

Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border

Fighting in July interrupted what had been a stretch of relative quiet on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. The incidents underscored how quickly and unexpectedly this front can erupt. The two countries should take better advantage of a hotline created in 2018 to avoid dangerous misunderstandings.



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What's new? Deadly July 2020 clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces left dozens dead, civilians among them, and forced villagers to flee their homes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border. Shooting across the trenches along the border is more frequent today than anywhere else on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's front lines.

Why does it matter? Efforts by Baku and Yerevan, including through limited diplomacy, a communication channel set up in 2018 and an agreement between the two sides to safeguard farmers, have largely failed to create conditions that would deter people from leaving border areas. Violence there also risks permanently damaging wider peace efforts.

What should be done? The two sides should use the communication channel to warn each other about planned engineering works or other activities that might be

misconstrued and lead to escalation. They should begin talks on limited cooperation to allow farmers to harvest crops, repair water networks and clear mines.

Executive Summary

The mid-July 2020 escalation on Armenia and Azerbaijan's densely populated state border, which killed over a dozen people and sent women and children fleeing, should sound as a warning. Villagers on both sides of the 230km, trench-lined border have long lived in fear of clashes and landmines. Three decades after the 1992-1994 war over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, children go to schools behind ever-thicker cement walls, farmers shun fertile but mine-riddled fields and young people seek their future elsewhere. International mediation efforts have largely ignored the border regions, focused on untangling disagreements over Nagorno-Karabakh itself. But July's violence shows how critical it is to pay attention to the safety of more than 150,000 civilians living there. Yerevan and Baku should keep channels open to find mutually beneficial ways to cooperate along the border. The shooting should not stop them from exploring collaboration on narrow initiatives to allow children to attend school, farmers to harvest crops, herders to put livestock to pasture, and water to flow to taps and fields.

For both sides, the potential cost in lives and property of violence is higher along the border than in other areas. Neither side has a clear military advantage in the border zone. Military positions and front-line trenches are so close in places that residents can shout to soldiers on the other side. The border is at the crossroads of the three post-Soviet states of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. As such, it is criss-crossed by key roads, railways and pipelines pumping natural resources from Russia to the region or from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Europe. Both sides not only have an interest in avoiding disruptions to this infrastructure but also stand to benefit from repurposing and repairing sundered cross-border Soviet-era water supply networks.

“A looming economic crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic injects even greater volatility into the standoff”



Simmering tensions have long choked efforts by both Azerbaijan and Armenia to stem emigration from their border regions. Both sides have built protective walls around public buildings and key roads, dug bomb shelters and instituted crisis training in schools. They have tried a mix of tax incentives, subsidies and other initiatives to spur development and built irrigation works to help farmers. These measures have done little to stop the outflow of people with the means to leave, while some ageing residents

able to stop the outflow of people with the means to leave, while some aging residents have not bothered to repair damaged homes, whose crumbling stands as testament to their fatalism. A looming economic crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic injects even greater volatility into the standoff, making it harder for people in the region to make ends meet. Longer-term climate trends will likely also exacerbate shortages of water and arable land. Only through cooperation can Baku and Yerevan make a lasting difference in the lives of people in the border regions.

The two sides should not now walk away from their breakthrough accords of 2018 and 2019. Those understandings for the first time in over fifteen years reopened direct communication lines between security personnel and political representatives in both capitals. The channels, which have so far only been used in the wake of flare-ups, served in recent days to allow for retrieval of the dead. The 2019 detente also led the parties to agree for the first time to show particular restraint along the border during the harvest, allowing for a modest expansion of farming. The fresh violence now threatens the livelihoods of many facing the impossible choice of leaving their crops to rot or risking their lives gathering their produce for market. Were the two sides to expand communication to include preventive messaging, such as notification of planned engineering works or dates of harvests, they might avoid future misunderstandings or escalations. With time, doing so may also build good-will to allow for further, limited cooperation on areas of mutual interest, such as fixing critical water infrastructure and demining farmlands.

The July clashes, the most serious between the two parties since 2016, also risk hardening attitudes concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. The death of a popular Azerbaijani general in the border skirmishes pushed tens of thousands of angry citizens into Baku's streets to call for revenge and the return of Nagorno-Karabakh. More violence on the border would only fan those flames. Diplomatic progress on the border not only would be easier to accomplish than progress over Nagorno-Karabakh, but also, at this point, is an essential prerequisite for it.

Baku/Yerevan/Brussels, 24 July 2020

I. Introduction

The Armenia-Azerbaijan border zone was not always a place of entrenched rival militaries and palpable hostility breaking out in periodic shooting. Older residents remember the close ties that bound people across the boundary the Soviet Union had drawn between its two republics. The Azerbaijani side was home to the biggest regional markets, while some Armenians were fluent in Azeri and studied or completed their military service in the republic of Azerbaijan. 1

Yet it is in these once-intermingled border villages that ethnic violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis first erupted in the late 1980s, stirred by irredentism in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1991, upon the Soviet Union's collapse and independence for both countries, the former administrative border between two republics became an

international border. Three western Azerbaijani districts lie on one side of the trench-lined divide and the Armenian region of Tavush on the other. The ethnic violence and ensuing 1992-1994 war over Nagorno-Karabakh left hundreds of people displaced from centuries-old settlements on both sides of the border.² Though recognised by the UN, the border remains undemarcated, and soldiers from both countries are dug into positions on both sides.³ More than 150,000 people live close to the front lines, with 26 Armenian and 84 Azerbaijani villages within 10km of the border.⁴

Tensions in the area have remained high for years, reaching a zenith in 2014, when several weeks of clashes drove many locals to emigrate.⁵ Another uptick came in 2016, when fighting erupted in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.⁶ The Armenian and Azerbaijani armies faced off along the international border, moving heavy vehicles and artillery closer to the trenches.⁷ An urgent ceasefire on the fourth day of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh pulled them back from the brink.

While the border regions have seen relative calm since then, tensions have been rising again in the last two years. Even before the July 2020 skirmishes, the international border area had been the most active stretch of the front line. From 2016 to 2018, clashes along the border accounted for only 7 per cent of all soldiers and civilians killed or wounded in the conflict, but in the last two years the proportion has doubled.⁸ Most of these have taken place along the northern part of the border, close to Georgia; the latest fighting flared up on 12 July to the south, between Movses in Armenia and Agdam in Azerbaijan – mountain villages on opposite sides of the border, both surrounded by trenches.



Azerbaijani sniper fire can hit almost everywhere in Movses, a village in Armenia's north-eastern region of Tavush, pictured here from the Armenian side. The Azerbaijani positions run along the flanks of the high mountain in the distance on the right.
CRISISGROUP/Jorge Gutiérrez Lucena

What sparked the July escalation remains unclear; each party accuses the other of conducting the first strike. ⁹ Yerevan's defence minister said an Azerbaijani jeep drove close to an Armenian outpost, catching Armenian soldiers off guard: "[F]or as yet unknown reasons, Azerbaijani servicemen got out of the car and moved toward our position". ¹⁰ Rather than employing "some form of communication" to retrieve the vehicle, which they abandoned after Armenian troops issued a warning, he said, the Azerbaijanis began shelling. ¹¹ Baku rejected this version of events, saying its soldiers were on a routine patrol when they were shot at. ¹² "The Armenian side ambushed them in a premeditated attack. ... The soldiers on patrol had to retreat to their posts, and then the Armenians opened fire on our post with artillery". ¹³ A few days earlier, Baku's ambassador to Moscow had stressed that the vehicle was "not a tank. They could have immediately called – got in touch by radio. They have a local way to contact each other, a hotline". ¹⁴

"Violence takes a heavy toll on civilians on both sides of the border." ¹⁵ The mutual accusations of failure to use communications channels before resorting to violence show awareness of these channels' potential. But in this case the channels availed the sides little: the July fighting wound up being a rare instance in which the sides used heavy weapons before it tapered off. As of 21 July, Azerbaijan was reporting twelve of its military personnel, including a well-regarded general, and one civilian killed, while Armenia was reporting four military casualties and one civilian wounded.

Such violence takes a heavy toll on civilians on both sides of the border. Even in tranquil periods, daily life is constrained by fear of renewed clashes and limited economic prospects. Families keep their children out of school for long periods because several have been hurt on the way there and back. Graves located in no-man's land or near minefields are left untended – in painful violation of deep-seated traditions. When violence breaks out, as in mid-July, the elderly, women and children are evacuated. Some return within days, but others do not. In the aftermath of the most recent clashes, a villager told Crisis Group that evacuees "are waiting to see what will happen. ... It is not safe here". ¹⁶

Those who can get out do so, usually to look for work in Baku, Yerevan, Russia or Turkey. It is mostly young men who depart, leaving wives, children and parents of pensioner age behind. ¹⁷ Reliance on remittances from male family members has led to selective abortion – families terminating pregnancies if the baby is a girl – in the region. ¹⁸ "People leave because they lost their last means of living", said an Armenian priest. ¹⁹ "Even if we were allowed access to all our lands ... there would be no young people to work there", said a female teacher in neighbouring Movses. ²⁰ Attempts by Baku and Yerevan to improve security and spur growth have done little to alleviate the area's plight.

In the wake of the July clashes, this report looks at insecurity and ways to reduce it in the Armenia-Azerbaijan border zone. It is based on dozens of interviews conducted in

Baku, Yerevan and localities on both sides of the border from November 2018 through December 2019, as well as telephone interviews since then. It includes the views of former and current officials, diplomats, military and security officers, NGO workers, independent experts, clerics and tens of residents in the border regions. In Armenia, field research took place in the biggest towns and border villages of the Tavush region. In Azerbaijan, it took place in four districts – Gazakh, Tovuz, Gadabay and Aghstafa – and approximately 25 villages during June-July 2019. Crisis Group had official permission to travel to these Azerbaijani districts and meet with Border Service officials in other villages. Officials denied a request to visit sensitive outposts in Gazakh and Aghstafa. The report does not cover the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, where greater calm reigns and where the Armenian and Azerbaijani militaries are dug in along a 246km border.

II. Efforts to Improve Security, Stem Emigration

Neither side has a clear military advantage in the border zone, leading to an unstable standoff characterised by frequent ceasefire violations that nevertheless stop short of the fighting seen in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.²¹ Settlements in proximity to the trenches render civilians on both sides equally vulnerable. While the prospect of civilian casualties may discourage the sides from using heavy weaponry, it also means that any escalation risks taking a fearsome human toll.²² The resulting anxiety is an omnipresent feature of life in the area, stunting development and overshadowing steps by both governments to reassure their populations.

Efforts by both sides to bolster their position through security relations with neighbouring states have acted as a mutual deterrent: Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which calls upon members to come to one another's aid in case of outside attack, while Azerbaijan has strengthened its ties with Turkey.²³ Since 2015, the CSTO has issued regular statements of concern about clashes along the border, as it did on 14 July.²⁴ In the words of a former Armenian official, CSTO membership is "a security umbrella for us, although one with holes in it".²⁵ Russia voiced "extreme concern" over the flare-up in fighting and said it was ready to mediate.²⁶ Baku, which is not a member but nonetheless has its own close ties to Moscow and other CSTO members, says only a full-fledged incursion into Armenia by its military – an eventuality it views as unlikely – would trigger CSTO intervention.²⁷ After the July clashes, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev complained about Armenia's appeal to the CSTO: "What does the CSTO have to do with it?"²⁸

"Both sides also worry that ceasefire violations along the border might damage strategic roads, railways and energy infrastructure."

While the United States, Russia and the European Union (EU) all called on both sides to show restraint amid the July clashes, Turkey threw its full weight behind Azerbaijan, its statements replete with bellicose rhetoric. Armenia will be "buried under their own plot, drown in it, and will absolutely pay for what they did". Turkey's defence minister

...and many people in Armenia, they will not do that,” he said. ²⁹ Azerbaijan’s ties with Turkey were strengthened by an agreement “on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance”, signed in 2010 just days before Yerevan extended Russia’s lease for military bases in Armenia. ³⁰ The Baku-Ankara agreement prioritises military cooperation, including mutual assistance in the event of an attack or act of aggression upon either country. ³¹ In response to Ankara’s backing of Baku in July, Armenia accused Turkey of “neo-Ottoman policies” and meddling in the South Caucasus. ³²

Both sides also worry that ceasefire violations along the border might damage strategic roads, railways and energy infrastructure. A major road and a railway linking Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey run near the Azerbaijani side of the border. The 692km South Caucasus pipeline, which transports natural gas from the Shah Deniz field to the Georgian-Turkish border, lies some 15km from Azerbaijan’s border districts of Aghstafa and Tovuz. The 1,768km Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline also passes through Aghstafa and Tovuz, carrying oil from Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey. ³³ On the Armenian side, the main highway and a railway connecting the country to Georgia, Russia and other parts of Europe pass through the northern Tavush region, as does a Russian pipeline bearing gas to Armenia.

A boast by Azerbaijan’s military amid heightened tensions on 16 July that its new missile system had ample range to reach a Soviet-era nuclear power plant near Yerevan highlighted both the strategic importance of critical infrastructure and constraints against further escalation. ³⁴ After the threat made international headlines and prompted outrage in Yerevan, a high-ranking Azerbaijani official walked it back, saying, “Azerbaijan has no policy of targeting critical strategic facilities”. ³⁵



A wall protects a school from potential Armenian sniper fire in Bala Jafarli village, in the Azerbaijani region of Gazakh. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shiriyev

Despite the structural checks on escalation by both sides, residents feel the danger of

stray bullets acutely and daily. Efforts by both sides to boost villagers' sense of security

with school safety drills and protective barriers around public buildings are no more than a band-aid. "When my son is a minute late [coming home] from school, I fear", a mother of two said.³⁶ The barriers have eased concerns among some but serve as permanent reminders of insecurity for others. A 70-year-old who bricked up a window 100m from military positions said, "I feel like I am living in a prison".³⁷ Residents erect most of the walls themselves, using building materials supplied by the respective governments, sometimes resulting in flimsy constructions that cannot withstand sniper fire.³⁸ The barriers become useless if troops on the other side move their positions. Residents clamour for more and better protection in the absence of a palpable lowering of tensions. One exasperated Armenian village head said, "One can't put the whole village behind concrete walls".³⁹

On both sides of the border, security services hold sway and treat outsiders with suspicion. In recent years, Baku in particular has tightened security measures in the region. Amendments to the laws on state secrets and media enacted in late 2014 limit access by journalists and other non-residents. These measures became more stringent after the April 2016 escalation, according to locals, possibly due to a May 2017 presidential decree on "rules for providing an enhanced security regime in residential areas within the front lines", though the "rules" are not public.⁴⁰ Baku has opened new police stations in most border villages and installed new surveillance cameras.

⁴¹ Despite the changes, security in the border villages is largely a question of topography. In some villages, Azerbaijani forces are dug into strong defensive positions. In others, the Armenian military holds the higher ground.

"On both sides of the border, security services hold sway and treat outsiders with suspicion."

In a bid to present a more human face to residents, Baku replaced the military with the State Border Service in the Gazakh district and parts of Aghstafa in December 2018. The change brought new restrictions on movement, especially for farmers and agricultural labourers, who must get daily permission from the Border Service to work in their fields.⁴² "We are now unable to secure our daily income because we can only get into our farmlands for part of the day", a farmer in Qushchu Ayrim in the Gazakh district said.⁴³ Border guards are also conducting more patrols, including occasional checks of identity documents, in residential areas. The new measures have done little to assuage safety concerns among those living near the front lines and may even have raised tensions, as they provoked alarm on the Armenian side.

Both Yerevan and Baku have also sought to stimulate development in the border villages – as part of efforts to stem emigration. Azerbaijan has repaired roads; increased financial and technical support to small businesses; carried out irrigation work; and granted some villages special status making residents there eligible for gas and electricity subsidies. For its part, the Armenian government has introduced subsidies for electricity, natural gas and drinking water.⁴⁴ It has spent almost \$40 per person in the area annually since 2015.⁴⁵ Yerevan has also abolished two business taxes to attract investors to the area and is considering getting rid of more.

⁴⁶ "Our soldiers need to see life to understand who they are protecting" said a



Crisis Group’s Olesya Vartanyan visits a glove factory set up to promote business and help repopulate the Armenian village of Movses, close to the international border with Azerbaijan. CRISISGROUP/Jorge Gutiérrez Lucena

But these policies have not succeeded in attracting more investment to the region or slowing emigration. 48 What little money flows into the region comes from the Armenian diaspora, who donate to medical facilities and schools. In a few villages, Armenian expatriates have opened small businesses employing local women. 49 “It’s more about charity than a real business”, said the manager of one such enterprise. 50

The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic will only make matters worse. In Azerbaijan’s border districts, which account for some 7 per cent of the country’s agricultural production including 35 per cent of its potato crop, locals have faced bureaucratic delays obtaining permission to continue work during lockdowns while their produce rotted. 51 Others lacked the field hands to sow their crops. 52 The collapse in oil prices has also hit Azerbaijan hard: it will likely drive up unemployment and reduce the budget allocations for border areas. In Armenia, the post-Soviet country seemingly worst affected by the coronavirus per capita with more than 35,000 confirmed infections, an economic contraction is also expected. 53 Remittances, which account for some 13 per cent of GDP in Armenia and almost 3 per cent in Azerbaijan, will likely shrink. 54 The economic pressure may push farmers back to precarious farmlands despite the insecurity in many areas.

III. Preventive Messaging

In September 2018, the then newly elected Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev agreed to set up a new communication channel amid an international push to lower tensions following clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh. 55 The leaders reached agreement outside the usual OSCE Minsk Group format, co-chaired by representatives of Russia, U.S. and France, that governs the

Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Pashinyan and Aliyev clinched what one diplomat described as an unscripted accord on the sidelines of a Russia-led summit of post-Soviet states in Dushanbe. It listed technical steps to reduce tensions; Pashinyan kept the original piece of paper and Aliyev photographed it for the record on his mobile phone.⁵⁶ The communication channel they put in place is used to discuss incidents along the front lines. Although the respective defence ministries operate the line, communications through this channel go directly to the top security services personnel who brief the two leaders.



The Armenian village of Berkaber, seen from a hill nearby. The village, in the region of Tavush, is separated from Azerbaijan's district of Gazakh by the Joghaz Water Reservoir. CRISISGROUP/Jorge Gutiérrez Lucena

Since then, prospects for resetting the peace process have dimmed, and the July skirmishes further narrowed space for discussion. After the worst of the clashes, Pashinyan urged a resumption of talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs, repeating a call for more rigorous international monitoring of ceasefire violations.⁵⁷ In the past, Russia has offered to deploy its troops to the conflict zone to deter any further escalation, but both Yerevan and Baku turned the Kremlin down, wishing for a more international peace monitoring presence in the region.⁵⁸

“What is clear is that neither side appears to have availed itself of the existing communication channel.”

In any case, officials in Baku said now was not the time for talks.⁵⁹ The death of a well-respected Azerbaijani general in the July fighting stirred one of the largest street protests in recent years. Major General Polad Hashimov was the highest-ranking official killed on the battlefield since the 1994 ceasefire. In the wake of his death, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets, demanding that Baku go to war to return Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control, with a small number storming Azerbaijan's parliament in anger.⁶⁰ Aliyev praised the demonstrations as “another picture showing the unity of the people and power”, though he denounced the incursion into

parliament. ⁶¹ A day later, he sacked his foreign minister, Elmar Mammadyarov,

who had been the country's key emissary in peace talks with Armenia for sixteen years, accusing him of leading "useless negotiations" to allow the World Health Organization access to Nagorno-Karabakh to help its residents deal with the pandemic. ⁶² Aliyev replaced Mammadyarov with the relatively low-profile education minister.

As noted above, the origins of the escalation remain murky. What is clear is that neither side appears to have availed itself of the existing communication channel. ⁶³ It was only used after calls by the OSCE and EU to do so, and then only in order to allow Azerbaijan to safely retrieve its dead. ⁶⁴ This is nothing new. The two sides rarely use the channel to relay information on planned activities on the front – such as troop movements or reinforcement of trenches – and thereby to minimise risks of misunderstandings.

Nor was it the first time that the channel could have come in handy. For instance, it could have lowered the tensions that have regularly emerged since December 2018, after Baku replaced soldiers with border guards in Gazakh and a part of Aghstafa bordering Armenia's Tavush region. Baku maintains that it intended the move as an olive branch – but it appears to have backfired. ⁶⁵ "We wanted the demilitarisation of the border areas. Therefore, we deployed the border guards", a senior government official said. ⁶⁶ The border guards began building new bases as they moved in. "The establishment of a border security system requires land clearing and considerable digging", one border guard official explained. ⁶⁷ Across the border, however, "no one could understand why they were digging", said an Armenian commander. ⁶⁸ The unusual activity may partly account for the rise in tensions. Today, 60 per cent of all clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia occur in the border regions. ⁶⁹ Thirteen of the sixteen incidents since September 2018 have taken place in the area that the border guards control. ⁷⁰

"Top brass from the two countries fear that allowing communication between lower-ranking officers on the front lines could lead to explosive misunderstandings."



In the last decade, the Minsk Group co-chairs have on occasion floated ideas for strengthening the ceasefire regime along the international border, including by opening a direct line of communication between military commanders. ⁷¹ Commanders in trenches on both sides of the border in Nakhchivan have been communicating via hotline since the mid-1990s. But attempts to make similar arrangements along other sections of the border have gained little traction.

Today, neither side believes it is possible to revive contact when there has been so little for so long. Top brass from the two countries fear that allowing communication between lower-ranking officers on the front lines could lead to explosive misunderstandings. “Azerbaijanis and Armenians are emotional people, and given that both sides have mostly young soldiers and officers, today such a hotline is risky”, a high-level commander in Baku said. ⁷² Echoing these concerns, an Armenian field officer in the Tavush region said communication should take place at a senior level to protect the chain of command: “If we were to speak with those in the trenches, and their senior commanders were to give conflicting orders, who would they listen to?”

⁷³

The best way forward could be an agreement between Baku and Yerevan to make greater use of existing communication channels, including to offer updates on planned construction works or other activities along the front lines. Even before the 2018 Dushanbe agreement, some international humanitarian organisations had sought to introduce such preventive messaging. Every summer, the International Committee of the Red Cross seeks information from farmers on the planned harvests near the trenches and shares it in an official letter to both sides in hopes of encouraging restraint. ⁷⁴ Military commanders along the border, who are closest to the situation on the ground, should elaborate on these messages and give them to superiors, who would then relay them via security agencies to the other side. An expanded communication channel might include updates on mutually acceptable activities such as farming, waterway maintenance and demining (all discussed in detail in sections below). For Baku, expanded communication could allow the complete deployment of its border guard, which it halted amid heightened tensions.

IV. Making Farming Safe

With farmers now too fearful to venture out, the forthcoming harvest in the border regions may be left rotting for the birds and the worms. Even before the July 2020 clashes, the abundance of unmarked minefields and restrictions on access to land prevented border residents from fully exploiting opportunities for farming, which is often their only source of income. Locals cultivate fruits, vegetables and grains where they can, but much fertile land remains beyond reach. Others raise livestock in the foothills, running the risk of stumbling upon mines or being targeted by snipers. ⁷⁵ Additional job opportunities are scarce. Some youths serve on the front line, but few remain with the army after completing their compulsory military service. ⁷⁶ Nor does the military presence in the region bring much commerce to villages. ⁷⁷

The Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders underscored the importance of making farming safe in the spring of 2019, when they tentatively pledged to avoid ceasefire violations during that fall’s harvest. ⁷⁸ Two weeks after their first official meeting in March, the two sides formalised their agreement, but no details were made public. ⁷⁹ Although the agreement appears to have led to a decrease in incidents during the 2019 harvest, farmers were left ignorant of the high-level diplomacy. Officials on both sides say they

restrained from commenting on the agreement for fear of being blamed for encouraging

residents to cultivate lands close to the border in the event that tensions escalated.

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Preparation for the annual harvest in fields near Farahli village, in Gazakh region, Azerbaijan. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shiriyev

Over the past decade, residents on both sides have lost access to acres of land they once farmed. 81 “We were able to use the fields until 2002, but then the military put up barbed wire in the hills and mined more areas near the border”, an Azerbaijani villager in the Gadabay region said. 82 Farmers are reluctant to expose tractors or combine harvesters to gunfire or shelling. Azerbaijani villagers in Asrik-Jirdakhan work their farms at night because almost all their land is within Armenian troops’ shooting range.

83 The fear is shared across the border. In the Armenian village of Nerkir Karmiraghbyur, residents have built greenhouses to compensate for the loss of farmland. “Many are still afraid of attacks on greenhouses because they are ... very visible, but greenhouses help us make some money”, said one woman, who repaired her house for the first time in 30 years in 2019 when she first felt secure enough to undertake building work close to the trenches. 84 But in July, when at least six houses were damaged and gas supplies cut in her village, she left with her grandchildren.

“In Azerbaijan, disputes over land reform as well as the special fiscal status granted to a few border villages complicate matters.”

Before the July clashes, some farmers, out of desperation, had encroached on land closer to the trenches, though most remained wary. 85 On the Armenian side, a modest uptick in enterprise was noticeable amid the relative calm since the 2018 Dushanbe agreement. Some farmers there told Crisis Group they planned to invest in new seeds and technology, which they had previously been reluctant to do due to fears of renewed tensions. 86 No such boldness was apparent on the Azerbaijani side, however, and on both sides, habits formed over years of worry and want are hard to

break. Across the border, one Armenian harvester said she could not shake her anxiety from years “when we had to run, hide, lay on the ground … thinking that, at any moment, any of us can be shot” despite the relative calm of past years.⁸⁷ Her home village of Aygepar was rocked by fresh shooting in the recent violence.

In Azerbaijan, disputes over land reform as well as the special fiscal status granted to a few border villages complicate matters. The post-Soviet land reform enables locals to rent land from municipalities for agriculture. Farmers in villages where insecurity halted the reform’s rollout cannot own or plough land.⁸⁸ As such, their livelihoods are more precarious, and they take greater financial risks, when renting land, for instance, and stand to lose more when fighting disrupts commerce. The “border village status”, meanwhile, confers tax breaks as well as gas and electricity subsidies.⁸⁹ Where villages do not have it, especially in the Gazakh and Gadabay districts, residents are resentful. They are likelier to push for access to farmland in riskier border regions. “If there isn’t enough agricultural production in the village, then we cannot afford the electricity and gas prices”, said a 70-year-old villager in Qaralar. New Azerbaijani legislation could give some relief by allowing farmers access to subsidies via an electronic system.⁹⁰ But farmers need to apply well in advance of sowing season, when they may not yet know which land is safe.

As one border resident said in September 2019, efforts to improve farming in the region are like “sand castles”, carefully built only to disappear the moment shots are fired.⁹¹ His words seemed prescient. Activity ground to a halt amid the July clashes, causing people on both sides to suffer. One farmer in the Azerbaijani village of Agdam, which was shelled in mid-July, said he was already having trouble finding people to work the fields: “After these clashes, the fear of those people increased”.⁹² Likewise, in the Armenian village of Movses, when shooting started near his house, Sargis Arakelyan took his wife and 92-year-old mother to safety at the other edge of the village.⁹³ Speaking to Crisis Group by telephone, he said his more pressing concern was whether locals would be able to collect the forthcoming harvest: “Some people already try to go to the farmlands, but only a few. The tragedy is that this year the harvest should have been particularly rich”.⁹⁴

“Yerevan and Baku should redouble efforts to allow farmers to safely harvest crops and herders to tend livestock.”

Even in areas unaffected by the flare-up, people dare not venture out. “If there is shooting in Tovuz’s Agdam village, I naturally think that if I go to my fields around Gazakh’s Dash Salahli village, they will shoot me, too”.⁹⁵

Yerevan and Baku should redouble efforts to allow farmers to safely harvest crops and herders to tend livestock – all the more so as people in the region feel the pandemic’s financial bite. The two sides have found ways in the past to put aside deeply divisive territorial disputes to cooperate on limited humanitarian measures. At a minimum, they should inform each other of any plans for works on land near the trenches – offering the opposing side a chance to raise security concerns. In the future, they might organise talks among local and military officials on both sides about the tracts of land

that residents are eyeing. The evolving security environment, with the deployment of border guards on the Azerbaijani side, will require an especially nuanced approach to allow for effective communication not only with the Azerbaijani military but also with its border guard service. The imminent harvest makes the development of preventive messaging between the sides all the more important.

V. Repairing Water Supply Networks

Water was once abundant in the border zone, thanks to a network of reservoirs and irrigation pipes, but today shortages are chronic.⁹⁶ After the 1992-1994 war, it became too dangerous to maintain the water supply system, which criss-crosses the front lines, and it fell into disrepair.⁹⁷ Villagers began blocking supply channels to satisfy their own needs.⁹⁸ Today, a mere handful of households draw their water from reservoirs fed by mountain rivers. In some places the dams are so outdated they may themselves pose a threat to nearby residents.⁹⁹ Many households have access only to unfiltered well water, which they describe as “salty”.¹⁰⁰ In some villages, running water is limited to two to three hours per day.¹⁰¹ “It’s only enough to prepare dinner”, said a woman from Berkaber, a village sitting next to a reservoir in disuse.¹⁰²

Officials on both sides are under pressure from villagers to fix water shortages, and demand will only grow if farming expands amid long-term climate trends.¹⁰³ Already fields are parched, with farmers praying for rainfall in ever-warming summers. “There wasn’t enough rain this year, and I lost all my investments”, one farmer said.¹⁰⁴ While locals are largely unaware of climate dynamics, experts say less rain and higher temperatures due to climate change are exacerbating water scarcity in the region.¹⁰⁵ Aggregate river flows in Armenia and Azerbaijan are projected to decrease by 11.9 per cent by 2030 and 37.8 per cent by 2100.¹⁰⁶

Armenia and Azerbaijan have both made substantial investments to break dependence on the other side but with limited success. They both lack expertise and capacity to implement adequate solutions.¹⁰⁷ The Azerbaijani government built a reservoir in Tovuzchay with a capacity of 20 million cubic metres.¹⁰⁸ But most residents of the district where it is located still lack water.¹⁰⁹ With the help of donors, Baku has also drilled hundreds of sub-artesian wells.¹¹⁰ The wells may also soon run dry. Residents also blame the well water’s poor quality for health problems.¹¹¹ “When we go to doctors in Baku, and they find kidney stones, they ask: ‘Are you from the Gazakh district?’”, one woman said.¹¹² For its part, the Armenian government is mulling an investment of around \$30 million in new pumping stations.¹¹³ It has, however, baulked at the cost of a new reservoir.¹¹⁴ Instead, villages raise funds from the Armenian diaspora to lay pipes coming down from the mountains, but this costly supply is far from enough.¹¹⁵ Some village heads have rationed water and publicly shamed or cut off supply to residents who exceed their quotas.¹¹⁶

“While decades of tensions have prevented cross-border cooperation, some tentative steps might serve the two nations’ interests.”



A more strategic approach to the water problem in the region would help, but ultimately neither side can resolve the water supply problems without the other. While decades of tensions have prevented cross-border cooperation, some tentative steps might serve the two nations’ interests. One might be the resumed use of the Joghaz reservoir. Built in the early 1970s, the Joghaz reservoir once supplied water to almost 30 Armenian and Azerbaijani villages.¹¹⁷ Now it services only a few nearby households.¹¹⁸ Trenches stretch along the shores, and soldiers face off mere metres from each other on the dam. Three derelict pumping stations need to be fixed in order to restore water supplies to adjacent Armenian and Azerbaijani villages.¹¹⁹ Engineering works are impossible, however, without a clear, detailed accord and a commitment from both sides.¹²⁰

Such circumscribed technical talks, avoiding discussion of Nagorno-Karabakh, could be possible with the blessing of the leadership in both countries. An independent international actor such as the Red Cross could help facilitate limited discussions between local representatives and security officials about repair of specific water infrastructure of mutual benefit.¹²¹ Such cooperation could then extend to other areas of the border where water distribution systems are in disrepair but remain inaccessible even for regular maintenance due to minefields or trenches nearby.¹²² It would also be an important trust building measure that could bolster the peace process and reassure residents in the border areas. “If one starts bringing water from the other side, the message will be clear: ‘We have no intention of fighting with you anymore’”, said Ahmed, an 80-year-old resident of Agdam village in Tovuz district.¹²³

80-year-old Ahmed, a local resident of Agdam village of Tovuz region, thinks the time is right to act for peace. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shirihev

VI. Clearing Landmines

Landmines and unexploded ordnance are perhaps the most pernicious and complicated of border residents' concerns. In some villages, mines have turned more than 500-1,000 hectares into no-go zones. There is no reliable data on the number of mines or unexploded ordnance in border villages, but the region is among the most heavily contaminated in Azerbaijan and Armenia.¹²⁴ Demining has long been stalled by mutual concerns that it might shift the balance on the front lines and weaken deterrence. The painstaking and thorough nature of mine clearance work also rubs up against military concerns about secrecy.



A sign posted by Azerbaijan's de-mining agency warns residents "Don't enter dangerous areas" in Aghstafa, Tatli village, Azerbaijan. CRISISGROUP/Zaur Shirihev

In Azerbaijan, the state demining agency (ANAMA) clears mines, raises awareness and offers first aid training in partnership with the education ministry and Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society.¹²⁵ There have been fewer accidents since 2016, with explosions triggered by cows or disoriented herders straying into no-man's land.¹²⁶ "One of our herders stepped on a mine while his cattle were grazing", a farmer said of one accident that led to a leg amputation. "By the time he realised [he was in a minefield], it was too late".¹²⁷ ANAMA says it cannot work within 2km of the border at present.¹²⁸ "Our workers' safety is also a priority".¹²⁹ In Armenia, demining has never taken place in the border region of Tavush, leaving at least twenty contaminated areas.¹³⁰ The Armenian Center for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise says it cannot guarantee its employees' safety, as they would need to enter areas close to the trenches. They fear that Azerbaijani soldiers will mistake the hulking demining trucks for military vehicles.

Modest attempts to open discussion on the issue have been tied to diplomacy over Nagorno-Karabakh. An attempt in the early 2000s to put together a survey of where mines lie hidden saw months of detailed talks among local officials and military representatives, before disagreements between the countries' leaders over Nagorno-Karabakh halted progress.¹³² "Politics spoiled what should have been only in the hands of professionals", said a veteran demining specialist in Armenia.¹³³ In 2017, Azerbaijan blocked the work of the OSCE office in Yerevan, accusing it of going beyond its mandate by engaging in demining activity in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.¹³⁴ Armenian officials deny it, saying a detailed investigation showed no evidence of work close to the front lines.¹³⁵

"Even with political will at the top, demining experts say the task at hand is gargantuan,"

Any new attempts to discuss demining would likely need to occur in tandem with or following improvements in preventive messaging, respect for the ceasefire during the harvest and repairs to essential water supply networks. Even with political will at the top, demining experts say the task at hand is gargantuan, necessitating special security guarantees and additional funds that would likely need to come from donors.¹³⁶ The focus, for now, should be on the humanitarian imperative of clearing the mines that pose the greatest danger. Discussions might begin by delineating areas in some border villages where, for example, landmines block access to the only source of water or particularly valuable farming areas. At the very least, the sides should aspire to clearly demarcate where landmines may be buried near farmlands and water sources to prevent accidents.¹³⁷

VII. Conclusion

For three decades, what little diplomacy Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in has sought to reconcile their leaders' intransigent views on Nagorno-Karabakh.

Humanitarian projects, especially in the border regions, have fallen by the wayside. It is regrettable that these projects have languished: not only do they arguably offer the clearest opportunities for compromise and mutual benefit, but their focus is also squarely on improving the lives of populations most affected by the daily tensions on the front lines. Residents on both sides of the border share the same fears: "The pandemic has already affected our lives. Water shortages have affected us also, and these clashes have become another burden".¹³⁸

"Easing tensions could prevent deaths and injuries among farmers and seasonal workers, who are readying to collect the next harvest."



The July clashes should serve as a warning and call to action. As a first step, the two countries should recommit to using their existing communication channel. It should be expanded to include preventive messaging to avoid tensions and apparent misunderstandings like those that developed around Azerbaijan's deployment of border guards to replace its armed forces. Easing tensions could prevent deaths and injuries among farmers and seasonal workers, who are even now readying to collect the next harvest from August to September. Over time, such messaging may also help dispel suspicion between military commanders along the front lines. Repairing water supply networks and demining borderlands will be lengthy and complex processes; that is even more reason to begin discussions on these issues before new pandemic-related economic pressures and climate change worsen conditions for farmers and herders in the region.

Baku and Yerevan have both invested heavily in attempts to mitigate problems related to insecurity and water shortages, with little success. Even minimal cooperation would cost them less. It may be the only way to stop the emptying of villages on both sides of the border, as people who love their homeland nonetheless find themselves forced to seek better, safer lives elsewhere.

Appendix A: Map of Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border

