



PROSPECTS FOR DIALOGUE: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES FROM ARMENIA

August 2022



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Read the full report on their findings:
<https://www.c-r.org/scoping-for-dialogue>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Photographs: Jack Losh



Funded by the European Union

The contents of this publication cannot be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

Published by:

Conciliation Resources
Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road
London NW5 1AL

Design & layout: Design@gloryhall.com

Cover photo: An unexploded mortar round is stood on its tail outside the destroyed wreckage of a munitions warehouse in the village of Aygestan near Stepanakert, (known as Khankendi in Azerbaijani sources), Nagorny Karabakh

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CONTENTS

Introduction and key findings	4
1. Lessons and legacies of the 2020 war	5
2. Impacts on communities	8
3. Perspectives of displaced communities from Hadrut and Shusha/Shushi	9
4. Perspectives on dialogue	10



Since the end of the 2020 Karabakh war, perspectives on dialogue and peace initiatives between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been dominated by top-down, often geopoliticised discussions of regional connectivity, transit routes and the potential for revived economic relations. While these discussions offer important forward-looking perspectives, less prominent are the voices of those most directly affected by the consequences of the 2020 war and those with the most direct stake in possible new border openings and revived communications.

This briefing presents the results of a scoping exercise conducted in Armenia in July-November 2021. A total of six focus groups were conducted with the residents of border communities in the three Armenian regions (*marz*) of Syunik (in Meghri and Goris), Gegharkunik (in Vardenis) and Tavush (in Ijevan), and with people displaced from the towns of Hadrut and Shusha, which is known as Shushi to Armenians, in Nagorny Karabakh as a result of the 2020 war.

Altogether 76 people participated in the focus groups, of whom 52% were women. In addition, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders in each setting, experts and political analysts, four of whom were women. Interview guides for the focus groups and individual interviews were structured around questions about perceptions on the causes and lessons of the 2020 war, current expectations, and perspectives on future dialogue with Azerbaijanis.

In providing 'bottom up' perspectives, these findings can usefully be read in conjunction with two surveys that since the 2020 war have asked similar questions of respondents among expert and political elite circles.¹ The findings of this study similarly indicate that many people in local communities in Armenia share with the respondents of those surveys realistic perspectives on Armenia's current situation. This realism is founded on critical views of the choices made by leadership in the country over the past three decades, and a widespread demand for more strategic approaches to state-building, security and foreign policy.

Key findings

1. Armenian communities are at an important inflection point where many established beliefs have been broken as a result of defeat in the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. Citizens attest to the discarding of myths and false assumptions, such as confidence in Armenian military power or in tangible diplomatic and military support from outside actors. This has been experienced as an overwhelmingly negative phenomenon, yet a significant shift as recorded in the communities consulted for this initiative is the re-evaluation of peace and the value of life.
2. While many in Armenian communities share fear and concern for the future, they also identify clear problems with some of the ways in which negotiations with Azerbaijan have been managed in the past, including the lack of both adequate information emanating from the talks, and public discussion of possible outcomes. While negotiations will always retain an element of confidentiality, the lack of information about their progress has been a major source of mistrust in Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks. More public discussion, led by political elites and supported by civil society, is necessary to overcome a decades-long deficit of trust in a closed, top-down process.
3. The number of communities living in close proximity to Armenian-Azerbaijani borders has increased significantly as a result of the changes in patterns of territorial control proceeding from the 2020 war. This number will increase as Azerbaijani returnees re-settle areas returned to Azerbaijani jurisdiction. Border communities have specific needs and interests in local-level dialogue across borders and need to be included in discussions about peace.
4. Pragmatic interests at the local level can provide a resource for peace that is often overlooked in the more politically charged atmosphere of national capitals. Forms of 'everyday peace' – the everyday interactions of communities in contact – can serve to socialise communities into predictable relations and provide a basis for trust. New initiatives to establish relations among community leaders in border communities can strengthen the prospects for safe and successful transit and trade.
5. Insecurity, fear, and trauma, if not addressed, will block the potential for economic and social relations to be revived and for the South Caucasus to be opened up, as foreseen in recent agreements between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Community perspectives on security need to be taken into account, and threats as defined by local communities addressed. Discussions on regional connectivity need to foreground the communities closest to, and most affected by, new borders, transit routes and infrastructure.
6. There is a spectrum of perspectives among Armenian communities on the possible futures of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. This indicates that the reframing of these relations is possible, if long-standing practices of hate-speech, belligerence and coercive pressure are set aside. Incumbent political elites, who are also advocates of regional connectivity, bear a particular responsibility through this period of dynamic change to set new and consistent standards in their political and popular rhetoric.

1. LESSONS AND LEGACIES OF THE 2020 WAR

Armenian communities are at an important inflection point where many established beliefs have been broken as a result of the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. The six-week war resulted in a decisive military defeat for Armenian forces, and some 4,000 Armenian soldiers killed in action. Most of those consulted in this initiative expected the war, although they did not expect it to erupt so soon, to last as long as it did, or to result in such large-scale losses.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have swapped 'victim' and 'victor' identities as a result of the war, although many of those interviewed do not believe that the conflict is over and expect a resumption of major violence in the future.

Reflecting on the causes of Armenia's military defeat in 2020, participants focused on poor Armenian diplomacy, the stagnation of Armenian military capacity and the interests of outside actors.

Poor diplomacy

Participants attributed the war and its outcomes first and foremost to the mistakes made by successive Armenian governments in enabling a protracted conflict to fester without a negotiated solution, while also acknowledging the difficulties of negotiating a solution:

"[War could have been avoided] if those in power in Armenia would have pursued a sensible policy from 1997."

"Some conditions should have been created for living together. After all our neighbour is our enemy. We are always next to each other. There should be some conditions for relations. There is no other option. Either we have to get out of here or we have to negotiate. But [these need to be] very high-quality negotiations, without kidnappings or killings going on at the same time like before. The fact that we will live together, side by side is inevitable."

"If we had given what they [Azerbaijanis] have taken, then without a doubt [war could have been avoided]; however, whoever would have been the

leader [of Armenia] to do that, they would have been put against the wall and shot."

While some participants held the post-2018 "Velvet Revolution" government under the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan responsible, many evoked a longer timeframe of three decades encompassing previous regimes. Participants highlighted two core inter-related defects with the previous Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations. The first was the lack of information and transparency about the process. Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations have been notoriously narrow since the 1990s, with only a very small number of officials briefed on their content and progress.² Participants were well aware of this reality:

"All the leaders knew everything very well. They went there, discussed things, returned here and told lies to the people. People were not prepared; they did not know what the situation was, so they did not know what to think."

The second defect was the distortion of the negotiation agenda, whereby previous leaders presented themselves as defending a territorially maximalist position, whereas in reality all leaders were negotiating the terms of territorial withdrawals from those areas occupied by Armenian forces in 1992-94:

"Society should have been prepared for that. Because whenever someone would say let's make compromises [...] the public would not agree... They should have explained that there is international law, there are recognized borders. They had to explain to people, so it would not be so painful, so a citizen would not say 'that's terrible, he's giving up our land.' For 30 years they did the opposite, saying 'Anyone who concedes land is a traitor,' but in reality all of them were negotiating to give land away. Let's tell the truth."

Participants identified the absence of strategic thinking in meeting Armenia's challenges:

"We did not have a long-term state policy. If there was a clear policy, if the authorities would have planned from the [19]90s what we should do to preserve our statehood, and if we had taken steps in that direction, the public would also understand."

"We do not have any strategy... Since I have been an adult, there has never been a single program [strategy] on what was going to happen in 30 years."



A sign warning about the presence of landmines in the village of Kaghartsj, Nagorny Karabakh.

Military stagnation

The inability to achieve a negotiated solution was also linked to stagnation – relative to Azerbaijan – in Armenia’s military capacities over time, combined with political mismanagement:

“I served in the army [...], and given what I had seen, the situation, the level of preparedness of our soldiers, it was inevitable that it ended the way it did. I served when it was my time, but could not imagine from the outside that our army had changed so completely compared to when I served.”

“For 30 years our country was ruled by people who brought it to this state. We never expected and we did not know before the war that our army was in this condition. And [the leadership] knew everything, they knew that we cannot protect the lands with the army we have. They were building palaces for themselves. I don’t know, how can a leader build a palace and just postpone the war, when the other side constantly buys more weapons?”

“We [Armenians] have used all situations, at the border and inside the country, for internal political purposes.”

Many participants reflected on the failure to learn the lessons of 2016’s ‘four-day war’, an escalation that took

place at numerous points along the Line of Contact 2-5 April 2016 and claimed over 200 lives:

“It was a warning that there should be mutual compromises. They already had those drones back then. It was like a warm-up that they did to show that they were going to attack. And our [side] did not want to face the reality.”

“I feel so bad that the soldiers of the twenty-first century Armenian army had to eat canned food, line up the empty cans in the trenches so as to be able to hear the rustle of cans when the enemy approached, while their [Azerbaijani] soldiers studied in Massachusetts, USA, and today only need remote-control equipment, [to send] drones on my soldier. We lagged behind technologically.”

While all focus groups agreed on the need for a commission to investigate the causes and responsibility for the outcomes of the 2020 war, public trust in the capacity of a commission to fulfil this role remains low. Perceptions of any official commission continue to draw on Soviet-era traditions: *“If you want the issue to remain unsolved, create a commission.”* Some participants welcomed unofficial, civil society-led initiatives to investigate the shortcomings in Armenian strategy and practice (see Note 1).

External actors

Alongside ineffective negotiations and military factors, participants linked the outcomes of the 2020 war to the role of external actors. The absence of a negotiated solution, the onset of war in 2020 and the war's outcome were all seen as serving a Russian interest. Whereas the de facto republic established in Nagorny Karabakh had previously been unique among the wider cohort of such entities in Eurasia in not being directly under Russian control, that situation changed as a result of the 2020 war:

“The delay in a political solution and the unpreparedness of our authorities for the war, these are the causes. Not only did they not resolve the issue, but they constantly delayed the solution serving Russian interests.”

“At the end of the day, the question is how the conflict will end. And that depends on what will happen in the Kremlin in the coming years.”

“[Between 1991 and 2020] we did not separate Karabakh from Azerbaijan, but we did remove it from the influence of Russian manipulation.”

“Sooner or later Meghri will become a Russian province and entry and exit will be regulated by special passes.”

Turkey was perceived as the force disrupting the previous status quo favourable to Russia.

“The key factor in 2020 was the decision of the Turkish Government to directly participate in the military operation. Before that the Turkish Government always supported Azerbaijan diplomatically and otherwise, however, it seems that a decision was made in September [2020] to provide direct military support to Baku.”

In different ways the participants expressed frustration at the failure of Armenian diplomacy both to respond to new regional and global dynamics and to build self-sufficiency beyond reliance on external support or special relationships:

“The use of modern/latest technology in the Middle East was a wake-up call for us to prepare. But our people were completely asleep. Neither the army headquarters, nor anybody else did anything...”

“We saw during the war that those countries [in Europe and the West] only urged us to stop the war and did not lift a finger to help us. To rely on help from other countries is a fairy tale.”

“In terms of political orientations, we show our level of political naivete when we say we are either pro-Western or pro-Russian. We have drunk the bitterness of it all, especially in the last 100-150 years, from both Russians and Europeans.”

Unsurprisingly, the human losses, the shattering of belief in military self-sufficiency and renewed dependency on outside actors have resulted in trauma, depression, mistrust, uncertainty, and apathy among communities in Armenia. Many long-established beliefs and stereotypes, such as confidence in Armenian military power and the tangible – versus merely rhetorical – support of outside actors, have been swept away. This implies that Armenian communities stand at an important inflection point where previous belief systems have been challenged and many discarded, and there may be space for new ideas and beliefs to take root. One major shift in thinking since the war as recorded in the focus groups consulted for this initiative is the understanding of the value of peace and human lives.

“I do not believe in myths now. The myths of our excellence and almightiness. It's us and our ugly face. No thinking in absolute categories anymore.”

“We were all uncompromising. Now we have changed. The feeling of being a winner is broken.”

“I have lost trust towards the authorities. If trust towards state and government were maintained, we would somehow come to terms with our losses. The human losses are very painful, but I value statehood very highly and I fear its loss.”

“After the war we started to see the reality more clearly. Before that there were ridiculously fake agendas... Our way of living, both the state and then ordinary people, was like in Aygektsi's³ tale where the mother asks 'where are the goats?' and the son answers 'the water that you poured into the milk diluting it every day, it gathered, flooded and took the goats...”

“I also realized that human lives are more important than land. I never thought I would think this way.”

“WE SHOW OUR LEVEL OF POLITICAL NAIVETE WHEN WE SAY WE ARE EITHER PRO- WESTERN OR PRO-RUSSIAN. WE HAVE DRUNK THE BITTERNESS OF IT ALL...IN THE LAST 100-150 YEARS, FROM BOTH RUSSIANS AND EUROPEANS.”

2. IMPACTS ON COMMUNITIES

New insecurities are particularly keenly felt in many communities which almost overnight became border communities after substantial territories were returned to Azerbaijani jurisdiction as a result of the 9 November 2020 ceasefire statement. Many settlements are now located within proximities to Azerbaijani border posts and servicemen that are unprecedented in nearly 30 years, creating feelings of insecurity:

“We are not like the people in Yerevan cafes... How should a person at the border who is constantly in the line of sight of the Azerbaijanis feel? People cannot cultivate and sow the land... Vardenis is only 20 kilometres away from [Azerbaijanis]. They can easily exert their influence. There is an Azerbaijani position on Srasar now, they can control even Yerevan from there. No Azerbaijani has ever climbed that mountain. We and our kids would climb and play there.”

“The situation on the border made us hopeless. [The Azerbaijanis] used to be 270 kilometres away and now they are on our land.”

“There are very big concerns, at any moment Azerbaijanis can quietly bypass the border and enter [Goris]... I am not sure how security is taken care of, but nothing can be ruled out.”

“Maybe in two months they will say we are handing over Vardenis as well... We cannot initiate any business hoping that it will grow and flourish.”

“Everybody says they will not hand over Meghri. What if they do? We thought the same about Artsakh. Five years ago nobody would imagine that Shushi would not be ours.”

In Syunik and Gegharkunik, formerly separated from Azerbaijani forces by large swathes of occupied territory, there is fear of ‘Tavushization’, meaning the replication of the dynamics visible in Tavush region to the north. This area of the international Armenian-Azerbaijani state border increasingly became a site of ceasefire violations and skirmishes in the 2014-2016 period.

Participants also expressed concern over the issue of Soviet-era enclaves, small pockets of territory situated inside Armenia belonging formally to Azerbaijan and populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis until the conflict erupted in the late 1980s (a similar Armenian-

populated enclave existed in Soviet Azerbaijan). Since the second Karabakh war in 2020 Azerbaijan has indicated its interest in regaining sovereignty over its former enclaves in Armenia, some of which overlap with important infrastructure such as arterial roads:

“We are a border village, it is possible that they will take the former Qazakh territories, the Voskepar enclave. This concern exists, especially among the residents of Voskepar.”

Beyond security, communities are also concerned about the socio-economic impacts of lost pastures and orchards, decreased access to common natural resources (such as the Black Lake, Sev Lich/Kara Göl), and coping with the economic impacts associated with the presence of displaced communities from Nagorny Karabakh:

“[In Goris] we are in a blockade, and fewer people visit the community because they are afraid that it is not safe here... the economy thus becomes riskier and investors do not want to invest in our community because it is not safe... poverty and unemployment are rising, many hotels in the tourism sector are almost inactive, and the labour market is mostly dependent on hotel business. One can say that there is almost 50 or more percent decrease in labour demand, which surely will eventually lead to out migration.”

“Before the war we, the young people, were trying to do some business in Meghri [...] Now everything is uncertain. We do not know- shall we stay in Meghri or shall we move to Yerevan? Where will we go from Yerevan? We love Meghri, that’s a fact. We want to stay, to do something, but that uncertainty is there.”

The new situation has affected women in specific ways:

“When men returned with an injury from the war, the burden of the family was on the wives. These men became very irritable and impulsive, and there were cases of domestic violence.”

Large numbers of men were wounded during the 2020 war, leading to disabilities that have not only made them unable to work but which have deeply affected them psychologically. Women are consequently coping not only with supporting their families economically, but are dealing with increased rates of domestic violence.⁴

Those interviewed for this study were in principle in favour of open borders, but only in a more secure context. Many are also fearful of Turkish and Azerbaijani economic domination, and stressed the need for both a stronger Armenian economy and more trust before borders can be opened.

3. PERSPECTIVES OF DISPLACED COMMUNITIES FROM HADRUT AND SHUSHA/SHUSHI

The focus groups included two with refugees (22 in total) from Hadrut and Shusha/Shushi, two towns that were formerly part of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region in the Soviet period. These communities are now dispersed across Armenia and in that part of Nagorny Karabakh that is under the control of the Russian peacekeeping mission.

Participants from Nagorny Karabakh indicated mixed views over the trajectory of the negotiations to 2020:

"[It would not have been possible to resolve the conflict peacefully] as Azerbaijan was not going to compromise on anything"

"Regardless of whether we were going to give them one, two, or more regions, the Turks [Azerbaijanis] always said that there would be no Artsakh outside the territory of Azerbaijan."

"We were not sure that anything would improve if we gave some territories back. We don't trust them."

"I always said we should have little by little handed over some territories to get rid of the status of aggressor."

"I have been always discussing the option of compromising before the war, and during the war as well."

"If there would be guarantees, I would agree to the [19]97 option."

While participants from Nagorny Karabakh ascribed responsibility for the 2020 war to Azerbaijan, they also articulated criticism of their own de facto authorities in Nagorny Karabakh:

"I was surprised by neither war nor defeat. It was the logical end of 30 years of degradation. If in the [19]90s we were fighting for a neighbour, a relative, for the motherland, there are no such values in the society anymore. The leadership in Hadrut was busy with its private interest and not the public interest. I kept saying 'People, change! You are going to lose your homes.'"

They shared the same concerns as participants from Armenia regarding military decline: *"[It] would have been possible to avoid the war if the army had really been strengthened."*

Now scattered across Armenia, refugees from Hadrut and Shusha are experiencing difficulties in accessing aid and governmental support. They expressed disappointment with how the Armenian government has addressed their needs:

"We have written and spoken to officials [about our problems], we have organized demonstrations, but we came to the conclusion that the state does not see us, does not want to notice. They say 'yes, yes', but it stays in that room only."

"As the men aged 18-63 mostly do not have jobs and also do not receive social benefits for over a year, they leave the country in desperation..."

These participants set out more maximalist territorial demands compared to other groups interviewed, indicating that for dialogue to be possible, Azerbaijan should withdraw from Shusha and Hadrut, withdraw from those territories that the de facto authorities in Nagorny Karabakh claimed as of 2 September 1991, or withdraw to the positions of 1994 as a basis for negotiations. They also indicated that if the issue of status would not be solved, no Armenian will stay in Nagorny Karabakh.

"People in Stepanakert make plans for two, three years, as they are sure that there will be no escalation in the coming 2-3 years, before the end of the five-year term. But they do not make any long-term plans."

"WE HAVE WRITTEN AND SPOKEN TO OFFICIALS, WE HAVE ORGANIZED DEMONSTRATIONS, BUT WE CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE STATE DOES NOT SEE US, DOES NOT WANT TO NOTICE. THEY SAY 'YES, YES', BUT IT STAYS IN THAT ROOM ONLY."

4. PERSPECTIVES ON DIALOGUE

Perspectives on the potential for dialogue with Azerbaijanis varied between participants from Armenia's regions and those displaced from Nagorny Karabakh. Participants from Armenian regions had mixed answers. While some rejected the possibility of dialogue, others saw it as inevitable but extremely challenging in the absence of basic confidence building measures.

Participants displaced from Nagorny Karabakh take a different view that dialogue is not possible at the moment. They expressed views such as *"How is dialogue possible if the condition of their existence is our non-existence?"* or *"Do not speak of peace with the one who came to kill you."*

Among those participants who felt that there is ultimately no alternative to dialogue, several enabling factors were mentioned as needed before dialogue could take place. These include the cessation of state-level hate speech and belligerent rhetoric, the reduction of militarisation and tension along the borders, the cessation of vandalism of Armenian cultural heritage, opening borders as they are and leaving some room for the discussion of Nagorny Karabakh's status. The most immediate step that these respondents identified as paving the way to a possible dialogue was the release of all Armenian prisoners of war and civilian detainees still held in Azerbaijan.

Views diverged on which actors should lead or initiate dialogue. Some participants expressed preferences for the state to initiate dialogue and scepticism as to the contributions that civil society, especially in Azerbaijan, could make to dialogue. Young participants in particular, however, specified the need for inclusive and participatory dialogue, which would imply the involvement of civil society actors.

Among the focus groups interviewed for this study, there was wide variation in attitudes towards Azerbaijanis. While some participants cited ongoing violence and hate-speech in Azerbaijan towards Armenians as precluding any discussion of possible relations, others drew on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations from other eras and contexts as examples demonstrating that non-antagonistic relations are possible. These examples included current communications and cross-border contacts between Armenians in Meghri and ethnic Azerbaijanis from Iran, historical traditions of commercial relations and even, more faintly, historical

traditions of quasi-familial, kinship-like relations:

"There were brotherly relations in Soviet times, marriages even. However, at the same time Nakhichevan and Karabakh were emptied [of their Armenian populations]... The same policy is being implemented now, and we should be friends?"

"Who among Azerbaijanis can I meet now? We are all in trenches. There are no old qirve⁵ relations."

"History showed that the best we [Armenians and Azerbaijanis] could do was trading, neither friendship nor animosity."

"[We need a state policy to communicate that] they are our neighbours and we have nowhere to run from them, we have to find a common language."

These point to the potential for 'everyday peace' between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, meaning everyday interactions through trade and day-to-day contacts that can disrupt conflict dynamics⁶, if security and rhetorical conditions allowed.

Even if concerns about the capacity of Armenia and Azerbaijan to negotiate free of the influence of outside actors remains high, a resonating view in the focus groups consulted for this initiative is popular demand for an eventual end to the conflict:

"For war to end, there should be a political solution."

"As long as the bigger players are here it is neither Armenia's nor Azerbaijan's decision."

"Even if you could delay with diplomacy, you need to solve the issue because even if 100 years go by, [without a solution] there would still be a war."

"We should have direct contacts, without Turkey and Russia."

One perspective highlighted the historical responsibility of the winning side to pursue integrative approaches to peace in order to avoid future conflict. This perspective echoes similar arguments put forward by Azerbaijani analysts before the 2020 war, which advocated for integrative, rather than punitive, approaches to peace⁷, whereby a losing party is quickly integrated into a new regional or international order that reduces of future conflict:

"[Azerbaijan should] overcome its complexes and try to ensure peace in the region, that is, do what we [Armenians] didn't do when we could have done. We won the [1992-94] war, but did not bring peace to the region, now Azerbaijan should try to bring peace to the region. If Azerbaijan doesn't do it, there will be a new conflict."

Endnotes

- 1 These are, firstly, the armeniacommission.org initiative (Causes of Armenia's Defeat in 2020. Questions That Need To Be Answered to Avoid Repetition of Failure. The Urgency of A Fact-Finding Commission), authored by Vicken Cheterian, Salpi Ghazarian, Karen Harutyunyan, Arthur Martirosyan, Leonid Nersisyan, Syuzanna Petrosyan, Benyamin Poghosyan, Tevan Poghosyan, Emil Sanamyan and Simon Saradzhyan, May 2021, <https://armeniacommission.org/>. The second is *A White Paper. The Karabakh War of 2020 and Armenia's Future Foreign and Security Policies*, published in July 2021 by Robert Aydabirian, Jirair Libaridian and Taline Papazian, https://www.armeniapeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Armenia_Foreign_and_Security_Policies.pdf
- 2 See Conciliation Resources, Accord 17, *The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process, 2005*, <https://www.c-r.org/accord/nagorny-karabakh>
- 3 Vardan Aygektsi (d. 1250) is a medieval Armenian author and a priest, mostly known for his fables. In 1668, an extensive collection of Aygektsi's fables, under the title *Aghvesagirq* (Book of the Fox) was published in Amsterdam.
- 4 Research conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Tajikistan has demonstrated that early exposure to armed conflict increases the risk of intimate partner violence and domestic abuse as the use of violence is normalised. See Orsola Torrissi, "The long echo of war. Early life exposure to armed conflict and female experiences of intimate partner violence", HiCN Working Paper 358, November 2021, Households in Conflict Network, <https://hicn.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2021/11/HiCN-WP-358.pdf>
- 5 *Qirve* refers to a person who holds a child during its circumcision ceremony. Historically it was not uncommon for members of non-Muslim families, such as Armenians, to play this role for Muslim families. With respect to Armenians and Azerbaijanis, or Armenians and Turks, playing the role of the *qirve* could be seen as a kind of kinship or friendship, and families who engaged in the practice of *qirve* enjoyed lasting friendly relationships.
- 6 Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace: How So-called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 7 Esmira Jafarova, "Does Armenia Want an Integrative or Punitive Solution?", 27 May 2020, Centre of Analysis of International Relations, <https://aircenter.az/en/single/does-armenia-want-an-integrative-or-punitive-solution-567>



Mila Babayan, 79, stands in her doorway as humanitarian deminers from the Halo Trust survey her garden which was littered with dozens of unexploded ordnance following the 2020 war.

Since the end of the 2020 Karabakh war, perspectives on Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue and peace initiatives have been dominated by discussions of regional connectivity, transit routes and the potential for revived economic relations.

These discussions offer important forward-looking perspectives. But the voices of those most directly affected by the consequences of the 2020 war and with the most direct stake in possible new border openings and revived communications have been less prominent. This briefing presents the results of a scoping exercise conducted in Armenia in July-November 2021, exploring attitudes among communities in Syunik, Gegharkunik and Tavush, in addition to communities displaced from Nagorny Karabakh as a result of the 2020 war. Focus groups explored local perceptions of the legacies and lessons of the war, its impacts on communities and the prospects for dialogue.

Findings attest to wide-ranging transformations in popular attitudes in Armenia, whereby many established beliefs have been broken by the 2020 war. Fear, trauma and insecurity predominate among border communities in particular, and if left unaddressed, will block the potential for regional connectivity and economic ties to effectively transform Armenian-Azerbaijani relations.

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