promoting integration and reconciliation between the parties.

Considering the recent events surrounding the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the barriers to reconciliation seem to be as relevant as ever. IDPs from Azerbaijan, with international law on their side, are anticipating the return to their homeland, which is closely linked to the prospect of coexistence and dialogue between the two nations who share a common way of life. In order for any resolution of the conflict to be successful, it is crucial that both Azerbaijani and Armenian populations in Karabakh and adjacent regions are able to live, work and travel without fear and threat to their security. This requires a tolerant environment where the rule of law and democratic principles are firmly established and respected. Mutual security and tolerance should form the foundation of any settlement.

## **Key findings of the analysis**

An analysis of interviews and testimonials with internally displaced people in Azerbaijan has revealed key patterns related to their expectations and perceptions of the resolved conflict, as well as possible coexistence with Armenians.

Firstly, all of the interviewed individuals expressed a strong desire to return home and settle in their native land, from which they were forced to flee around 30 years ago. The sense of being deprived of visiting home undoubtedly had a negative stain on the emotional and mental state of IDPs.

Secondly, a significant number of respondents shared similar views about their perception of Armenians, highlighting peaceful coexistence before the 1980s. However, their mixed feelings have led to uncertainty regarding the issue of possible coexistence in the liberated territories of Karabakh. While some believe in the possibility of a collaborative and peaceful future, others find it difficult to forget and forgive the traumatic events that occurred during the military confrontation. The recollection of the traumatic experience was more prevalent among the interviewees who were victims of the Khojaly massacre. This observation suggests that they are less inclined to envision the possibility of coexisting with Armenians.

The third finding is derived from a gendered perspective analysis, which indicates that the long-lasting conflict and military operations had detrimental effects on the mental well-being of women impacted by it. Moreover, the interviews with female participants indicate that they are more inclined towards the prospect of coexistence, as they empathize with women from the "opposing side" of the conflict. Although opinions varied among different age groups, with some uncertainty expressed by middle-aged and elderly respondents, the younger generation appears to be more optimistic and open-minded toward promoting dialogue and mutual understanding.

In addition, the analysis revealed the principal barriers to achieving reconciliation, which include the traumatic experiences resulting from the conflict, the development of a sense of victimhood, and a tendency to assign blame to the opposing side. Although each of these obstacles can be explained through various arguments, it is undeniable that their presence makes it more difficult to establish a peaceful coexistence.

Finally, the analysis emphasizes the individuality of each case, suggesting that there may not be common ground or universal principles upon which every internally displaced person perceives their situation. The perception of the future and management of livelihood depends on various factors, including personal experience, the aftermath of trauma, and the willingness to forgive and move on.

## **Conclusion**

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had a profound impact on civilians, causing trauma and significant life changes, particularly for those forced to leave their homes without a clear vision of the future. The issue of internal displacement is prevalent in many conflict-affected countries across the globe. However, for Azerbaijan, with a population of just over 7 million in 1990, the displacement of almost 600,000 people was unexpected and provided no opportunity for preparation or guarantee of the country's ability to manage the situation.

For over three decades, the Azerbaijani government, in collaboration with various international organizations, has been striving to enhance the situation of internally displaced persons from Karabakh, guaranteeing their equal rights and preventing any form of prejudice or segregation against them. During the last two decades, the country has successfully managed to navigate the crisis and sustain the well-being of IDPs through all possible means.

Nevertheless, in addition to the provision of adequate living conditions, the overwhelming desire of nearly all IDPs was to return to their homeland. This aspiration was complicated by various factors, including the protracted state of conflict, eroded trust, lack of clear projections or indications of progress, and the passage of time.

In 2020, almost 32 years after the conflict began, a significant event occurred that had a profound impact on internally displaced persons and the Azerbaijani nation as a whole. The country liberated its territories in Karabakh and adjacent regions after a 44-day war, thereby restoring historical justice. I believe that the day of the ceasefire will be remembered as a significant milestone for many Azerbaijani IDPs. According to the Statement signed between the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, the ceasefire marked not only the end of hostilities but also the beginning of the return of IDPs to their native lands.

Currently, the Azerbaijani government is undertaking the "Great Return" project, which was launched shortly after the end of the war. This initiative represents a gradual approach designed to facilitate the safe and successful return of all internally displaced persons from Azerbaijan to their homes in Karabakh. Although the implementation of the program will require a significant amount of time, the first batches of IDPs have already been resettled in the reconstructed areas.

To ensure the successful repatriation of IDPs, it is not only necessary to rebuild infrastructure and provide time but also to exhibit patience, tolerance, and a willingness to adapt to new realities. The joy of returning home and feeling secure cannot be underestimated. Hence, all parties involved must demonstrate a commitment to adaptation, a desire for peace, and a willingness to coexist safely with their neighbors.

## Appendix

The interviews were taken from the respectful sources:

*Karabakh.org, Witnessing the War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Shusha's IDPs Testify* (accessed: March 20, 2023)

*Aztv. Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees: Stories of Loss, Survival & Hope. November 24* (accessed: March 25, 2023)

*Turan Az. We Are Waiting to Return - IDP from Kalbajar. November 23* (accessed: March 27, 2023)

*Edward Crawford Photojournalist. Fuzuli to Baku, Mr Aliyev's story.* (accessed: March 27, 2023)

*OPINION: ROVSHAN RZAYEV: "My main wish is to return to my homeland"* (accessed: March 24, 2023)

*Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2019). LISTEN TO HER. Gendered Effects of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Women's Priorities for Peace* (accessed: March 25, 2023)