



**Season 3 Episode 2**  
**Conflict and Displacement in Nagorno-Karabakh**  
*Episode Transcript*

**Disclaimer:** This podcast contains content that may be alarming to some listeners. Listener discretion is advised. As always, the views, thoughts, and opinions expressed by our guests are their own, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of CIVIC or PAX.

**Teaser Clip:** Every day 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

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**Annie:** Hello, everyone, and welcome back to the Civilian Protection Podcast. I am Annie Shiel, US Advocacy Director at Center for Civilians in Conflict or CIVIC.

**Marc:** And I am Marc Garlasco, Military Advisor from PAX. Our organizations both work in conflicts around the world to protect civilians caught in war.

**Annie:** If you are just tuning into Season 3, this season we are exploring civilian protection issues in light of current events, as well as what the headlines are missing.

**Marc:** Today's episode focuses on Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan which is home to ethnic Armenians. Following a 24-hour military operation by Azerbaijan to seize power of the region on September 19, tens of thousands of ethnic Armenians are fleeing the region.

*News clips by – in order – Channel 4 News, Al Jazeera, DW News:*

**Channel 4:** This morning in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, the government of Azerbaijan said it had mounted a counterterrorist operation. But the ethnic Armenians who live here saw it as an unprovoked and opportunistic attack.

**Al Jazeera:** On the streets of Stepanakert, the main city in Nagorno-Karabakh, panic took over as mortars pounded its surroundings.

**DW News:** Almost all of the ethnic Armenian population have now fled to Armenia following an Azerbaijani military offensive last week. Armenia has asked the European Union for assistance to help it deal with the influx of refugees.

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**Annie:** To help us make sense of the situation and the impact on civilians there, we are pleased to welcome Alissa de Carbonnel, Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia at the International Crisis Group. Welcome, Alissa – thank you so much for joining us.

**Alissa:** Thank you for having me.

**Annie:** I want to get to the headlines that we have been seeing over the last few days and weeks and months. But before we do that, for listeners who maybe have not followed or have not heard about this conflict until the last few weeks, can you start by helping us put this into broader historical context? What do we need to know about the history of Nagorno-Karabakh over the last few years or even decades?

**Alissa:** So, it is a region that has seen decades of displacement and conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh itself is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. But it is an enclave in the country that is primarily populated by ethnic Armenians, and that has basically been under self-rule and self-governance by *de facto* authorities, supported by Armenia, since a war in the 1990s. So in brief, Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence from Azerbaijan in 1991, so after the Soviet Union collapse. And the war that followed from 1992 to 1994 pitted Azerbaijan's armed forces against Nagorno-Karabakh rebels backed by the Armenian army. Azerbaijan lost control of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent or surrounding regions, leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, of Azerbaijanis. And the peace process that we saw in the decades since then really led nowhere. It was led by the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe], and grievances have proliferated, certainly on Azerbaijan's side.

Things really shifted in 2020. While the world was engulfed in the pandemic, and just before the US presidential elections, Azerbaijan retook, in a very brief but brutal war, the surrounding regions to Nagorno-Karabakh and part of the enclave itself. Some 7,000 people died in six weeks of fighting and Armenia emerged really weakened, its army was really in a terrible state compared to before the conflict. It withdrew its forces from Nagorno-Karabakh as part of a ceasefire brokered by Russia. And since then we have seen peace talks and concerted efforts by Washington, Moscow and Brussels to try to reach a peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially in the last year and a bit, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In part of those talks, Nagorno-Karabakh and the fate of residents there has always been the most painful point, but Azerbaijan refused to discuss it as part of its peace talks with Armenia because it sees it as an internal matter, it sees it as part of its territory and therefore not something to discuss with Armenia. As a result, international powers and Armenia had pushed for direct talks between *de facto* authorities in Stepanakert, the main city of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Baku [Azerbaijan's capital city], but those never went ahead and now we are seeing sort of the results of the failure of diplomacy and countries resorting to force rather than diplomacy, once again in the region.

**Annie:** And that of course, brings us to the last few weeks in which the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has rapidly escalated and made headlines. What have we seen in the last few weeks, and where does that leave us today?

**Alissa:** The situation really got much, much worse in December last year. So for the last nine months or so, the 120,000 or so residents of Nagorno-Karabakh have been living under an effective blockade. It led to a steadily deteriorating humanitarian situation. There was growing alarm, especially over the summer, of shortages of food, of fuel, of medicine. And there was a lot of diplomacy to try to get Baku to lift the blockade and allow humanitarian convoys in, allow people there to, you know, have access to basic supplies. Azerbaijan was relatively impervious to the diplomatic pressure that was a lot of intense diplomacy, including sort of joint efforts by Russia and the West, which is incredibly rare, right? And it appeared that there might be a breakthrough. And I should say that as part of that diplomacy, there were sort of repeated assurances by Azerbaijan to EU and US diplomats, who have told us that Baku did not plan to resort to military action. So there was a buildup of Azerbaijani forces in the beginning of September, along the border with Armenia and sort of Armenia was warning about this. There is an EU mission that is deployed to the border, which was also warning that they saw a buildup. But Azerbaijan continued to reassure the US and EU diplomats involved in diplomacy in the region that it was not going to resort to force and it appeared that there were two trucks loaded with humanitarian supplies that entered Nagorno-Karabakh on September 18, so the day before Azerbaijan launched its military offensive. So there was this kind of glimmer of hope. And then the military offensive. And of course, what we have seen after that 24 hour-operation is the surrender of the *de facto* authorities there, the effective end of self-rule for the region and the exodus of almost all of its residents now to Armenia.

**Marc:** Wow. So when you speak about the exodus of its population, I mean, this is really widespread displacement, right? So, can you speak a little bit more about how civilians are being impacted and the humanitarian needs that we are seeing right now?

**Alissa:** I should say that that is really the priority at the moment: to help Armenia cope with the influx of, you know, now we are looking at 100,000+ people at the moment. So, Armenia had not prepared publicly for an exodus of people, despite the military buildup, because it did not want to encourage a situation in which people were panicking or there was preparation. Authorities there said they had prepared for 40,000 people to arrive in the days just before and just after the military operation by Azerbaijan. So of course, now we are seeing tens of thousands, huge numbers. People are arriving. They are taking a days-long journey to get to Armenia; they are arriving in Armenia also after having lived this experience of lack of supplies, of you know, stores being empty. There was no bread in bakeries in the days before the military operation. So people are arriving, hungry, traumatized. Some people burned their homes and their possessions because they did not want others to take control of their houses or of their personal belongings. So there is a very fearful and anxious population that is ethnically Armenian but different from Armenia and therefore difficult to integrate. And so, there have been pledges of financial support from international powers. And that is really important and that work will have to move ahead.

You know, there is a second aspect to this, which is with regards to Baku's responsibility now that it controls Nagorno-Karabakh. We saw a UN expert mission on the weekend to Nagorno-Karabakh; it was small, it was limited, it was very brief. But it is also the first visit of the UN agencies to the region in over 30 years. So, you know, it is very important, and there should be more visits.

**Marc:** I am curious, why so long? Why has it been such a complete dearth of UN influence or attempts to in any way come into the region, besides, I imagine, WFP [World Food Program] or others providing foodstuffs?

**Alissa:** The same dispute over territory and sovereignty plays out with respect to humanitarian access to the region. So we see, not only in Nagorno-Karabakh but in other places also, that the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] are some of the only actors on the ground. In this fight, where in this case, with regards to Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan sees that as part of its territory and does not want to allow international actors to work there without entering and exiting through Azerbaijan, because it is seen as part of its territory. So it is humanitarian access becoming prey to politics in a wider conflict. I mean, you both know that that is not the only region where this is the case.

**Marc:** No, that is incredibly disappointing and very upsetting. Now, you touched on the widespread displacement, and with tens of thousands of ethnic Armenians, you know, nearly the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh, now apparently fleeing the region, many have described the situation as ethnic cleansing. How can we expect these humanitarian impacts to develop over time and what is needed to address them now?

**Alissa:** So I mean, there is the short term humanitarian help, and that sort of immediate crisis, right? But there is also the long term factor, obviously: people who have left feel completely abandoned by the international community. There are people who are incredibly fearful and distrustful and traumatized, not only by the recent military operation, but by the fighting in 2020, or sometimes, in some cases, by the memories of the fighting in the 1990s. There were claims and brutal video clips in the 2020 war that emerged of human rights violations by armed forces, which has fueled the fear and anxiety. So you have a population that fled and, you know, just dropped everything and left. So the UN mission that went described a sort of a ghost city now, when you saw journalists who went there, because everything was kind of, you know, there were prams in Stepanakert, the main city of Nagorno-Karabakh, that had just been left as trash. And so you have people leaving, thinking they are never going to return. There should be everything done to also think about the longer term, think about Azerbaijan's responsibility for protecting cultural sites, for protecting property, for giving people the opportunity – I know that this sounds crazy to most of the people who have just lived this trauma – but to potentially think about one day returning to visit or returning to the region in whatever capacity. So there is a responsibility both to think about the short term humanitarian imperatives, but also the longer term responsibilities that Azerbaijan has, having control over that region for the residents and their properties and what they might want to do in the future.

**Annie:** I want to ask you also about the role of other states in this conflict. For example, a Russian peacekeeping force has been present in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2020. What has Russia's role been

in this conflict, and in this latest escalation? What about other neighboring states like Turkey or Iran, or the EU?

**Alissa:** There has been a big geopolitical shift in the region. I guess if you can pick a time, I would say the shift was in 2020, but it has all been relatively gradual development. A lot of people are seeing this as a sign that Russia has lost influence and sway in its neighborhood. Certainly Russia brokered and was the guarantor of the ceasefire in 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and it deployed peacekeepers that were there as a sign of reassurance for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh that Russia was going to guarantee their safety and act as – I mean, there was always a question over the mandate of the peacekeepers, and how much ability they had long term – but certainly they were on the ground.

The context changed pretty radically after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We see that there was conflict between Armenia and Russia, that Russia might also, and even before the invasion, see Azerbaijan as an important ally. So it was always balancing between the two and its relationship between the two. Armenia began to pivot more towards the West in recent months, which created a lot of anger in Moscow. But regardless, there was a clear inability and lack of desire by Moscow to really do anything to deter Baku. Now, it should be said that Azerbaijan has been relatively impervious to a lot of international pressure. And it has got the backing of Turkey, which is one of its staunchest regional allies, and arguably the only other regional power with the sort of military force to be able to flex its muscles in the region. Just after the military operation that happened, as leaders were meeting at the UN General Assembly in New York, the Turkish president used his opening statements to basically say that he supported Azerbaijan in every way and defended its territorial integrity. So Russia and Turkey have always been involved in this balancing act, where they have a very strategic relationship, but are on the opposite side of different conflicts. So those are the regional actors, the most important regional actors.

And after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU and the US took a much bigger role in diplomacy in the region, something that was unthinkable almost before the invasion of Ukraine. It opened up a space for other actors to become involved. And there were three parallel tracks for diplomacy between Armenia and Azerbaijan. So there were even two draft peace agreements for a while: one sort of a Russian one and one that was drafted by Armenia and Azerbaijan through meetings facilitated by Washington and Brussels. They have been very important actors on the diplomatic front and they continue to be.

But I think perhaps the best way to answer your question is the different reaction of diplomats from Russia and Turkey and from the West, that we spoke to in the days after the military offensive. On the one hand, you had EU and US diplomats who were incredibly angry, disappointed, and yet trying to sort of keep their reactions in private depending on the country because there is still a hope of pushing diplomacy forward in talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite all of the trauma and the situation that we see developing in Nagorno-Karabakh. And that has been part of the problem of the last nine months, where they were trying to put pressure on Azerbaijan to lift the blockade to Nagorno-Karabakh, but also continue facilitating talks and peace talks. And on the other hand, you had reactions of diplomats from Russia and Turkey that we at the International Crisis Group, me and my team speak to, where there was a lot of dismissiveness of Armenia, there was not a huge amount of surprise and anger in the same way that this has happened. There was a feeling that, okay, maybe Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh should have done more to advance talks. And despite Azerbaijan not offering many compromises and concessions in the last years, after winning the 2020 war effectively, that, you know, this was the defeated party, and they should just kind of move things forward. So a really quick pivot by Turkish and Russian diplomats to say, okay, well, can we now move things forward? Let's go on. And both actors have a stake in seeing peace talks move forward, because they would open trade routes in the region, they would offer an opportunity in Turkey's case, perhaps for Armenia-Turkey normalization talks to continue. So, you know, it is striking to see that really big difference in the way that the actors, the regional actors, and then the Western powers who have been involved in the region reacted to developments.

**Annie:** And what are the risks for future or renewed conflict in the region, as well as risks of other forms of civilian harm, other widespread human rights risks, that you are concerned about?

**Alissa:** So that is a very good question. The military operation appears to be contained at the moment to Nagorno-Karabakh. But there have been flare ups over the past year, periodically, on the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan: there was a big buildup of troops there as well in recent weeks. And we have seen from experience, monitoring and watching the situation at Crisis Group, that having those troops in close proximity is a very volatile situation. And even as Armenia and Azerbaijan were involved in peace talks, you have seen these periodic escalations. So that is a concern, and it continues to worry us. So the best way to avoid renewed escalation and renewed potential of violence in the region is – particularly in this moment when many in Armenia are angry and upset by what has happened, and certainly as everyone is feeling, rather emboldened and empowered, I think, is a fair characterization, in the days following the surrender of *de facto* authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh – it is really quite important to move talks ahead between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in spite of everything. So the onus for that is really on Washington and Brussels and Moscow to help facilitate those talks. And hopefully this week, there will be a meeting on the sidelines of a meeting of the European political community in Granada. So that is one risk of escalation. And then there is just the future – I mean, not ‘just’ – there is the future and fate of the displaced people. It is not at all the end of the story. These people are displaced, they have lived through trauma, they have a really long road ahead. And it is going to be a long haul to help integrate them and also to help offer them choices and opportunities that are very difficult to perceive at this current moment in time.

**Marc:** You just touched on this a bit, speaking about the international community and the meetings that are coming up, but what do you think is needed more broadly from the international community with regards to this conflict?

**Alissa:** We have spoken quite a lot about the humanitarian crisis, but I would like to repeat that this is a huge displacement of people in a very short period of time, who have already lived through a rather catastrophic period over the last nine months since December. So that is really the priority. And that mass exodus is a tragedy and there is no way to restore those broken communities and those lives that were lost, and there is never going to be a way for Nagorno-Karabakh, most likely, to return to the *status quo* under which it operated for three decades now.

But for the international community, it is incredibly important to remain engaged over the longer term. I know that people make those pleas about every conflict that they work in or that they watch. You know, I work on Ukraine, and there is a whole debate over staying engaged for support. I think we have seen too often how powers in the region are resorting to force rather than diplomacy. Diplomacy works, it can. There are these ongoing talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan: they are going to be critical to finding some kind of durable sustainable peace in the region. That is despite the sort of trauma that we have seen in the last days. So even though it is difficult to think about the longer term now, when there is such a moving and tragic humanitarian crisis unfolding, I think it is really important, and international actors are right to keep the ball rolling on those longer term talks.

**Annie:** Thank you so much for joining us, Alissa. Really appreciate it.

**Alissa:** Thank you.

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**Annie:** In related news, on Wednesday, Azerbaijan’s President pulled out of a planned meeting with Armenia’s Prime Minister in Spain, dealing a blow to efforts to rescue a peace process between the countries. In the United States, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Ben Cardin, called for the US to withhold security assistance to Azerbaijan after its operations in Nagorno-Karabakh. Similarly, in the House, US Representatives Jim Costa, Adam Schiff, and Frank Pallone also introduced a so-called 502B resolution to demand information about Azerbaijan’s human rights violations and open the door for Congress to block or limit US security assistance.

Elsewhere in the world, in Kosovo, a deadly gunfight this week, along with US warnings of Serbian troop buildups at the Kosovo border, raised concerns about the possibility for renewed conflict in the region, and with it civilian harm risks.

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**Marc:** That is it for today’s episode of the Civilian Protection Podcast.

**Annie:** The Civilian Protection Podcast is brought to you by Center for Civilians in Conflict and PAX – two NGOs working to improve the lives of civilians in conflict. Today's episode was written and edited by Annie Shiel, Marc Garlasco, and Erin Bijl, and produced by the Podcast Guru. Hajer Naili and Matt Longmore made sure we are online. Thank you to our guest, Alissa de Carbonnel for joining and sharing her expertise.

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