



Field Visit of the International
Conflict Resolution Center to the
Republic of Azerbaijan
Following the Second
Karabakh War

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About International Conflict Resolution Center

The International Conflict Resolution Center (ICRCenter) is an independent, non-profit think tank committed to the advancement of international dialogue, preservation of territorial sovereignty, and resolution of frozen conflicts in Europe and Eurasia. Based in Washington, D.C. the Center is dedicated to promoting ideals of self-determination, international legitimacy, and diplomatic confidence in an effort to ensure cooperation and prosperity in the region.

Background

Representatives of the International Conflict Resolution Center traveled to Baku, Azerbaijan to gather information about the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; the ongoing issues and relations between Armenia, Azerbaijan, third countries, and the international community; and the reconstruction efforts that will take place in the territories reclaimed by Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

The delegates of the organization met with representatives of both governmental and non-governmental organizations in the capital city of Baku. Members of the International Conflict Resolution Center met with the leaders of the Azerbaijani Community of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Vice-Chairman of the Russian Community of Azerbaijan, the leadership of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), officials from the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Hikmet Hajiyev, the Assistant to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Head of the Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration.

For the second part of the field visit, the representatives traveled to regions in the western parts of Azerbaijan to meet with regional officials. Regional officials in the cities of Ganja and Tartar coordinated visits for the representatives to observe damages inflicted during the war. These territories were located within the internationally-recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan, located far away from the conflict zone. The representatives of the International Conflict Resolution Center concluded their visit by visiting Aghdam with a military escort, a city that was decimated by Armenian forces during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war between 1988 and 1994.

Authors



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Christopher Chambers is a Washington, D.C. native and a Professor of Media Studies at Georgetown University. He is contributor to SiriusXM satellite radio news channels, NBC's The Grio.com, ABC News, CrimeReads and China's CGTV News. He is a former attorney for Independence Bank and the United States Department of Justice in Washington, as well as a mediation and arbitration specialist for The Lash Group in Charlotte, NC. He currently serves as an advisor to the Internet of Things (IoT) and cybersecurity start up Soteryx Corporation in Saratoga Springs, New York. He's written the award-winning bestselling novels and short stories in his spare time, including the crime novel Scavenge (starred in Publisher's Weekly) and a story in the upcoming Black Panther, Tales of Wakanda, from Marvel Comics.

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Austin Clayton is currently the Program Director at the International Conflict Resolution Center where he also conducts research on the conflicts of the South Caucasus region. He received a Master of Research in Political Science from Pompeu Fabra University and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University. Austin developed an interest in the South Caucasus region after studying energy security at Yerevan State University in Yerevan, Armenia as part of an EU-supported initiative. Following the completion of his undergraduate studies, he returned to the region and served as a Research Intern at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Tbilisi, Georgia. He later worked as a political risk consultant and freelance journalist while residing in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Field Visit to Ganja and Tartar

Following the International Conflict Resolution Center's meetings with governmental and non-governmental organizations in Baku, the delegates first traveled to Ganja, Azerbaijan. Ganja, Azerbaijan's second largest city and historic capital, is located in the far western part of the country.

In Ganja, the delegates were met by the Deputy Mayor of Ganja, who provided additional details about the attacks on the city that occurred during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The most important piece of background information to have in assessing the situation is Ganja's location; the city is located more than 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the conflict zone, meaning it is located well inside Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders and distant from any territory that Armenian forces have ever controlled. Armenian forces initially denied their attacks, but later stated that they were targeting military infrastructure. As all of the attacks targeted civilian structures, it is clear that this was an attempt to escalate the conflict, and perhaps to provoke Azerbaijan to launch a direct attack on the territory of the Republic of Armenia. If this were to occur, according to the principles of international law, the conflict would then extend outside of Azerbaijan's borders, making it possible for third countries to become directly involved.

During the war, Armenian military forces deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure in several Azerbaijani cities, with the artillery attacks directed at Ganja claiming several lives and leaving many more displaced.

According to Human Rights Watch, two residential buildings were destroyed on October 4, 2020. In addition to damaging multi-family housing complexes, attacks also damaged approximately 30 houses on Ali Nizami Street. In this first attack, one civilian was killed and another 30 were injured.



Impact crater from shelling near Qebele Park in Ganja, Azerbaijan



Memorial to victims of shelling attack, Qebele Park, Ganja



Memorial showing age of victims in Qebele Park attack

On October 8, 2020, Ganja suffered additional shelling. No civilians were killed in this round of attacks, but a number of residential buildings and a school were damaged.

On October 10, Human Rights Watch confirmed that Armenian forces had fired a Scud-B ballistic missile, detonating in a residential zone, killing 10 civilians, and wounding 34 more.

On the night of October 16 and stretching into the morning of October 17, Armenian forces used additional Scud-B ballistic missiles on two residential areas at approximately 1 a.m. A total of 21 civilians were killed in this attack: 17 in the initial attack, and another 5 who died later of severe injuries. Shortly after the first missile was launched that night, a second missile hit another part of the city, destroying 15 homes and damaging 50 others. Human Rights Watch observers identified a large crater with munition remnants surrounding the site.

In total, 32 civilians were killed in Ganja, and another 125 were injured.

Following the visit to the apartment complex destroyed near Qebele Park, members of the center visited other residences that were the targets of attacks and later met with local media to give their impression of the damages inflicted on the city.



Aerial view of residential buildings targeted during the night of October 16 and morning of October 17 (Source – Anadolu Agency)

After visiting Ganja, the representatives of International Conflict Resolution Center continued their field visit to observe damages to the town of Tartar, which was attacked multiple times throughout the entire duration of the war, from September 28, 2020 to November 10, 2020. They were guided by city officials, who showed them homes and offices damaged by shelling. They also witnessed cemeteries, schools, and historic and cultural monuments that were damaged by rockets fired by Armenian forces.

On the second day of the war, September 28, the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan stated that more than 2,000 shells fell in the Tartar district in a single day. On October 29, Mustagim Mammadov of the Tartar District Executive Power stated that 15,500 shells had been launched at the district. From September 27 to October 29, 133 houses had been completely destroyed. 873 homes, 14 schools, three hospitals, and 18 government buildings sustained damage.

On November 5, the city's residential and commercial shopping districts were targeted once again, leading to several deaths. In total, 17 civilians were killed and another 63 injured.

Like Ganja, Tartar lies outside of the conflict zone, well within the borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Thus, the targeting of civilians in Tartar was another attempt to provoke Azerbaijani forces into attacking the territory of the Republic of Armenia.



Man standing at site of destroyed home



Kitchen in home damaged in shelling attack



Broken headstones in cemetery targeted in a rocket attack

Field Visit to Aghdam

Following the visit to Ganja and Tartar, the representatives of International Conflict Resolution Center visited Aghdam, a city that Azerbaijan regained control of in the 2020 war that is commonly referred to as the 'Hiroshima of the Caucasus.'

The pre-war population of the city of Aghdam was registered as 28,031 people. During the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijanis were expelled from their homes. Armenian forces were able to drive out the local population easily as Aghdam is located on a flat plain at the base of the mountains, providing the city with no natural barrier against attacks.

Although Azerbaijani forces have a heavy presence in Aghdam, it is incredibly risky to visit the city as the lands in and around Aghdam have been heavily mined. After the territory was brought back under Azerbaijani control, additional injuries and deaths were reported, as families previously residing in the city rushed to visit their former homes. These families had returned to the lands before the Azerbaijani forces had conducted a survey of landmines and determined safe zones.



Remnants of Aghdam State Drama Theater, Aghdam, Azerbaijan

Notably, Aghdam was a large city with a vibrant culture before and during the Soviet era. The city features the well-known Aghdam Juma Mosque, which was gutted and the Islamic motifs were deliberately damaged. In addition to the mosque, Aghdam previously was home to the State Drama Theater, a famous Tea House, and the Bread Museum.

The scale and intensity of the intentional destruction was shocking for the visitors. The city, which was previously a mid-sized city, is spread across the plain and is not compact in nature. Religious and cultural sites were damaged, and residences and homes were razed to the ground. After Azerbaijanis were forced to leave, their homes were destroyed and the land was extensively mined in a concerted effort to ensure that Azerbaijanis would never be able to return to their homes.



Ruins of Aghdam city, which was vacated during the First Karabakh war. The Juma Mosque and Bread Museum are in a state of disrepair, graves have been unearthed, and signs warn of the dangers of remaining landmines.

Future Research

Following the visit to Azerbaijan, several meetings with authorities in Baku, and field observations in the cities of Ganja, Tartar and Aghdam, the International Conflict Resolution Center was able to verify and validate several of the claims made by the Azerbaijani government about the damages inflicted on the civilian population during the 2020 war.

There are future opportunities for research. As the security situation improves, the International Conflict Resolution Center hopes to conduct additional field work in cities and regions that were reclaimed by Azerbaijan. The center is particularly interested in conducting a visit to the southern region of Azerbaijan to investigate how the reclaiming of territory affects Azerbaijani-Iranian and Armenian-Iranian relations. International Conflict Resolution Center has engaged in communications with representatives of Armenia and plans to organize an assessment with the assistance of government officials, think tank leaders, and members of civil society organizations.

As the Azerbaijani government continues its own assessments of damages, the International Conflict Resolution Center plans to monitor reconstruction plans as well as the situation surrounding demining efforts. The extent of mining in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region hinders the redevelopment of territories and delays the return of civilians and internally displaced persons from returning to their homes.



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