

The Systematic Erasure of Armenian Christian Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh

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Cover Image: The Main Church of Dadivank Monastery. [Bible Museum](#) (last visited 2024).

Abstract

Nagorno-Karabakh, located in what is now southwestern Azerbaijan, hosts a rich treasure trove of Armenian Christian heritage—churches, monasteries, *khachkars*, and other cultural artifacts that tell of the faith and culture of the Armenian people. These cherished pieces of Armenian history, however, are being systematically erased from the region. This report seeks to bring attention to the malicious destruction and revisionism of Armenian Christian heritage, evaluate the international response to date, and provide recommendations to combat the cultural erasure occurring in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The region of Nagorno-Karabakh boasts of approximately 500 cultural sites holding roughly 6,000 relics of Armenian heritage. For decades, the Armenians and Azerbaijanis have struggled over Nagorno-Karabakh, each claiming rightful control. This intermittent conflict has resulted in both bloodshed and the destruction of precious cultural heritage. After the Second Karabakh War (September 2020–November 2020), Azerbaijan gained control of the majority of Nagorno-Karabakh. Between November 2020 and September 2023, dozens of Armenian Christian heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh were destroyed or damaged. When not torn down, many of these sites were closed to the public, even to pilgrims. Now, with Azerbaijan’s complete control of Nagorno-Karabakh following a military offensive in September 2023, the destruction of Armenia’s cultural heritage has only grown more rampant.

Despite numerous requests from Armenia and various international institutions, Azerbaijan has repeatedly refused to allow foreign observers to monitor these cultural sites. Thus, Armenia’s heritage can only be monitored via satellite surveillance, and access to sources regarding the cultural destruction is limited. This report provides a thorough list and detailed examination of the religious heritage sites that have been destroyed, damaged, or threatened by Azerbaijan between September 2023 and June 2024. This report also details the cultural revisionism carried out by Azerbaijan. To accomplish complete cultural erasure, Azerbaijan has gone beyond merely destroying Armenian heritage—Azerbaijan is also denying it ever existed.

Azerbaijan’s destruction of Armenian culture warrants attention not only because a people group’s invaluable heritage is endangered, but also because Azerbaijan’s actions contravene international agreements, such as the 1954 Hague Convention and the World Heritage Convention. Although numerous international institutions have condemned Azerbaijan’s actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, the international response has not been strong enough; Azerbaijan has not heeded the international community’s calls to respect Armenia’s cultural heritage.

Regardless of whether it is due to institutional corruption or mere apathy, international organizations and Azerbaijan’s near neighbors have all failed to adopt a strong stance in opposition to the destruction and revisionism of Armenian culture. This must not continue. As noted by historians and cultural experts alike, if total cultural erasure occurs, it will be as a consequence of international complacency. However, there is still time to stop Azerbaijan’s cultural genocide. To prevent the destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh before it is too late, international organizations must go beyond their moral condemnations and take firm, assertive action against the systematic erasure of Armenian Christian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Map of the Caucasus Region

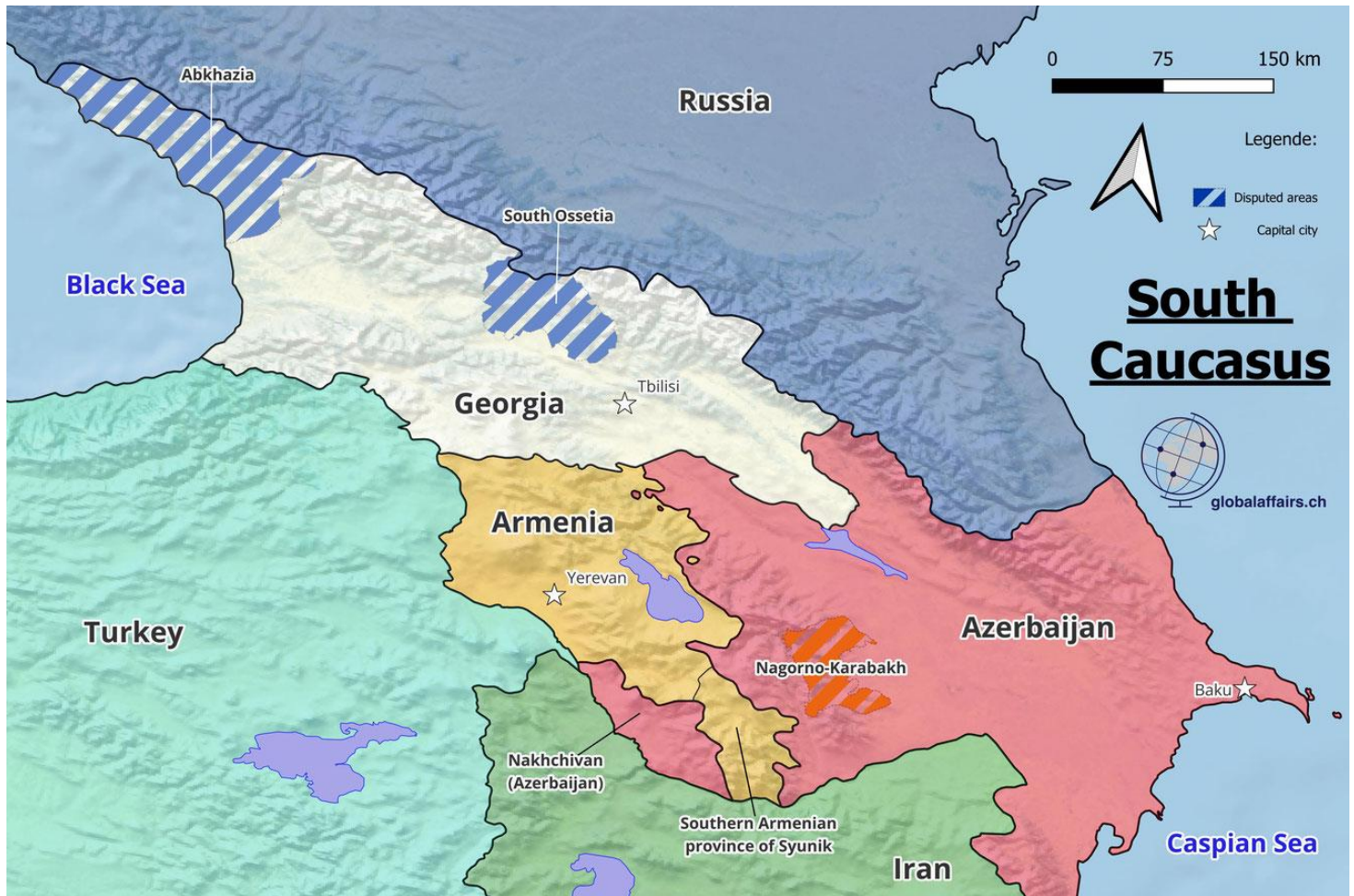


Figure 1: [Swiss Institute for Global Affairs](#) (2024).

This map neither reflects nor implies the position of the ECLJ.

Map of Nagorno-Karabakh



Figure 2: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, accessed via [University of Texas at Austin: University of Texas Libraries](https://www.utexaslib.org/) (1993). This map depicts the configuration of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1993. Although Nagorno-Karabakh is no longer an autonomous region, this map provides an overview of the general geographic layout of Nagorno-Karabakh's cities.

This map neither reflects nor implies the position of the ECLJ.

I. Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh¹ region, located in what is now southwestern Azerbaijan, has long been embroiled in conflict. For decades, ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis have struggled over the land, each claiming rightful control. This intermittent conflict—exacerbated by the extended history of ethno-religious tension between the predominantly Christian Armenians and predominantly Muslim Azerbaijanis—has resulted in both bloodshed and the destruction of precious cultural heritage.

A. The Importance of Protecting Armenian Christian Heritage

In the early third and fourth centuries, Christianity took root and bloomed across the region now known as Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Indeed, the Christian faith flourished in this region for many years, and it became deeply intertwined with the culture of the ancient ethnic Armenians. The early Armenian Church—in modern-day Nagorno-Karabakh and beyond—developed unique Christian traditions that have stood the test of time, providing insight into the faith and culture of a resilient people. Thus, Nagorno-Karabakh is home to thousands of distinctive Christian churches, monasteries, cemeteries, *khachkars*,² and religious inscriptions that tell of the treasured faith and heritage of ancient ethnic Armenians. Indeed, Nagorno-Karabakh boasts of approximately 500 cultural sites that hold roughly 6,000 monuments of Armenian heritage.³



Figure 3: Narek Harutyunyan, *Khachkars* from the Tenth to Eighteenth Centuries in Noraduz Cemetery, Gegharkunik. [Smithsonian](#) (2018).

As implied by the 1954 Hague Convention, the international community should rally to preserve any endangered cultural heritage, for “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world.”⁴ Thus, any danger facing Armenian Christian heritage should inherently garner international attention. The religious sites and monuments of the ancient Armenians, however, merit special attention. These

¹ Nagorno-Karabakh is also known by the ancient Armenian name of “Artsakh.” Because most reports on the destruction of Armenian Christian heritage refer to the region as “Nagorno-Karabakh,” which is derived from Russian and Azerbaijani terms for the region, this report will also use “Nagorno-Karabakh” for the sake of consistency. The ECLJ’s use of “Nagorno-Karabakh” instead of “Artsakh” neither reflects nor implies the position of the ECLJ on the use of Azerbaijani names to refer to the region, its towns, its roads, or its monuments.

² *Khachkars* are Armenian cross-stones. These stones are unique pieces of Christian Armenian art that usually depict a cross surrounded by intricately carved motifs. These stones act as a focal point for worship and as means of memorial. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added *khachkars* to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.

³ Simon Maghakyan, “[Artsakh Heritage: What is Happening to Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian Monuments](#),” *EVN Report*, para. 2 (November 27, 2023).

⁴ “[Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of an Armed Conflict](#),” 249 U.N.T.S. 215, 240 (May 14, 1954).

cultural sites are cherished by Christians across the globe, for they house a myriad of sacred monuments and artifacts that record the names, stories, manuscripts, and prayers of the early Church.⁵

Additionally, these sites are precious to those who are now refugees—the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. The medieval churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and monuments of the region are relics of their homeland, and several of the churches and monasteries were previously places of active worship. Due to this, the erasure of cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh would not only be a loss for the world, but it would also be the permanent loss of a victimized, displaced people's home. Moreover, depriving the Armenians of their ability to participate in cultural practices and worship would be a direct violation of Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁶ and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.⁷ In light of this, it is clear that the destruction of cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh is the destruction of the world's culture, the Church's history, and refugees' home and heritage.

Additionally, the preservation of Armenia's culture is important to the stability of the Caucasus region. As noted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the preservation of cultural heritage is essential to sparking economic revival, ensuring geopolitical security, and rebuilding trust and cooperation between warring nations. Indeed, as stated in the United Nations' Security Council Resolution 2347, "[T]he unlawful destruction of cultural heritage...can fuel and exacerbate conflicts and impede post-conflict national reconciliation."⁸ Therefore, it is clearly within the interest of every nation to ensure that the culture of Nagorno-Karabakh is protected.

B. The Historical Background of the Cultural Destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh

The ongoing cultural erasure in Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be understood without glancing through the pages of history. Today's destruction originates in the days of the Soviet Union.

The First Karabakh War and Cultural Destruction Caused by Armenia

When Armenia and Azerbaijan were first incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), Nagorno-Karabakh was part of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.⁹ However, years later, in 1923, Soviet leadership designated Nagorno-Karabakh as an autonomous administrative region within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁰

At the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh demanded the region be reintegrated into the new Republic of Armenia, for over ninety-four percent of Nagorno-Karabakh's population was ethnically Armenian.¹¹ In 1988, Azerbaijan answered the separatists with violent force, leading to the brutal First Karabakh War (1988-1994).¹² This war

⁵ Museum of the Bible, [Ancient Faith: The Churches of Nagorno-Karabakh](#), para. 4 (last visited June 13, 2024).

⁶ ["Universal Declaration of Human Rights,"](#) G.A. Res. 217A (III), Article 27 (December 10, 1948).

⁷ ["International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,"](#) G.A. Res. 2200A(XXI), Article 15 (December 16, 1966).

⁸ ["Resolution 2347 \(2017\),"](#) S.C. Res. 2347, p. 1 (March 24, 2017).

⁹ National Geographic, ["How the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict has been Shaped by Past Empires,"](#) para. 3-4 (September 25, 2023).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Center on Foreign Relations, ["Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,"](#) para. 2 (last visited June 13, 2024).

resulted in over 30,000 casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees.¹³ By 1993, however, Armenia had gained control of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴

After Armenia won the First Karabakh War, the nation forcibly expelled between 450,000-500,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions.¹⁵ Additionally, Armenia destroyed multiple mosques and Azerbaijani cultural sites.¹⁶ This cultural destruction was not as widespread or systematic as what is taking place today in Nagorno-Karabakh;¹⁷ however, any expulsion or cultural destruction must still be recognized and condemned. The destruction of Azerbaijani heritage, however, will not be addressed in depth in this report as this report focuses on the modern-day destruction of Armenian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Second Karabakh War and Cultural Destruction Caused by Azerbaijan

When a 1994 ceasefire agreement left Nagorno-Karabakh de facto independent, the ethnically-Armenian region was still heavily reliant on its economic and military ties with Armenia.¹⁸ Between 1994 and 2020, the region experienced intermittent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁹ However, on September 27, 2020, a nearly two-month war—the Second Karabakh War—erupted, killing at least 1,225 and leaving the majority of Nagorno-Karabakh in the hands of Azerbaijan.²⁰ The remainder of the region was governed by local authorities and patrolled by a Russian peacekeeping force.²¹



Figure 4: Photos Before and After the Destruction at Julfa. Argam Ayvazyan Digital Archive, [RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty](#) (2020).

Between 1997 and 2011, Azerbaijani authorities destroyed roughly 98% of the medieval Armenian monasteries,

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, [Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh](#), p. xi (December 8, 1994).

¹⁶ Caucasus Heritage Watch, [Between the Wars: A Satellite Investigation of the Treatment of Azerbaijani Cultural Heritage in the Unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, 1994-2020](#), p. 6 (2023).

¹⁷ *Id.*; As noted in the Caucasus Heritage Watch report, “Armenian authorities of [Nagorno-Karabakh] failed to prevent both widespread looting and several instances of targeted destruction. At the same time, the forensic evidence we present below shows no attempt to systematically erase the material traces of Azerbaijani history and cultural life in the troubled lands that Armenians controlled from 1994-2020.”

¹⁸ Center on Foreign Relations, [“Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,”](#) para. 2.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, [“The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer,”](#) para. 3 (last visited June 13, 2024).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

churches, and cemeteries in the historically Armenian region of Nakhchivan.²² It is estimated that 89 churches, 5,840 *khachkars*, and over 22,000 Armenian tombstones were lost.²³ In a striking example of complete cultural erasure, in the 1500-year-old Julfa cemetery, nearly all of the 10,000 Armenian *khachkars* were destroyed.²⁴ The systematic eradication of Armenian heritage in Nakhchivan was rightfully dubbed the “worst cultural genocide of the 21st century.”²⁵

The Modern Conflict and Cultural Destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh

At the end of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan controlled the majority of Nagorno-Karabakh. Many were fearful that the destruction of Nakhchivan would prove to be a template for destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁶ Unfortunately, those fears were well-founded. During the time between 2020 and the end of the 2023 conflict, dozens of Armenian heritage sites were damaged, destroyed, or threatened by Azerbaijan.²⁷ When these cultural and religious sites were not destroyed, thousands of them were closed to the public, even to pilgrims.²⁸

In December 2022, Azerbaijan-backed protests arose in the Lachin corridor, blocking traffic to Nagorno-Karabakh and leading to severe shortages and rationing in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁹ Rather than unblock the corridor and relieve the growing humanitarian crisis, Azerbaijan tightened its hold on Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁰ In September 2023, despite the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces,³¹ Azerbaijan conducted what its government called an “anti-terrorist operation” to dismantle alleged Armenian military installments in Nagorno-Karabakh.³² This “operation” resulted in 200 deaths, 400 wounded, and a Nagorno-Karabakh completely under the control of Azerbaijan.³³ Since Azerbaijan’s attack, over 100,000 ethnic Armenians living in the region fled—nearly the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁴

II. Modern-Day Cultural Erasure in Nagorno-Karabakh

Since the end of the 2023 conflict and the mass-exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population, the early concern over the destruction of cultural sites has grown even stronger, for when Azerbaijan conquered the remainder of Nagorno-Karabakh, it gained control of 200 to

²² *Caucasus Heritage Watch*, “[Silent Erasure: A Satellite Investigation of the Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan](#),” para. 1 (May 1, 2023).

²³ Andran Abramian, “[Agram Ayvazyan: Spy-Researcher for Nakhichevan Armenian Culture](#),” *Cultural Property News*, para. 4 (March 27, 2021).

²⁴ Dale Berning Sawa, “[Monumental Loss: Azerbaijan and ‘The Worst Cultural Genocide of the 21st Century’](#),” *The Guardian*, para. 4 (March 1, 2023).

²⁵ *Id.* at para. 3.

²⁶ *Caucasus Heritage Watch*, “[Silent Erasure](#),” para. 4.

²⁷ Because this report focuses on the systematic erasure of Armenian Christian heritage between September 2023 and June 2024, this report does not provide a detailed list of the sites that have been destroyed or damaged between 2020 and September 2023. For a thorough inventory and description of destroyed damaged sites during this time, the ECLJ recommends looking into reports and articles produced by [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) and [Monument Watch](#).

²⁸ Canalès Marion, “[Registration of the Heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh as a World Heritage Site: Written Question no. 08975](#),” 16th Legislature (November 9, 2023); *Horizon*, “[Azerbaijan Blocking Access to Dadivank Armenian Monastery Since May 2](#),” para. 1 (July 9, 2021).

²⁹ *Center on Foreign Relations*, “[Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict](#),” para. 6.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at para. 8.

³² *Id.* at para. 10.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Olesya Vartanyan, “[Armenia Struggles to Cope with Exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh](#),” *International Crisis Group*, para. 1-2 (March 4, 2024).

300 additional sites of Armenian heritage.³⁵ Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev claimed that Azerbaijan would protect the “religious...[and] cultural rights” of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁶ Unfortunately, Aliyev has broken this promise time and again. Since September 2023, Azerbaijan has carried out a brazen, devastating policy of cultural erasure, one that utilizes both destruction and revisionism to erase the heritage of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

A. The Destruction of Armenian Christian Heritage

Nagorno-Karabakh boasts over 500 sites that tell of the history and faith of the Armenian people.³⁷ Across all 500 sites, there are approximately 6,000 Armenian monuments—and all are currently under Azerbaijan’s control.³⁸ Considering Azerbaijan’s history of cultural erasure in Nakhchivan and the destruction of heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh between 2020 and 2023, the concern that Azerbaijan will continue its cultural erasure in Nagorno-Karabakh is well-founded. Numerous organizations have called for the on-site observation and protection of these locations. Despite numerous requests from Armenia and various international institutions, Azerbaijan has repeatedly refused to allow foreign observers to monitor these cultural sites; Armenia’s heritage can only be monitored via satellite surveillance.³⁹ Due to this restriction, access to sources regarding the destruction is limited.

Religious Heritage Sites Destroyed (September 2023-June 2024)

St. Sargis of Hadrut in Mokhrenes: Although the complete destruction of the 18th-century St. Sargis church was recorded in March 2022, as of September 2023, the Azerbaijanis have completely cleared the land and have begun building a new structure atop the grounds of the church.⁴⁰

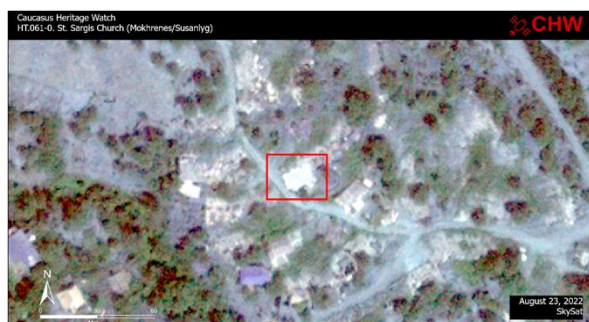


Figure 5.1: The Remains of St. Sargis Church on August 23, 2022. [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2023).



Figure 5.2: A New Structure Rising on Top of the Remains of St. Sargis Church on September 26, 2023. [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2023).

³⁵ Cornell University: College of Arts & Sciences, “[Hundreds of Armenian Heritage Sites at Risk in Nagorno-Karabakh](#),” para. 8 (September 21, 2023).

³⁶ Ilham Aliyev, [Address at the Opening Ceremony of the 2nd Azerbaijan National Urban Forum](#), (September 29, 2023).

³⁷ Fernando Padilla, “[Azerbaijan’s Attacks on Armenian Heritage Aim to Erase an Entire Culture](#),” para. 10 (February 7, 2024).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at para. 9; Azerbaijan has had a long history of refusing to allow international organizations to monitor the cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh. A notable exception to Azerbaijan’s long-standing refusal is the 2023 UNESCO mission to Nagorno-Karabakh. In a later section, this report details the concerning execution of this mission and the need for a new, impartial investigation into the state of the cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh.

⁴⁰ [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#), [Monitoring Report No. 6](#), p. 18 (December 2023).

St. John the Baptist Church (Kanatch Jam) in Shushi: On April 4, 2024, satellite imagery revealed that the St. John the Baptist Church in Shushi, which had been damaged by Azerbaijani bombs in 2020, has been completely razed to the ground.⁴¹ Built in 1847, the “green chapel” was an 177 year old landmark that once bore an inscription honoring the deceased brother of its Armenian builders.⁴² Now, this place of worship has been completely wiped from the map.



Figure 6: A Side-By-Side Comparison of the St. John the Baptist Church Site on December 28, 2023 (Left) and April 4, 2024 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).



Figure 7: Inscription on the St. John the Baptist Church, which read "St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church was built by Shusha townsman baron Hovhannes and Baba Stepanyan Hovnanents in memory of their deceased brother Mkrtych in the year of 1847." [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

⁴¹ Arnaud Spilioti, "[Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh Fear Religious Heritage is in Peril](#)," para. 3 (April 24, 2024).

⁴² [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#), "[Destruction Alert: St. John the Baptist Church, Shusha/Shushi](#)," para. 1, 3 (April 20, 2024).

Ghazanchetsots Cemetery in Shushi: Satellites confirmed on April 4, 2024, that the months-long destruction of Ghazanchetsots cemetery in Shushi has been completed. Beginning in October 2023, the Azerbaijani government systematically the tombstones, which dated back to the 18th and 19th centuries. This cemetery is merely one of many, including the Mets Taher, Sghnakh, Sui Northern, and Yerevan Gates cemeteries, that have been destroyed. Rather than treat the historical burial ground with respect, honoring those who lost their lives and the cultural heritage preserved in the headstones, Azerbaijan has destroyed the cemetery.⁴³



Figure 8: A Side-By-Side Comparison of the Nearly Complete Destruction of the Cemetery in December 2023 (Left) and the Complete Destruction Photographed in April 2024 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

St. Ascension (St. Hambardzum) Church in Berdzor: In 2022, Azerbaijan’s “Public Organization for the Protection of Monuments” proposed converting this church into a mosque. Plans for this transformation may very well be underway, for the church has been demolished and removed from its grounds. This destruction was publicized via satellite imagery on May 11, 2024.⁴⁴



Figure 9: Satellite Imagery of the Destruction of the St. Ascension Church Compared to an Image of the Church Prior to Its Destruction. [ArmenPress](#) (2024).

⁴³ *Caucasus Heritage Watch*, “[Destruction Alert: Ghazanchetsots Cemetery, Susha/Shushi](#),” para. 1-3 (April 20, 2024).

⁴⁴ *ArmenPress*, “[The Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh is Gradually Being Destroyed](#),” para. 2, 4 (May 13, 2024).

Ghuze T'agh Cemetery near Aknaghbyur: The destruction of the Ghuze T'agh Cemetery began as early as March 2021, with a significant portion of the cemetery damaged by October 2021. As of May 2024, it was confirmed that the cemetery, which dates back to the 19th century, was fully demolished.⁴⁵



Figure 10.1: The Ghuze T'agh cemetery fully intact as of February 2021 (Left), and the cemetery severely damaged by earthmoving and roadwork activities in October 2021 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).



Figure 10.2: The Ghuze T'agh cemetery completely erased. [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

The Kohak Sacred Place: Listed as a “sacred place” on the former Nagorno-Karabakh Republic’s inventory of monuments, these ruins were once the home of three medieval *khachkars* and a *khachkar* pedestal. These *khachkars* dated back to between the 9th and 13th centuries. Although most of the site was destroyed during a strike in April 2021, it was confirmed in June 2024 that earthmoving and construction have destroyed the last remnants of the Kohak sacred place.⁴⁶



Figure 11.1: The progression of the destruction of the Kohak Sacred Place from September 18, 2020 (Left) to April 14, 2021 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

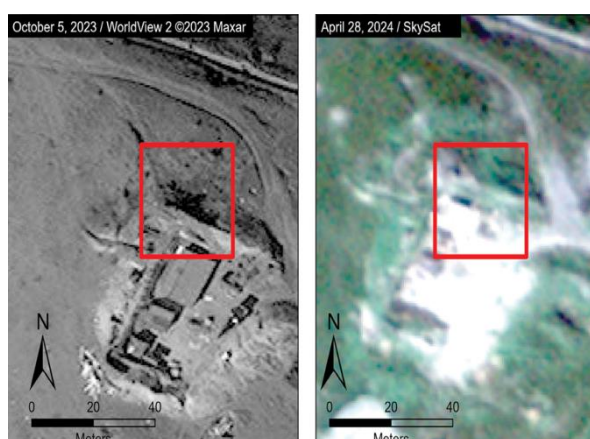


Figure 11.2: The progression of the destruction of the Kohak Sacred Place from October 5, 2023 (Left) to April 28, 2024 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

⁴⁵ [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#), [Monitoring Report No. 7](#), p. 9 (June 2024).

⁴⁶ [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#), [Monitoring Report No. 7](#), p. 12 (June 2024).

The Zar School and the Chirag School: The Zar and Chirag schools, which were built during the 1950s, were constructed from the spolia of medieval Armenian churches and cemeteries in Nagorno-Karabakh. The spolia included *khachkars*, ornamental relief relics, and inscribed stones that survived the systematic destruction of Armenian heritage sites by the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic during the 1940s and 1950s. The schools were looted and abandoned in the 1990s, but their structures remained intact, serving as a reminder of the enduring heritage of the Armenian Christians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Between October 5, 2023, and June 2, 2024, however, Azerbaijan razed both schools to the ground.⁴⁷



Figure 12.1: The Remains of the Zar School on October 5, 2023 (Top) and the erasure of the school as of June 2, 2024 (Bottom). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).



Figure 12.2: The Remains of the Chirag School on October 5, 2023 (Top) and the erasure of the school as of June 2, 2024 (Bottom). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

Religious Heritage Sites Damaged (September 2023-June 2024)

Cemetery Near Vazgenashen: Dating back to the 14th century, this cemetery was once a treasure-trove of medieval *khachkars*. Since June 2023, Azerbaijani construction has moved closer and closer to the heritage site. In October 2023, satellite imagery confirmed that a significant portion of the cemetery has been destroyed due to “earth-moving activity.”⁴⁸



Figure 13: A Khachkar from an Armenian Cemetery. [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2024).

⁴⁷ Caucasus Heritage Watch, [Monitoring Report No. 7](#), p. 10 (June 2024).

⁴⁸ Caucasus Heritage Watch, [Monitoring Report No. 6](#), p. 9.

Ghazanchetsots Cemetery and Yerevan Gate Cemeteries in Shushi: The Ghazanchetsots and Yerevan Gate cemeteries, built between the 18th and 19th centuries, were severely damaged between October 5 and November 3, 2023. Bulldozers have dumped large debris atop Ghazanchetsots fragile tombstones and carved a road through Yerevan Gate Cemetery, mowing down historic grave markers.⁴⁹



Figure 14.1: A Side-By-Side Comparison of the Ghazanchetsots Cemetery on October 5, 2023 (Left), and November 3, 2023 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2023).



Figure 14.2: A Side-By-Side Comparison of the Yerevan Gate Cemetery on October 5, 2023 (Left), and November 3, 2023 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2023).

⁴⁹ [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#), “[Damage Alert: Ghazanchetsots Cemetery \(Shushi/Shusha\)](#),” para. 1-2 (November 27, 2023); [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#), “[Damage Alert: Yerevan Gate Cemetery \(Shusha/Shushi\)](#),” para. 1-3 (November 24, 2023).

Meghretsots Holy Mother of God Church: The Meghretsots Holy Mother of God church, which was founded in 1838, was first damaged during the Soviet era; however, in November 2023, satellite imagery confirmed that Azerbaijan has further damaged the remains of the old Armenian church by dumping demolition debris on the building's remaining foundation.⁵⁰



Figure 15.1: The Structure of the Meghretsots Church prior to November 2023. [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2023).



Figure 15.2: A Side-By-Side Comparison of the Meghretsots Church on April 10, 2021 (Left), and November 3, 2023 (Right). [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (2023).

⁵⁰ *Caucasus Heritage Watch*, “[Damage Alert: Meghretsots Holy Mother of God Church](#),” para. 1 (November 24, 2023).

Vankasar Church in Tigranakert: Video footage released in January 2024 revealed that the cross of the Vankasar Church, which dates back to the 7th century, has been removed. Under the guise of “renovation,” this medieval Armenian church—perched atop the highest peak in Vankasar—has already endured over three decades of vandalism at the hands of the Azerbaijani government.⁵¹



Figure 16.1: Vankasar Church Before the Cross was Removed. [Monument Watch](#) (2024).



Figure 16.2: Vankasar Church After the Cross was Removed. [Monument Watch](#) (2024).

Surb Sargis Church in the Tsar Village of Karvachar: According to a February 2024 report, the Surb Sargis Church, built in 1279,⁵² has been vandalized by the Azerbaijani government, which claims it is “renovating” the historical house of worship. Azerbaijani efforts to restore this church have taken the form of destroying religious symbols and enclosing the area from view via a large iron fence. Notably, two historic polished stone slabs—decorated with Christian artwork and medieval Armenian inscriptions—have been smashed, and the remains of the second slab have been removed. This second slab bore a rare Armenian inscription referring to the “hamadki” measurement. This unit of measurement is unique to Armenian inscriptions in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Thus, this destruction has not only deprived Armenia of a unique piece of its heritage, but it has removed undeniable evidence of the Armenian origins of the church.⁵³

⁵¹ [Monument Watch](#), “[Azerbaijan Removes Cross from Vankasar Church](#),” para. 1-6 (February 10, 2024).

⁵² [Monument Watch](#), “[St. Grigor and St. Sargis Churches of Tsar](#),” para. 7 (last visited June 20, 2024).

⁵³ [Monument Watch](#), “[It was the Tsar Settlement’s Turn](#),” para. 1-4 (February 27, 2024).



Figure 17: The Inscription of the Surb Sargis Church Before Azerbaijan's Occupation. [Monument Watch](#) (2024).

St. John's Cathedral of the Mother of God in Stepanakert: On March 4, 2024, reports surfaced that St. John's Cathedral of the Mother of God, built and consecrated in 2019, has been vandalized by Azerbaijani perpetrators.⁵⁴



Figure 18: St. John's Cathedral of the Mother of God in Stepanakert During its Construction in 2019. [Candle of Jerusalem](#) (n.d.).

⁵⁴ *The Armenian Report*, "[St. John's Cathedral in Stepanakert Vandalized by Azerbaijan](#)," para. 1-2 (March 4, 2024).

Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi: The Ghazanchetsots Cathedral, built in the 19th century and located near the cemetery of the same name, has been significantly defaced. Azerbaijan, falsely claiming that the cathedral belongs to the Russian Orthodox church, has begun “renovating” the Armenian worship site. Although the church is engulfed in thick scaffolding, images posted on Azerbaijani social media sites show that multiple religious symbols have been removed from the church, including the unique angels on the building’s gate, the domes of the church, and the cathedral’s cross.⁵⁵



Figure 19: An Early Photograph of the Ongoing "Renovation" of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral. [Monument Watch](#) (2022).

Religious Heritage Sites Threatened (September 2023-June 2023)

Although every historical site under Azerbaijani control is endangered, some sites face an imminent threat of damage or destruction.

Monasteries in Nagorno-Karabakh: The monasteries in Nagorno-Karabakh are under great threat of being damaged, destroyed, or appropriated. Considering Azerbaijan’s policy of removing emblems and symbols of Armenian heritage from sites that the Azerbaijani government declares are “not Armenian,”⁵⁶ many cultural experts are fearful that the monasteries in Nagorno-Karabakh will be stripped of their heritage. In particular, the fates of the Dadivank Monastery (built between the 9th and 13th centuries), the Monastery of Gandzasar (built in the 13th century), and the Amaras Monastery (built in the 4th century) have raised international concern.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ CivilNet, “[New Reports Emerge of Damage to Armenian Heritage in Karabakh](#),” para. 10-11 (April 23, 2024).

⁵⁶ Amos Chapple, “[‘Forgeries’: The Armenian Art that Azerbaijan May ‘Erase’ From Churches](#),” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, para. 1-3, 5, (February 9, 2022); Sargis Harutyunyan, “[U.S. Agency ‘Deeply Concerned’ About Karabakh Churches](#),” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, para. 1 (February 8, 2022).

⁵⁷ “[Letter of Support for the Nomination of Dadivank Monastery and the Armenian Cultural Heritage in Artsakh-Nagorno Karabakh for Europa Nostra’s ‘Europe’s Most Endangered Heritage Sites’ Program](#),” Central European



Figure 20: The Main Church of Dadivank Monastery. [Bible Museum](#) (last visited 2024).

Cemeteries and Churches in Nagorno-Karabakh: The following cultural sites have been flagged by Caucasus Heritage Watch and Monument Watch—research teams dedicated to documenting the loss of heritage in the Nagorno-Karabakh region—as locations under imminent threat of damage, destruction, or cultural appropriation: Sub Grigor Church, Zorakhach Church, Kavak'avank Church, St. Astvatsatsin of Avetaranots' Church, Gyzyk Kangarli Historical Cemetery, Gavurgala Church, Amenap'rkich Church, Vazgen Ashen Church, St. Poghos-Petros Church of Shalva, the Church of Yeritsushen, St. Yeghisha of Mataghis, Vakunis Church, Arakhish Cemetery, Arakhish Church, Mokhrenes Cemetery, Ughtamejk Cemetery, Mrchmants Church, Amenap'rkich Church, Vank'asar Church, Ptkat'aghi Vank' Church & Cemetery, Surb Mariam Astvatsatsin of Gozlu, and K'arin Tak Cemetery.⁵⁸



Figure 21: St. Astvatsatsin of Avetaranots' Church. [Monument Watch](#) (last visited 2024).



Figure 22: A Khachkar near the Arakhish Cemetery. [Monument Watch](#) (last visited 2024).

University: Center for Religious Studies (October 3, 2023); Arnaud Spilioti, "[Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh Fear Their Religious Heritage is in Peril](#)," *La Croix International*, para. 1, 11 (April 24, 2024).

⁵⁸ Caucasus Heritage Watch, [Monitoring Report No. 6](#), p. 6; Caucasus Heritage Watch, [Monitoring Report No. 7](#), p. 7; Monument Watch, "[Alerts](#)," (last visited June 14, 2023).

Examples of Non-Religious Heritage Sites Destroyed or Damaged (September 2023-June 2023)

In addition to destroying religious heritage sites, Azerbaijan has continued its long pattern of destroying non-religious heritage sites. The following notable examples of such destruction provide further evidence that Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh go beyond mere religious hostility. Azerbaijan seeks to erase the heritage—and even the memory—of the Armenian people.

Village of Karintak: As reported in April 2024, the entire Armenian village of Karintak has been torn to the ground.⁵⁹ Now, Azerbaijan has begun construction of a large mosque on top of the ruins.⁶⁰ Husik Ghulyan, a lead researcher at Caucasus Heritage Watch, suspects that Azerbaijan intends to rebuild a new village atop Karintak to accommodate an Azerbaijani resettlement program.⁶¹



Figure 23: Karintak Before Its Destruction (Top) and After Its Destruction (Bottom). [RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty](#) (2024).

⁵⁹ Amos Chapple, “[Church, Entire Village ‘Erased’ in Azerbaijan’s Recaptured Nagorno Karabakh](#),” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, para. 4 (April 24, 2024).

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

Cross Memorial in Stepanakert: As both a memorial to fallen Armenian soldiers and a symbol of the nation's Christian heritage, a fifty-meter tall cross—the second highest in Europe—once stood on a hill near the Nagorno-Karabakh capital, Stepanakert. However, this memorial, installed in 2017, was torn down by Azerbaijani forces in September 2023.⁶²

Appropriation of Cultural Houses, Community Centers, and Schools for Military Purposes: In April of 2024, Monument Watch reported that many cultural houses, community centers, and schools in Nagorno-Karabakh—such as the Khachatur Abovyan school and the community center building in Getavan village—have been appropriated for the use of the Azerbaijani military. Additionally, many of the centers and schools that have not been commandeered have been vandalized.⁶³

The Wall of License Plates in Vank Village: Due to a November 2023 presidential order from Aliyev, a wall of Azerbaijani license plates from civilian and military vehicles abandoned in the territories liberated by the Armenians during the Artsakh war—a symbol of Nagorno-Karabakh's former independence from Azerbaijan's control—has been torn down. A new wall, featuring the license plates of abandoned Armenian cars, has been constructed in its place and displayed in Stepanakert Square.⁶⁴



Figure 24: The Wall of License Plates in Vank Village Being Dismantled. [Monument Watch](#) (2023).

Historical Khachkar Monument in Martakert City: In January 2024, it was confirmed that a 2021 khachkar monument, honoring the lives of two fallen Armenian soldiers, has been torn down in the town of Martakert.⁶⁵

⁶² Monument Watch, "[Azerbaijan Toppled the Cross in Stepanakert](#)," para. 1-3 (November 19, 2023).

⁶³ Monument Watch, "[Azerbaijan Utilizes Artsakh's Culture Houses, Community Centers, and Schools for Military Objectives](#)," para. 1-4 (April 16, 2024).

⁶⁴ Monument Watch, "[The Wall of License Plates in Vank Village Demolished by Presidential Order in Azerbaijan](#)," para. 1-3 (November 20, 2023).

⁶⁵ Monument Watch, "[Azerbaijanis Reportedly Damage Historical Khachkar Monument in Martakert City](#)," para. 1 (January 9, 2024).

Memorial and Cemetery in Village of Haterk: In early January of 2024, an Azerbaijani *YouTube* channel posted a video revealing that a memorial to fallen Armenian soldiers, installed in 2005, has been destroyed. This memorial, which depicted portraits of fallen soldiers and included multiple tombstones, was broken and overturned.⁶⁶

Monuments in Stepanakert: Multiple monuments and statues in Stepanakert have been either destroyed or removed in the past few months. Each memorial either speaks to a period of Armenia's history or records and honors a significant Armenian cultural or political figure—and each memorial has been harmed during the Azerbaijani occupation. The affected monuments include the Soviet-era eagle monument;⁶⁷ the monument of Alexander Myasnikyan, a famous statesman and literary critic; the bust of Admiral Ivan Isakov, known for his contributions to military theory and strategy; the bust of the former chief of the General Staff of the Defense Army of the Republic of Artsakh; the monument of Lieutenant General Anatoly Zinevich; and the statute of Stepan Shahumyan, a prominent cultural and political figure from the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.⁶⁸



Figure 25: Vandalized Statute of Stepan Shahumyan in Stepanakert. [Monument Watch](#) (2023).

As evidenced by the recent destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh, this region is on its way toward becoming the next Nakhchivan. Unfortunately, however, Azerbaijan has not stopped at the physical destruction of Armenian heritage. Azerbaijan has also employed a policy of cultural revisionism.

⁶⁶ [Monument Watch](#), “[Azerbaijan has Vandalized the Fraternal \(Military\) Cemetery in the Village of Haterk in Artsakh](#),” para. 1-3 (January 16, 2024).

⁶⁷ [The Armenian Report](#), “[Azerbaijan Destroys Historic Eagle Monument in Stepanakert, Erasing Symbol of Artsakh’s Armenian Cultural Heritage](#),” para. 1 (February 15, 2024).

⁶⁸ [Monument Watch](#), “[Azerbaijan Destroys Monument of Alexander Myasnikyan on Martuni Street, Stepanakert](#),” para. 1-3 (February 25, 2024).

B. The Revisionism of Armenian Christian Heritage

To accomplish complete cultural erasure, Azerbaijan has gone beyond merely destroying Armenian heritage—Azerbaijan is also denying it ever existed. For years, the Azerbaijani government has executed a policy of “Albanianising” Armenian culture, falsely claiming that the medieval Armenian cultural sites are actually of Caucasian Albanian origin.⁶⁹ Indeed, according to Azerbaijan, Armenians were never native to Nagorno-Karabakh. Instead, Azerbaijan claims that when Russia gained control of the region in the 19th century, the great northern power facilitated a large-scale Armenian migration into the South Caucasus.⁷⁰ Upon arriving in the region, Armenian clergy began to co-opt the ancient Caucasian Albanian churches by adding fraudulent Armenian inscriptions and modifying the architecture to appear Armenian.⁷¹

Not only are Azerbaijan’s claims blatantly false, but they are also malicious. First and foremost, this revisionist history attempts to strip ethnic Armenians of their heritage as natives of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding region; it paints the Armenians as nothing more than intruders and pawns in Russia’s efforts to “Christianize” the region.⁷² Furthermore, by denying the Armenians’ centuries-old presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijanis attempt to excuse—and even justify—horrific acts of cultural erasure.

For example, during the cultural erasure in Nakhchivan, the Azerbaijani government used this revisionist history to defend the wide-spread destruction of Armenian heritage. As explained by Tahir Taghizade, the former Azerbaijani ambassador to the UK, “[W]e need to make it clear that there is no such thing as ‘Armenian heritage’ in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic simply because Armenians never lived there. Primary academic research on the history of the region would testify to this. Non-existing sites or cemeteries cannot be destroyed.”⁷³

Azerbaijan utilizes this revisionist history in Nagorno-Karabakh as well. Shortly after the 2020 conflict ended, the First Deputy and Acting Minister of Culture of Azerbaijan, Anar Karimov, posted images of the 12th-century Dadivank monastery—which is filled with medieval Armenian Christian images and inscriptions of Christian prayers⁷⁴—and falsely claimed that it was built by the wife of an Albanian prince.⁷⁵ In line with this claim, the Azerbaijani government has attempted to expel Armenian priests from the Dadivank Monastery, asserting that the priests had no ties to the “Caucasian Albanian” religious site.⁷⁶ Azerbaijan has also claimed that the medieval *khachkars* of Tigranakert are not from the region; instead, they were “relocated” from elsewhere to Tigranakert.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut (Eds.), *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook*, p. v-vi (De Gruyter 2023).

⁷⁰ Javid Agha, “[Perspectives | Who were the Caucasian Albanians?](#),” *Eurasianet*, para. 9 (June 7, 2024).

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.* at para. 10.

⁷³ Simon Maghakyan, “[Special Investigation: Declassified Satellite Images Show Erasure of Armenian Churches](#),” *The Art Newspaper*, para. 35 (June 1, 2021).

⁷⁴ *Museum of the Bible*, “[Ancient Faith of the Churches of Nagorno Karabakh: Dadivank](#),” para. 3 (last visited June 13, 2024).

⁷⁵ Thomas de Waal, “[Perspectives | Now Comes a Karabakh War Over Cultural Heritage](#),” *Eurasianet*, para. 8 (November 16, 2020).

⁷⁶ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “[USCIRF 2024 Annual Report](#),” p. 16 (May 2024).

⁷⁷ *Monument Watch*, “[This time, Azerbaijani Propaganda is Engaged in Discourse Regarding Tigranakert](#),” para. 1 (March 30, 2024).

In 2021, the President Aliyev denied that the 12th-century St. Astvatsatsin Church in the village of Tsakuri was Armenian.⁷⁸ He claimed that the Armenian inscriptions on the church and the *khachkars* were fake and that Armenians had thus “desecrated” an ancient Caucasian Albanian temple.⁷⁹ Indeed, in accordance with this claim that the ancient Caucasian Albanian monuments and buildings have been defaced, Azerbaijan has begun a state-funded, systematic erasure of Armenian “vandalism.” Azerbaijan’s former Culture Minister, Anar Kerimov, confirmed in February 2022 that he had established a task group specifically focused on removing the so-called “fake” Armenian traces from the Caucasian Albanian churches.⁸⁰

Azerbaijan has endeavored to spread and legitimize this revisionist history via academia for years. For over a decade, Azerbaijan has increasingly included lies about Armenia’s origins in its school curricula.⁸¹ Since 2020, this revisionist history has become mainstream in the Azerbaijani education system.⁸² Notably, in 2007, Azerbaijan’s National Academy of Sciences published a book entitled “The Monuments of Western Azerbaijan.”⁸³ In this book, the authors—who, along with all sources referenced in the book, are all Azerbaijani—boldly claim that Armenia did not exist in the South Caucasus until the 19th century. Instead, present-day Armenia rests on the land of the ancient Oghuz Turks, ancestors of the Azerbaijani people.⁸⁴ Thus, Armenia is merely “Western Azerbaijan,” and all Armenian monuments, churches, and cultural sites belong to the Azerbaijani people. This book has been republished in recent years to further this false narrative.⁸⁵ Additionally, mere weeks after the 2020 conflict ended, the National Academy of Sciences established the Scientific Center for Albanian Studies—a center dedicated to proving “that the Albanian monuments that the Armenians want to appropriate belong to our people.”⁸⁶

To further remove all traces of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian history, Azerbaijan has also changed the Armenian street names in Nagorno-Karabakh. Mere weeks after Azerbaijan took control over Nagorno-Karabakh, the conquering government published a new, revisionist map of the region.⁸⁷ Streets that once bore names of Armenian historical figures or references to Armenia’s history were renamed in a malicious attempt to cleanse the area of Armenia’s history. The antagonistic nature of the names is most clearly seen in the new title of Tevosyan Street. This street, one of the main avenues in the capital city of Stepanakert, was renamed Envar Pasha Street.⁸⁸ Envar Pasha was one of the primary perpetrators of the 1915 Armenian genocide in which approximately 1.5 million Armenians were brutally murdered.⁸⁹ Similarly,

⁷⁸ Monument Watch, “[The Statement of the President of Azerbaijan on the Church of Tsakuri](#),” para. 1 (May 4, 2021).

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ Sargis Harutyunyan, “[U.S. Agency ‘Deeply Concerned’ About Karabakh Churches](#),” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, para. 1 (February 8, 2022).

⁸¹ Laurence Broers, “[Is Azerbaijan Planning a Long-Term Presence in Armenia?](#),” *Chatham House*, para. 24 (September 26, 2023).

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ Aziz Alakbarli, *The Monuments of Western Azerbaijan*, eds. Budag Budagov, Vali Aliyev, and Jafar Giyassi, trans. Zeydulla Aghayev and F. Alexander Magill (Nurlan Publishing House, 2007).

⁸⁴ *Id.* at p. 7.

⁸⁵ *Caucasian Albania*, p. 586.

⁸⁶ National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, “[Academian Ramiz Mehdiyev: ‘Serious steps should be taken in the academy and research should be expanded aimed at exposing the “facts” based on Armenian falsifications](#),” para. 3 (November 25, 2020).

⁸⁷ Center for Truth and Justice, “[Azerbaijan’s Policy of Irredentism: Illegitimate Territorial Claims on the Republic of Armenia](#),” p. 9 (January 2024).

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ *Id.*

another street, Nelson Stepanyan Street, was renamed Nuri Pasha Street after an Ottoman military officer who played a significant role in the massacre of 30,000 Armenian civilians in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku.⁹⁰

The website on which this revision map is published, *GoMap*, is funded and managed by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Culture and Tourism.⁹¹ However, Azerbaijan has succeeded in convincing at least one major, international company to recognize its revisionist history. Azerbaijan successfully petitioned⁹² Google to change the geographical names of towns and churches to their Azerbaijani equivalents.⁹³ In fact, Google even changed the name of a newly built Armenian church to the label "Ancient Albanian Church."⁹⁴

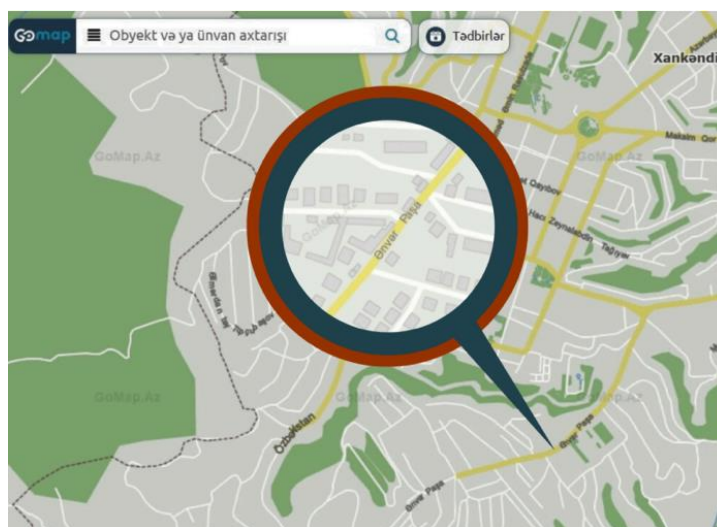


Figure 26: A GoMap Screenshot Showing one of the Main Avenues in Stepanakert has been Renamed "Envar pasha Street." [Center for Truth and Justice](#) (2024).

Now, Azerbaijan has unveiled a new means of cultural erasure—

“urban reorganization and reoccupation.”⁹⁵ Through adapting and refilling the abandoned Armenian towns and cities, Azerbaijan is slowly transforming an Armenian homeland into a distant memory. A key example is the establishment of Karabakh University. Azerbaijan is currently transforming the Armenian university in Stepanakert, formerly known as Artsakh State University, into an Azerbaijani university called Karabakh University. Via a name change and a nearly €6 million euro reconstruction budget, the Azerbaijani government is removing any evidence that it was ever an Armenian university.⁹⁶ By incentivizing students to come to Nagorno-Karabakh with the offer of free tuition and laptops, the Azerbaijani government is using Karabakh University as a catalyst to repopulate the region.⁹⁷

In addition to Karabakh University, the Azerbaijani government is developing an extensive initiative to settle its people into the ancient Armenian region. Dubbed the “Great Return” program, a reference to Armenia's forceful displacement of Azerbaijanis out of Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1990s, Azerbaijan's efforts to return Azerbaijanis to Nagorno-Karabakh have been rather successful.⁹⁸ Hundreds of Azerbaijanis have been relocated into abandoned Armenian towns, and over 140,000 people are expected to be returned by 2026.⁹⁹ As noted by

⁹⁰ *Id.* at p. 10-11.

⁹¹ *Id.* at p. 12.

⁹² *Azertac*, “[The Issue has been Raised Before “Google.”](#)” para. 1 (December 23, 2021).

⁹³ *Armenia News*, “[Tatoyan: Azerbaijan Chances Place Names on Google Maps.](#)” para. 4 (May 12, 2023).

⁹⁴ *Human Rights Network*, “[Chapter 6: Attacks on Cultural Heritage.](#)” para. 34 (December 2023).

⁹⁵ Padilla, “[Azerbaijan's Attacks on Armenian Heritage Aim to Erase an Entire Culture.](#)” para. 10.

⁹⁶ *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, “[Azerbaijan Promises Free Education, Laptops to Convince Students to Study in Nagorno-Karabakh.](#)” para. 2 (May 26, 2024).

⁹⁷ Aytan Farhadova, “[Azerbaijan to Settle Stepanakert in September.](#)” *OC Media*, para. 13 (May 30, 2024).

⁹⁸ Ilaria Romano, “[After Nagorno Karabakh, an Uncertain Future for Refugees and the Region.](#)” *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*, para. 16-19 (March 27, 2024).

⁹⁹ *Armenia News*, “[Azerbaijan Authorities Plan to Settle 140,000 Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh.](#)” para. 1 (October 19, 2023).

Armenia News, “[140,000] is strangely correlated with the number of indigenous Armenians who left Nagorno-Karabakh—100,000 after Azerbaijan’s military aggression [in] September [2020], and about 40,000 who did not return to Nagorno-Karabakh after the 44-day war in 2020.”¹⁰⁰ Aliyev has made it clear that a priority in the resettlement process is the resettlement of the capital city of Stepanakert, which the Azerbaijanis call Khankendi.¹⁰¹

III. The International Response

Azerbaijan’s destruction of Armenian culture warrants attention not only because a people group’s invaluable heritage is in danger of total erasure, but also because Azerbaijan’s actions contravene numerous international agreements. Azerbaijan, as a contracting party to the 1954 Hague Convention, is bound to “respect cultural property situated within [its] own territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties.”¹⁰² Moreover, all contracting parties must refrain from any act of “hostility” against cultural sites.¹⁰³ As a state party to the World Heritage Convention, Azerbaijan is also obligated “to take the appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation, and rehabilitation of this heritage.”¹⁰⁴ Azerbaijan also ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasizes the importance of cultural traditions and artifacts to a singular community and all of humanity.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Azerbaijan is party to or has ratified a plethora of international agreements—such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—that affirm the importance and sacred nature of cultural heritage sites.¹⁰⁶

Azerbaijan’s violation of these agreements has rightfully triggered a strong international response. In 2020, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director-General appealed to both Armenia and Azerbaijan to protect Nagorno-Karabakh’s cultural heritage and attempted to initiate a UNESCO mission to observe the state of heritage sites in the region.¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately, Azerbaijan refused to give UNESCO access.¹⁰⁸ In an address to the Azerbaijani president, the UN Special Rapporteur expressed concerns over a potential cultural genocide and urged Azerbaijan to protect Armenian heritage in the region.¹⁰⁹ In 2024, a United Nations report from the High Commissioner for Human Rights urged both Azerbaijan and Armenia to protect and preserve sites of cultural heritage in the region.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at para. 2.

¹⁰¹ *Reuters*, [“Aliyev says Azerbaijan to Start Resettling Capital of Karabakh Region in September,”](#) para. 1-2 (May 29, 2024).

¹⁰² 249 U.N.T.S. 215, Article 4, para. 1.

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ [Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage](#), 1037 U.N.T.S. 15511, Article 5(d) (March 9, 1977).

¹⁰⁵ [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#), UNESCO 10/001, p. 1 (October 17, 2003).

¹⁰⁶ *Human Rights Network*, [“Chapter 6: Attacks on Cultural Heritage,”](#) para. 17.

¹⁰⁷ [“Nagorno-Karabakh: Reaffirming the Obligation to Protect Cultural Goods, UNESCO Proposes Sending a Mission to the Field to All Parties,”](#) *UNESCO*, para. 7-9 (November 20, 2020).

¹⁰⁸ [“UNESCO is Awaiting Azerbaijan’s Response Regarding Nagorno-Karabakh Mission,”](#) *UNESCO*, para. 5 (December 21, 2020).

¹⁰⁹ *Monument Watch*, [“UN Special Rapporteur Addresses Azerbaijan on Status of Cultural and Religious Sites in Nagorno Karabakh,”](#) para. 1-3 (December 5, 2023).

¹¹⁰ Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/28/3, Section 16 (January 10, 2024).

In December 2021, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) released a significant decision ordering Azerbaijan to “take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artifacts.”¹¹¹

The European Union (EU) has also strongly condemned Azerbaijan’s actions. In a March 2022 statement, the European Parliament denounced Azerbaijan’s “policy of erasing and denying Armenian cultural heritage in and around Nagorno-Karabakh” and called on Azerbaijan to comply with the ICJ’s December 2021 order.¹¹² In October 2023, the European Parliament reaffirmed its strong stance, demanding Azerbaijan cease its cultural destruction and comply with both UNESCO standards and international agreements.¹¹³ The resolution also stated that the European Parliament “regrets” the EU institutions’ slow response to the crisis.¹¹⁴

The resolution also called for a reevaluation of the EU’s relations with Azerbaijan, declaring that Azerbaijan was not a “trustworthy partner” and urged the High Representative and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to suspend new partnership agreements.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the resolution called for the EU and its Member States to, “if Azerbaijan continues to disregard its commitments,...consider lowering the level of cooperation with the country.”¹¹⁶



Figure 27: A Panel of Speakers at the European Parliament's Conference on Preserving the Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh. [Monument Watch](#) (2024).

In January 2024, after months of continued destruction, the European Parliament held a conference on the Protection of the Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh. At this conference, the speakers emphasized the Parliament's call to organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), UNESCO, and the Council of Europe (COE) to take decisive action to preserve Armenia’s endangered heritage.¹¹⁷ Most recently, on March 13, 2024, the European Parliament released a new, concerned resolution condemning Azerbaijan’s

¹¹¹ International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Armenia v. Azerbaijan*, Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, para. 92 (December 7, 2021).

¹¹² European Parliament, “[Resolution on the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Karabakh](#),” 2022/2582(RSP), para. 1 (March 10, 2022).

¹¹³ “[European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2023 on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan’s attack and the continuing threats against Armenia](#),” 2023/2879(RSP), para. 8 (October 5, 2023).

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at para. 19.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at para. 11.

¹¹⁶ *Id.*

¹¹⁷ Monument Watch, “[Preserving the Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh: A Conference at the European Parliament on January 24, 2024](#),” para. 3 (February 5, 2024).

continued actions in Nagorno-Karabakh and urging UNESCO to take immediate action to preserve the endangered cultural sites.¹¹⁸

Additionally, in an answer to an April 2024 written question regarding Armenian detainees in Azerbaijan's capital, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy emphasized that "the EU continues to call upon Azerbaijan to ensure the rights of Karabakh Armenians, including their right to return to their homes without intimidation and discrimination."¹¹⁹ As implied in the EU's October 2023 resolution, this call to permit the Armenians to return without "discrimination" includes ensuring Armenians' "land and property rights,...their distinct identity[,] and ... their civic, cultural, social and religious rights."¹²⁰ Thus, the EU continues to call on Azerbaijan to end its erasure of Armenian Christian heritage.

The Council of Europe has followed the EU in strongly condemning Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian heritage. Prior to the recent destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) noted and condemned the rising use of cultural genocide in modern conflicts, and it labeled such destruction as "a crime against humanity."¹²¹ As early as September 13, 2021, PACE condemned both Armenia and Azerbaijan for the cultural destruction wrought by both sides.¹²² In October of 2023, PACE had strong words for Azerbaijan, condemning the cultural loss it had caused and urging the nation not to act in "revenge."¹²³ PACE also called on Azerbaijan to "prove its goodwill" towards the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹²⁴

Notably, in January 2024, PACE resolved not to ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan's parliamentary delegation. According to PACE, Azerbaijan violated a number of "major commitments" via its actions, including through its destruction of Armenian culture.¹²⁵ Azerbaijan may "resume its activities in the Assembly," however, once "conditions provided by the Rules of Procedure are met."¹²⁶ Although PACE suspended Azerbaijan's participation in the Parliamentary Assembly until further notice, Azerbaijan remains a member of the COE.

On June 26, 2024, PACE adopted Resolution 2558, "Countering the Erasure of Cultural Identity in Times of War and Peace." This resolution, which focuses on Russia's systematic, state-driven policy of cultural destruction in Ukraine, highlights the tragedy of "cultural cleansing" and how it is used as a tool to destroy a nation or people group.¹²⁷ By condemning the methodical destruction of historic monuments, the de-contextualization of cultural artifacts

¹¹⁸ ["Resolution on Closer Ties Between the EU and Armenia and the Need for a Peace Agreement Between Azerbaijan and Armenia,"](#) 2024/2580(RSP), para. 19 (March 13, 2024).

¹¹⁹ ["Answer Given by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell I Fontelles on Behalf of the European Commission,"](#) E-001345/2024(ASW), para. 3 (June 19, 2024).

¹²⁰ ["European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2023 on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan's attack and the continuing threats against Armenia,"](#) 2023/2879(RSP), para. 5 (October 5, 2023).

¹²¹ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, ["Cultural Heritage in Crisis and Post-Crisis Situations,"](#) Resolution 2057, para. 7 (May 22, 2015).

¹²² PACE, ["Humanitarian Consequences of the Conflict Between Armenia and Azerbaijan,"](#) Resolution 2391, para. 18 (September 13, 2021).

¹²³ PACE, ["The Humanitarian Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh,"](#) Resolution 2517, para. 17 (October 12, 2023).

¹²⁴ *Id.* at para. 14.

¹²⁵ PACE, ["PACE Resolves not to Ratify the Credentials of Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Delegation,"](#) para. 1-4 (January 24, 2024).

¹²⁶ *Id.* at para. 5.

¹²⁷ PACE, ["Countering the Erasure of Cultural Identity in War and Peace,"](#) Resolution 2558 (June 26, 2024).

through cultural revisionism, and the renaming of geographical sites—all of which are performed by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh—the PACE signaled to the world, and to Azerbaijan, that such acts will not be tolerated.

Although the ECLJ welcomes the international condemnation of the cultural destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is clear the response thus far has been insufficient. Azerbaijan continues to destroy and deny Armenia's cultural heritage despite the actions of international organizations. A new approach must be adopted if the heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh is to be protected from total erasure.

IV. The Defects of the International Response

The international response to Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian culture has been strong—but not strong enough. As evidenced by the destruction and revisionism that continues to this day, Azerbaijan has not heeded the international community's calls to respect Armenia's cultural heritage. Unfortunately, institutional corruption and a lack of political will have kept the international community from taking a stronger stance against Azerbaijan.

As noted by Lori Khatchadourian, an associate professor of Near Eastern Studies and one of the founders of Caucasus Heritage Watch, Azerbaijan has thus far been able to keep a “low profile” by capitalizing on its close ties with UNESCO.¹²⁸ “Azerbaijan has been destroying sites clandestinely,” Khatchadourian said.¹²⁹ “It's a state secret...Azerbaijan does not want to be known as a state that sponsors cultural erasure. They spent a lot of money on UNESCO trying to brand Azerbaijan as a land of tolerance even as they undertook a systematic program of heritage demolition.”¹³⁰

A concerning example of UNESCO facilitating the quiet acceptance of cultural destruction is the 2023 UNESCO mission to Nagorno-Karabakh. For years, Azerbaijan had refused to allow outside organizations to observe the state of Armenia's cultural heritage in regions occupied by Azerbaijan.¹³¹ In October of 2023, however, Azerbaijan allowed UNESCO to enter Nagorno-Karabakh. The report released after the one-day mission stated there was no damage to Armenian “cultural and religious structures,” and this report has become one of the primary sources Azerbaijan uses to deny or downplay the cultural destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹³² The UNESCO mission, however, has received significant international criticism—and for good reason.

The mission first raised concern due to the fact that only one day before it took place, Azerbaijan announced a \$1 million allocation from the Presidential Contingency Fund to UN-Habitat.¹³³ Additionally, the team leading the UNESCO investigation did not include any

¹²⁸ David Nutt, “[Report Shows Near-Total Erasure of Armenian Heritage Sites](#),” *Cornell Chronicle*, para. 17 (September 12, 2022).

¹²⁹ *Id.*

¹³⁰ *Id.*

¹³¹ “[UNESCO is Awaiting Azerbaijan's Response regarding Nagorno-Karabakh Mission](#),” UNESCO, para. 5 (December 21, 2020); Letter from the Permanent Representative of Armenia to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General, U.N. Doc. A/76/822, p. 1-3 (April 27, 2022).

¹³² [Concerns and Disappointment with the Recent United Nations Mission to Nagorno-Karabakh](#), *Democracy Development Foundation*, para. 4 (October 6, 2023).

¹³³ Hasmik Egain, “[Is the UN Whitewashing Azerbaijan's Ethnic Cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh?](#),” *PassBlue*, para. 18 (October 19, 2023); Azertac, “[President Ilham Aliyev allocates \\$1 Million to UN Human Settlements Program](#),” para. 2 (September 30, 2023).

representatives of the UN-Armenia team or the local Armenian community, prompting questions about the neutrality of the fact-finding mission.¹³⁴ This, coupled with the fact that Azerbaijan only allowed UNESCO to enter once the vast majority of the Armenian population had already fled from the region,¹³⁵ demonstrated a potential effort by the Azerbaijani government to ensure it could maintain control over the narrative of what is truly happening in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Further concerns arose when the mission report was released. The author of the UN report was Rashad Huseynov, the Deputy Executive Director of the Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication of Azerbaijan.¹³⁶ The report commends the efforts of the Azerbaijani government three times—atypical for a UN mission report on a humanitarian emergency—and uses Azerbaijani town names.¹³⁷ The report also made no reference to the Armenian history of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹³⁸

The accusations that UNESCO was influenced to publish a biased report are not unfounded. The Aliyev family has historically had close ties with UNESCO. The First Lady of Azerbaijan, Mehriban Aliyeva, was an UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for eighteen years, from 2004 to 2022.¹³⁹ During her time in the role, Azerbaijan committed repeated violations of international agreements by destroying the very culture that UNESCO and its Goodwill Ambassadors were committed to protect. Yet, despite this, UNESCO did not take affirmative action to remove Mehriban Aliyeva from her role; the First Lady herself stepped down to focus on the “restoration and revitalization” of regions that Azerbaijan had liberated from Armenian “occupation.”¹⁴⁰



Figure 28: Mehriban Aliyeva (Left) and former UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova (Right). [The Heydar Aliyev Foundation](#) (2014).

Additionally, President Aliyev has demonstrated his willingness to use money to influence high-profile members of international organizations. As revealed by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), between 2012-2014, Aliyev operated a “complex money-laundering operation” that handled over \$2.9 billion via four shell companies.¹⁴¹ Notable international leaders who received a portion of these funds include three former

¹³⁴ Lynn Zovighian, “[A Flawed Investigation, Thirty Years Too Late: Open Letter on United Nations Mission to Nagorno-Karabakh](#),” *The Zovighian Partnership*, para. 7 (October 4, 2023).

¹³⁵ France24, “[UN Mission Arrives in Nagorno-Karabakh for First Visit in 30 Years](#),” para. 4 (October 1, 2023).

¹³⁶ Greek Media Group, “[Azerbaijan Aliyev Allocated \\$1 Million USD to the UN Human Settlements Program, One Day Before a UN Mission Visited the Artsakh Region](#),” para. 5 (October 2023).

¹³⁷ Zovighian, “[A Flawed Investigation, Thirty Years Too Late](#),” para. 17, 37.

¹³⁸ *Id.*

¹³⁹ Again, “[Is the UN Whitewashing Azerbaijan’s Ethnic Cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh?](#),” para. 17.

¹⁴⁰ Azertac, “[First Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva Sends Letter to UNESCO Director-General to Terminate Her Term as Goodwill Ambassador](#),” para. 3-4 (November 15, 2022).

¹⁴¹ Arzu Geybullayeva, “[The First Lady of Azerbaijan is a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador No More](#),” *Global Voices*, para. 14 (January 4, 2023).

members of PACE, one of which had headed a team of observers sent to monitor an Azerbaijani election and happened to be one of the only observers who praised the “deeply flawed” election.¹⁴²

One of the UK-registered shell companies paid Kalin Mitrev—the spouse of the then-UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova—nearly \$500,000 for “supervision services.”¹⁴³ Notably, Bokova was an outspoken, highly influential supporter of Azerbaijan, and under her leadership, UNESCO hosted several events highlighting the “tolerance” of Azerbaijan.¹⁴⁴ During her time as Director-General, Bokova also awarded Mehriban Aliyeva with the UNESCO Mozart Medal.¹⁴⁵

Despite Azerbaijan’s actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, the international community continues to give Azerbaijan a positive reception. For example, as announced in December 2023, Azerbaijan was chosen to host the UN Climate Summit (COP 29) in November 2024.¹⁴⁶ The EU also still recognizes Azerbaijan as a member of its Eastern Partnership (EaP). One of the key objectives of the EaP is to support and develop accountable institutions that respect international law.¹⁴⁷ Yet, despite its status as a member of the EaP, Azerbaijan continuously demonstrates its contempt for international agreements by systematically destroying Armenian Christian heritage.

Not only does the EU continue to recognize Azerbaijan as a member of the EaP regardless of Azerbaijan’s actions, but the EU also continues to fund Azerbaijan via the European Neighborhood Instrument.¹⁴⁸ Although Azerbaijan receives a relatively small amount from the EU—€60 million compared to the €340 million Georgia receives or the €260 million Moldova receives—these funds are symbolic of the EU’s continued support of Azerbaijan.¹⁴⁹ This signals to Azerbaijan that the EU is willing to maintain its relationship with Azerbaijan despite its human rights abuses; it signals that Azerbaijan can continue to destroy Armenian heritage without EU intervention.

Additionally, the 2022 Azerbaijan-EU gas agreement continues forward, with Azerbaijan on track to double its gas exports to the EU by 2027.¹⁵⁰ The EU, wary of its dependence on Russian energy, negotiated this contract with Azerbaijan to substitute its Russian gas supply.¹⁵¹ The agreement was also intended to facilitate the EU’s sanctions against Russia for the nation’s human rights abuses in Ukraine.¹⁵² However, in turning away from Russia, the EU has merely

¹⁴² Paul Radu, Khadija Ismayilova, and Madina Mammadova, “[Azerbaijani Laundromat: The Influence Machine](#),” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, para. 3 (September 4, 2017).

¹⁴³ *Id.* at para. 20.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*

¹⁴⁵ *Id.* at para. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Fiona Harvey, Patrick Greenfield, and Damian Carrington, “[Azerbaijan Chosen to Host Cop29 After Fraught Negotiations](#),” *The Guardian*, para. 1 (December 9, 2023).

¹⁴⁷ European Commission, “[Eastern Partnership](#),” para. 5-9 (last visited June 21, 2024).

¹⁴⁸ Thibault van den Bossche, “[European Union-Azerbaijan Relations: For the Better and For the Gas](#),” *Valeurs Actuelles*, para. 5 (November 3, 2023).

¹⁴⁹ *Id.*

¹⁵⁰ Adrien Pécout and Faustine Vincent, “[Rising Gas Imports from Azerbaijan Embarrass Europe](#),” *Le Monde*, para. 1-5 (October 8, 2023); *Euronews*, “[EU Agrees Deal with Azerbaijan to Double Gas Exports by 2027](#),” para. 1 (July 18, 2022).

¹⁵¹ Pécout and Vincent, “[Rising Gas Imports from Azerbaijan Embarrass Europe](#),” para. 1; *National Gas Intelligence*, “[How Much of Europe’s Gas Comes From Russia?](#),” para. 1 (last visited June 20, 2024).

¹⁵² Thibault van den Bossche, “[Azerbaijan Excluded from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#),” *Valeurs Actuelles*, para. 6 (February 2, 2024).

turned towards another country that fails to respect human rights—Azerbaijan.¹⁵³ Moreover, the EU did not even achieve its aim to effectively sanction Russia, for a significant portion of the gas that Azerbaijan exports to the EU is gas that Azerbaijan purchases from Russia.¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, this gas contract, which earned Azerbaijan over €15.5 billion in only its first year,¹⁵⁵ has significantly contributed to the EU's reluctance to take assertive actions against Azerbaijan.¹⁵⁶ Although the European Parliament has adopted resolutions denouncing the destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh, these resolutions have merely been verbal condemnations; the EU has not taken tangible, substantial action. The EU should adopt the very steps proposed in the European Parliament's October 2023 resolution and reduce its cooperation with Azerbaijan. Yet, instead, the EU has doubled down on its collaboration with the nation, for in March 2024, the EU announced a renewable energy initiative to strengthen its “partnership” with Azerbaijan.¹⁵⁷

In May 2024, after a long hiatus from visiting Nagorno-Karabakh, the U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan, Mark Libby, paid a diplomatic visit to the region as part of his “regular travel throughout Azerbaijan.”¹⁵⁸ Libby had previously avoided journeying to Nagorno-Karabakh to avoid partaking in what he called Azerbaijan's “propaganda show.”¹⁵⁹ However, under pressure from Azerbaijan, the ambassador added Nagorno-Karabakh to his travel itinerary.¹⁶⁰ By visiting to Nagorno-Karabakh at a time the Armenian people were still reeling from the demolition of the St. John the Baptist Church and the Karintak village, the Western diplomat implicitly gave the Azerbaijani government what it wants most—for the world to turn a blind eye to the ongoing cultural erasure.¹⁶¹

Even Azerbaijan's near neighbors have demonstrated they are willing to ignore the cultural destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey, a member of NATO, has declared strong, unwavering support for Azerbaijan's aggression in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁶² The secure relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan, forged by cultural and economic ties, prompted Turkey to provide critical military aid to Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War, ultimately resulting in Azerbaijan's victory.¹⁶³ Turkey itself has a long history of cultural heritage destruction,¹⁶⁴ and while the Armenia-Turkey relationship has begun to show signs of normalization,¹⁶⁵ Turkey has not given any indication that it will provide resistance to the

¹⁵³ Van den Bossche, “[European Union-Azerbaijan Relations: For the Better and For the Gas](#),” para. 16.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.* at para. 10-13; Economist Intelligence, “[Azerbaijan's Gas Exports to the EU Face Challenges](#),” para. 5-6 (July 10, 2023); David O'Byrne, “[Azerbaijan's Russian Gas Deal Raises Uncomfortable Questions for Europe](#),” Eurasianet, para. 1-5 (November 22, 2022).

¹⁵⁵ Pécout and Vincent, “[Rising Gas Imports from Azerbaijan Embarrass Europe](#),” para. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Gabriel Gavin and Gregorio Sorgi, “[Calls Grow for EU Sanctions on Gas-Rich Azerbaijan over Ethnic Cleansing Fears](#),” *Politico*, para. 2-5 (September 20, 2023).

¹⁵⁷ Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, “[EU Steps Up Renewable Energy Cooperation with Azerbaijan](#),” *European Commission*, para. 1-3 (March 4, 2024).

¹⁵⁸ Amos Chapple, “[Amid Pressure from Baku, U.S. Diplomat Tours Nagorno-Karabakh](#),” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, para. 1-8 (May 15, 2024).

¹⁵⁹ *Id.*

¹⁶⁰ *Id.*

¹⁶¹ *Id.*

¹⁶² Aljazeera, “[Turkey Supports ‘Steps Taken by Azerbaijan’ in Nagorno-Karabakh: Erdogan](#),” para. 3 (September 20, 2023).

¹⁶³ Mathieu Droin, Tina Dolbaia, and Abigail Edwards, “[A Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines](#),” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, para. 9 (September 22, 2023).

¹⁶⁴ Uzay Bulut, “[The Destruction of Christian Cultural Heritage](#),” *Providence*, para. 8-10 (February 15, 2022).

¹⁶⁵ Devin Haas, “[Armenia and Turkey's Frosty Relationship Thaws Amid Earthquake Diplomacy](#),” *Emerging Europe*, para. 1-4 (February 20, 2023).

destruction of Armenian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey's strong support for Azerbaijan has led Turkey's partners, notably Qatar and Pakistan, to also back Azerbaijan's policies.¹⁶⁶

Even the most likely neighbor to act against the destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh—Iran—has demonstrated that it will take a firm stance of neutrality. Iran, which has historically been a close ally of Armenia,¹⁶⁷ clearly has a moral incentive to condemn the cultural destruction and revisionism in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, Iran also has a myriad of domestic reasons to oppose Azerbaijan, many of which stem from the looming threat of Azerbaijan's proposed Zangezur Corridor. As of now, this corridor is merely a concept; however, its implementation may be imminent. This new route threatens to reshape the region¹⁶⁸ by providing Azerbaijan unimpeded access to both Nakhchivan and Turkey,¹⁶⁹ connecting Armenia and Russia, and linking Turkey and Russia via railway.¹⁷⁰



Figure 29: Zangezur Corridor. [Security & Defense Quarterly](#) (2023).

¹⁶⁶ Droin, Dolbaia, and Edwards, "[A Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines](#)," para. 9.

¹⁶⁷ Eldar Mamedov, "[Perspectives: Iran Adapting to Altered Geopolitical Landscape in South Caucasus](#)," *Eurasianet*, para. 2 (April 4, 2024).

¹⁶⁸ Anna Ohanyan, "[Azerbaijan's Armenian 'Corridor' is a Challenge to the Global Rules-Based Order](#)," *Foreign Policy*, para. 11 (November 2, 2023).

¹⁶⁹ The Zangezur Corridor would provide unimpeded access by being a route that would be free of Armenian border or customs checks.

¹⁷⁰ Piotr Gawliczek and Khayal Iskandarov, "[The Zangezur Corridor as Part of the Global Transport Route \(Against the Backdrop of Power Games in the South Caucasus Region\)](#)," *Security & Defense Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1, p. 40 (March 31, 2023).

By changing the transit map of the entire region, the Zangezur corridor would negatively impact Iran. The new trade route between Turkey and Azerbaijan would significantly empower both parties, especially Iran's rival, Turkey.¹⁷¹ The corridor would also cut off a sizable portion of Iran's profits from gas transits between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan¹⁷² and interrupt its own trade and transport to Armenia by blocking the Iran-Armenia border.¹⁷³ Because the corridor would weaken Iran and strengthen neighbors, one Tehran-based foreign policy analyst warned that the Zangezur corridor could remove Iran from the geopolitics of the Caucasus region entirely.¹⁷⁴ By calling out Azerbaijan for the cultural erasure in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran might contribute to international interference in Nagorno-Karabakh or sanctions against Azerbaijan—interference or sanctions that might delay the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor.

Despite Iran's incentives to condemn Azerbaijan for the destruction of Armenian heritage, it is unlikely to do so. Armenia's growing alliance with the West has led Iran to become wary of Armenia,¹⁷⁵ and Iran fears that Armenia's "Westernization" will result in NATO interference in the Caucasus region.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, Iran is home to a significant Azerbaijani population, and it is doubtful the nation would adopt any policy that risks internal instability.¹⁷⁷ Thus, despite fearing how the Zangezur Corridor and an empowered Azerbaijan and Turkey could threaten its security,¹⁷⁸ Iran has not taken decisive action to stop the continuing cultural erasure in Nagorno-Karabakh. Instead, it has only expressed its availability to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁷⁹

Russia's actions also confirm that the future of Armenia's cultural heritage is grim. On June 12, 2024, the Russian peacekeeping forces deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh completed their withdrawal from the region.¹⁸⁰ This departure, negotiated between Aliyev and the Russian president, Vladimir Putin,¹⁸¹ illustrates a concerning change in Russia's policy toward the Caucasus region—one that could further endanger Armenia's cultural heritage. Russia was once a long-standing, outspoken ally of Armenia.¹⁸² Yet, during Azerbaijan's September 2023 attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian peacekeeping forces were complacent; Russia's inaction contributed to Azerbaijan's total control of Nagorno-Karabakh and the cultural heritage of the region.¹⁸³

¹⁷¹ Ohanya, "[Azerbaijan's Armenian 'Corridor' is a Challenge to the Global Rules-Based Order](#)," para. 14; Michael Scollon, "[Iran's Relations with Azerbaijan Get Heated Over Attacks, Baku's Ties to Israel](#)," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, para. 9 (June 8, 2023).

¹⁷² Gawliczek and Iskandarov, "[The Zangezur Corridor as Part of the Global Transport Route \(Against the Backdrop of Power Games in the South Caucasus Region\)](#)," p. 41.

¹⁷³ Scollon, "[Iran's Relations with Azerbaijan Get Heated Over Attacks, Baku's Ties to Israel](#)," para. 12.

¹⁷⁴ *Middle East Eye*, "[Why Iranians are Calling for War with Azerbaijan](#)," para. 18 (April 11, 2023).

¹⁷⁵ Mamedov, "[Perspectives: Iran Adapting to Altered Geopolitical Landscape in South Caucasus](#)," para. 6.

¹⁷⁶ *Id.*; Gawliczek and Iskandarov, "[The Zangezur Corridor as Part of the Global Transport Route \(Against the Backdrop of Power Games in the South Caucasus Region\)](#)," p. 41.

¹⁷⁷ *Id.* at para. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Samuel Ramani, "[How the End of Nagorno-Karabakh Will Reshape Geopolitics](#)," *Foreign Policy*, para. 2 (October 25, 2023).

¹⁷⁹ Droin, Dolbaia, and Edwards, "[A Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines](#)," para. 11.

¹⁸⁰ *La Croix*, "[Nagorno-Karabakh: The Russian Contingent has Completed Its Withdrawal from Azerbaijan](#)," para. 1 (June 12, 2024).

¹⁸¹ *Id.* at para. 4.

¹⁸² *Euronews*, "[Armenia to Leave Moscow-Led Collective Treaty Organization](#)," para. 4 (June 12, 2024).

¹⁸³ *Id.* at para. 5.

Due to Russia's failure to act, Armenia has lost trust in its former ally, leading Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinian, to announce that Armenia will leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an intergovernmental military alliance led by Russia.¹⁸⁴ In fact, Armenia has also turned away from Russia by joining the International Criminal Court (ICC), a decision that enables the Armenian government to arrest Putin should he ever step foot in Armenia.¹⁸⁵ By removing its peacekeeping forces from Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has pivoted itself away from Armenia toward stronger relations with Azerbaijan, which is now a major market for Russian arms exports.¹⁸⁶ This is a concerning development for the cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh, for yet another nation has demonstrated a lack of political will to stand up to Azerbaijan and keep its government accountable for acts of destruction. Left unchecked, Azerbaijan may well carry out its policy of cultural destruction to the very end—total erasure.

As noted by historians and cultural experts, the true catalyst for the total cultural destruction in Nakhchivan was international complacency.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, Azerbaijan was able to accomplish its destruction in Nakhchivan because the destruction went “unobserved and unimpeded.”¹⁸⁸ It is clear that the same cultural erasure in Nakhchivan looms over Nagorno-Karabakh; however, there is still time to prevent it. As stated by Khatchadourian, “[T]otal cultural erasure takes time...this sad story [of destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh] is likely to play out over many years.”¹⁸⁹ To stop this destruction before it is too late, international organizations must go beyond their condemnations and take firm, assertive action against this impending cultural genocide.

V. Recommendations

Given the severe cultural erasure occurring in Nagorno-Karabakh, as detailed in this report, the following recommendations are proposed:

- (1) **Organize and Execute an Independent, Neutral Investigation into the Cultural Erasure in Nagorno-Karabakh:** It is imperative that the UN and the EU organize and execute an independent, neutral investigation to observe, monitor, and thereby protect the remaining cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh. This investigative body should be composed of Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives. Moreover, this body should be mandated to collect evidence, document incidents of destruction, and provide a detailed assessment of the damaged sites to ensure that the global community is informed and responsive to the cultural erasure. This reinvestigation would not only protect Armenian cultural sites, but it would also permit the UN to repair the damage done by the previous UNESCO mission to Nagorno-Karabakh.
- (2) **Provide Reparations for Lost Cultural Heritage:** Although the damaged and destroyed cultural sites can never be fully restored, reparations must be made for the loss of Armenian heritage. These reparations should be based upon international law regarding State responsibility and should be provided via restitution, compensation, and restoration.

¹⁸⁴ *Id.* at para. 1-3.

¹⁸⁵ *Id.* at para. 7.

¹⁸⁶ Droin, Dolbaia, and Edwards, “[A Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines](#),” para. 7.

¹⁸⁷ *Caucasus Heritage Watch*, “[Silent Erasure](#),” para. 12.

¹⁸⁸ *Id.* at para. 5.

¹⁸⁹ Chappel, “[Church, Entire Village ‘Erased’ in Azerbaijan’s Recaptured Nagorno Karabakh](#),” para. 15-16.

(3) Raise the Cost of Cultural Erasure: Azerbaijan must not be allowed to comfortably destroy Armenia's cultural heritage. Thus, the international community must lower its cooperation with Azerbaijan to raise the cost of cultural erasure beyond what Azerbaijan can afford. International organizations should initiate sanctions, freeze the development of further agreements with Azerbaijan, and further public denunciations of the destruction in Nagorno-Karabakh. Additionally, until Azerbaijan ends its hostile actions, visits to Nagorno-Karabakh that are not focused on monitoring the destruction of cultural sites should be eliminated, and international organizations should not hold summits in the country. If destruction becomes costly for Azerbaijan, both economically and politically, the nation will have strong incentives to abandon its policy of destruction and denial.