



## POLICY BRIEF

### on Cultural Genocide in Artsakh

#### A Crisis in Artsakh: A Campaign of Cultural Genocide

Armenians are indigenous to Artsakh, which Azerbaijan refers to as Nagorno-Karabakh. Artsakh is a cradle of Armenian spiritual, historical, and cultural life. During the soviet era, Artsakh first fell under the control of Azerbaijan, who led pogroms against the indigenous population and began a campaign of destroying Armenian monuments and cultural heritage. Their policy of **ethnic cleansing** was aimed not only at displacing Armenians from their ancestral homeland, but entirely re-writing history to assert their false claims to the territory.

In December 2022 Azerbaijan began blockading Artsakh through the Lachin corridor, cutting off all access to food and medical supplies for nine months. At the end of the **deadly blockade**, Azerbaijan bombed civilian infrastructure, including homes, a hospital maternity ward, churches, and schools. The entire Armenian population was forced out, as Azerbaijani settlers took over the territory, leaving Artsakh empty of Armenians for the first time in thousands of years. The ethnic cleansing forced the 120,000 indigenous Armenians to abandon their families' gravesites, cultural heritage, and homes, causing immense psychological distress. Azerbaijan also killed 5,000 Armenians in the process.

Before the blockade, the Republic of Artsakh had three branches of government, an established parliament, and a democracy with a free economy. Artsakh holds 500 historic sites and 6,000 Armenian monuments. The moment it ceased to exist as an independent and democratic state, Azerbaijan began working to extinguish its rich cultural heritage in an attempt to wipe the land of any trace of its indigenous population.

The broader campaign of erasing Armenians' historical and cultural ties to their land has been ongoing for

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decades. Beyond aiming to justify their illegal occupation of Artsakh, erasing traces of Armenians serves as a tool for Azerbaijan to justify further land grabs. The Azeri government continues to spread historical revisionism, claiming the entirety of the Republic of Armenia is really, "Western Azerbaijan", and that Armenians are foreigners in the lands on which they have lived for thousands of years.

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, systematic historic revisionism, and denial of Armenians' access to their own cultural heritage sites breaches numerous international laws and conventions protecting cultural rites. It also stands as an assault on religious freedom, depriving Armenians of the right to practice faith in their ancestral homeland. The destruction of centuries old churches, artifacts, villages, and cemeteries effectively cuts off the freedom for Armenians to practice their faith at sacred sites for all future generations.

As Azerbaijan continues to destroy churches or convert them into mosques, demolish cemeteries, and raze villages into the ground, the international community must take immediate action to hold them accountable. Furthermore, US-backing, Azerbaijan just received permission to open a corridor through Syunik, connecting Azerbaijan with Turkey. Regional experts have long warned this corridor is a way for Azerbaijan to sever Armenia in half, allowing them to occupy and ethnically cleanse more of the country. As a result, there is an imminent need for the international community, including NGOs, universities, companies, states, and bodies such as the UN, to act.

## Legal Framework

### Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict

Article 4 of the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* mandates that parties, “undertake to respect cultural property situated within their territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties”, refraining from any hostility against cultural property or activities that are likely to expose it to harm or destruction. It also mandates parties, “refrain from any act directed by way of reprisals against cultural property”.<sup>1</sup> Article 9 of the *Second Protocol to the Hague Convention* states, “...a Party in occupation of the whole or part of the territory of another Party shall prohibit and prevent in relation to the occupied territory ... Any alteration to, or change of use of, cultural property which is intended to conceal or destroy cultural, historical or scientific evidence.”<sup>2</sup>

Armenia and Azerbaijan are both parties to the *UNESCO Convention* and its two protocols related to the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Azerbaijan’s ongoing cultural genocide is a complete disregard of their obligation under this framework. Serious violations of the protocol include, “(c) extensive destruction or appropriation of cultural property protected under the Convention and this Protocol; (d) making cultural property protected under the Convention and this Protocol the object of attack; (e) theft, pillage or misappropriation of, or acts of vandalism directed against cultural property protected under the Convention.”

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) guarantees individuals the right to freely manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.<sup>3</sup> Both Article 27 of the UDHR and Article 15 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) recognize the right of all people to partake in cultural life.

### International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

General comment #21 of the covenant states, “The right of everyone to take part in cultural life, like the other rights enshrined in the Covenant, imposes three types or levels of obligations on States parties: (a) the obligation

to respect; (b) the obligation to protect; and (c) the obligation to fulfill.”<sup>4</sup> It also mandates that, “Cultural heritage must be preserved, developed, enriched and transmitted to future generations as a record of human experience and aspirations.”

### International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Article 27 of the covenant reads, “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their religion, or to use their own language.”<sup>5</sup>

### 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities

Article 1 reads, “States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.”<sup>6</sup>

### Nara Document

Article 9 reads, “Conservation of cultural heritage in all its forms and historical periods is rooted in the values attributed to the heritage. Our ability to understand these values depends, in part, on the degree to which information sources about these values may be understood as credible or truthful. Knowledge and understanding of these sources of information, in relation to original and subsequent characteristics of the cultural heritage, and their meaning, is a requisite basis for assessing all aspects of authenticity.”<sup>7</sup>

1 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (adopted 14 May, 1954), 249 UNTS 215, art 4.

2 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (adopted 26 March, 1999), 2253 UNTS 172, art 9.

3 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNGA Res 217 A (III) (adopted 10 December 1948) (UDHR) art 18.

4 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, Right of everyone to take part in cultural life (art. 15, para. 1(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/21, 48 (21 December, 2009).

5 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR) preamble, art 27.

6 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, G.A. Res. 47/135, (Dec. 18, 1992), art 1.

7 Nara document on Authenticity. Adopted at Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention. Nara, 1994.

### International Criminal Law Cases

Azerbaijan's ongoing failure to abide by international law and norms necessitates a response. Past precedent offers possible avenues for accountability. In 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) found Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi guilty of war crimes for the 2012 destruction of ten religious sites in Timbuktu (Mali). After the destruction in 2012 had occurred, UNESCO alerted the international community and International Criminal Court, helping to ensure such crimes did not go unpunished. This was the first judgment under which the destruction of cultural heritage was considered a war crime.<sup>8</sup>

In 2004 Convention and UNESCO allowed the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to sentence Miodrag Jokić to seven years imprisonment for firing on the old town of Dubrovnik in 1991. The old town was an UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site and was protected under the 1954 *Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. There was also no question of jurisdiction in this case, as the ICTY was an ad hoc tribunal with specific statutes. On December 7, 2021 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Azerbaijan to, "Take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries, and artifacts."<sup>9</sup> Since 2021, Azerbaijan has not only failed to heed this order, but has instead intentionally and systematically demolished Armenian places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries, and artifacts.

### **Soviet-era Violations**

During the Soviet era, Azerbaijan began its systemic campaign to destroy Armenian religious sites and cemeteries systemically depopulate Armenian villages, and dismantle thousands of years of cultural heritage. For example, the *Church of Tandzatap* is an important cultural and historical site in the Kashatagh region of Artsakh. The 19th century church was surrounded by a contemporary Armenian cemetery. Between 1989 and 1993, Azerbaijan completely destroyed the cemetery, intentionally damaged the church, and demolished the tombstones with Armenian inscriptions and surrounding khachkars (crosstones).<sup>10</sup> In Nakhijevan, 8 dozen Christian

Armenian churches and cathedrals were destroyed or turned into mosques. Azerbaijan obliterated one of the largest and oldest Armenian cemeteries with over 20,000 cross stones.<sup>11</sup> The vast Armenian cultural heritage across Artsakh and Nakhijevan threatens Azerbaijan's claims to the region. Because of this, cultural genocide has become a part of their state policy.<sup>12</sup>



*Dadivank's khachkars in 2015*

8 Al Mahdi Case. | International Criminal Court. Retrieved August 8, 2025, from <https://www.icc-cpi.int/mali/al-mahdi>

9 International Court of Justice. (2021, December 7). Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan).

10 Monument Watch. Azerbaijan destroyed the church of Tandzatap.

<https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-destroyed-the-church-of-tandzatap/>  
11 THE GUARDIAN, Dale Berning Sawa, Monumental loss: Azerbaijan and 'the worst cultural genocide of the 21st century' (March 1, 2019), at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/monumental-loss-azerbaijan-cultural-genocide-khachkars>

12 Why Armenian Cultural Heritage Threatens Azerbaijan's Claims to Nagorno-Karabakh (February 28, 2021), available at <https://hyperallergic.com/614619/why-armenian-cultural-heritage-threatens-azerbaijans-claims-to-nagorno-karabakh/>.



## Continued Campaign of Erasure: Post-Soviet Violations

Azerbaijan was never properly held accountable for **cultural genocide** in Nakhijevan. Because of the international community's failure to act, Azerbaijan has begun enacting the same policy in the Republic of Artsakh following the 2023 ethnic cleansing. Azerbaijan continues to destroy villages, graveyards, churches, and historical artifacts. This allows them to deny that Armenians ever lived in Artsakh, justify the ongoing colonization of Armenia, and attempt to prevent the return of Armenian life to Artsakh.

The *Church of the Holy All Savior*, also known as *Ghazanchetsots Church* is a 19th century Church in the central part of the city of Shushi. During the first Artsakh war, Azerbaijan converted the church into a military depot and removed its dome. On October 8, 2020, Azerbaijani armed forces bombed the church twice. The second bombing included the use of precision-guided munitions, gravely injuring three journalists on site. Multiple international observers confirmed the absence of military targets in the vicinity of the cathedral, proving the Azeri military targeted Ghazanchetsots because of its status as an Armenian Church.<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch declared the attack a possible war crime: "The two strikes on the church, the second one while journalists and other civilians had gathered at the site, appear to be deliberate ... Apparently, a civilian object with cultural significance, was an intentional target despite the absence of evidence that it was used for military purposes."<sup>14</sup>



*The Church of the Holy All Savior (Ghazanchetsots Church) in Shushi, which was bombed by Azerbaijani forces on October 8, 2020.*

After occupying the city in 2020, Azerbaijan also vandalized over the church: leaving inscriptions on the walls, demolishing a cross shaped window, and removing a sculpture that represented the crucifixion of Christ.

Azerbaijan also attempted to disguise the church's origins as Armenian, restoring it in the style of a Russian orthodox church. This violation of international restoration practices erases the church's historical and cultural significance.<sup>15</sup> Caucasus Heritage Watch reported that the total destruction of the gravestones in the church's graveyard was completed on April 4, 2024.<sup>16</sup> Shushi's 19th century *St. Hovhannes Mkrtich Church*, also known as "*The Church of St. John the Baptist*", or *Kanach Zham* ("Green Church") was blown up by Azerbaijan following the 44-day war. In July 2021, without any justification, Azerbaijan denied the church's Armenian affiliation, instead initiating actions to reclassify it as Russian Orthodox. The Pastor's house, which served as an important location for religious activities and a library for clergy was turned into a cafe.<sup>17</sup> The destruction of churches alongside the falsification of their origins is indicative of a systemic campaign to strip Artsakh of its Armenian heritage, re-writing history to justify Azerbaijan's claims to the land.

The *Church of Vankasar* is a 7th century Armenian church in the Askeran region of Artsakh, within the bounds of the ancient Armenian city of Tigranakert. The church is a key example of the tearly-medieval small cruciform-domed triapsidal Armenian churches, resembling smaller churches in Talin, Karashamb, and Alyaber. The architectural style adds to its historical and cultural significance. Azerbaijan's "restoration" of the church in the 1980s altered it significantly, severing the church from its Armenian heritage: "[T]he Armenian inscriptions and the cross relief on the lintel of the western entrance were deliberately destroyed"<sup>18</sup>

14 Azerbaijan: Attack on Church a Possible War Crime, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, (16 December, 2020),

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>.

13 2020 Human Rights Report: Azerbaijan, U.S. Department of State, 2020, page 27

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AZERBAIJAN-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

15 Monument Watch. Illegal reconstruction of the Surb Ghazanchetsots church in Shushi. <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/illegal-reconstruction-of-the-surb-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/>

16 Caucasus Heritage. DESTRUCTION ALERT: Ghazanchetsots cemetery, Shusha/Shushi. <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/?p=1593>

17 Monument Watch. Azerbaijan demolished the Surb Hovhannes Mkrtich (Kanach Zham) Church of Shushi, reducing it to rubble. <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-demolished-the-surb-hovhannes-mkrtich-kanach-zham-church-of-shushi-reducing-it-to-rubble/>

18 Monument Watch. The Church of Vankasar.

<https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-church-of-vankasar/>

The *St. Hambardzum Church* of Berdzor served as a spiritual hub for both the region and the broader Armenian community. Its courtyard included khachkars dedicated to Armenian Genocide's 90th anniversary and victims of the Spitak earthquake. The Armenian community of Lebanon also donated two of the church's bells. Video footages shows Azerbaijani soldiers mocking Armenians after they demolished the church, comparing the demolition of *St. Hambardzum* to the the demolition of a toilet.<sup>19</sup> Satellite imagery confirmed the church's complete obliteration, which was later justified on Azerbaijani telegram channels which falsely labeled it as an "illegal structure."

The *St. Sargis Church* of Tsar was built in northern Artakh in 1297, containing unique historical details, including an inscription with the term "hamadki", an Armenian land measurement found only in Artsakh. Azerbaijan removed the church's cross, inscripted stone, and part of its khachkars. The removal of Armenian epigraphy, representing an irreplaceable loss, demonstrates how Azerbaijan pays close attention to identifying and systematically destroying important cultural and historical artifacts.

*Mokhernes* village came under Azerbaijani control in October 2020. The village and its surroundings were notable for their rich cultural heritage, with over 20 documented monuments including the renowned "Okhty Drni" monastery. Satellite imagery from 2024 confirms the complete destruction of the Mokhernes village by Azerbaijani forces: most of the village's houses, its school, kindergarten, and other structures were completely demolished. The destruction of the last remaining structures in Mokhernes continues, leaving an urgent need for the international community to intervene and stop the total destruction of the region's remaining cultural heritage.<sup>20</sup>

The *Karin Tak* village has maintained a distinct ethnic and religious identity, as it was home to an exclusively Armenian population. Satellite imaging revealed that the village has since been completely destroyed, as Azerbaijan target locations essential to Armenian life, including community centers, secondary school, homes, kindergarten, cultural center, health center, and the village hall.<sup>21</sup> Azerbaijan's genocidal policy aims to make Armenian life impossible in Artsakh, preventing Armenians from ever returning and solidifying their claim to the territory.



The photo of Google Earth satellite service.

*Gandzasar Monastery* in the first region of Artsakh was first documented in the year 949. Because its inscriptions contain information about the political, spiritual, and economic conditions of medieval Artsakh, it has become a target of Azerbaijan's **cultural genocide**. In 2024, Azeri propagandists filmed a series of videos claiming that Armenians had forged the origins of the *Gandzasar* and *Dadivank* monasteries.<sup>22</sup> This portrays Armenians as malicious to the general population and helps garner support for the occupation of Armenian lands and destruction of cultural artifacts. Azerbaijan also falsely claims the monastery was built by the Turkic governor of Khachen. The vulnerable position of Gandzasar necessitates an immediate response from the international community to prevent its destruction. The *Tatavik* monastery holds over 200 Armenian inscriptions. Azerbaijan took control of it after the second Artsakh war in 2020. It had been partially ruined under Soviet Azerbaijan, and today, Azerbaijan continues to desecrate it while falsifying Albanian origins.<sup>23</sup> In 2024, the Azeri government organized a visit for diplomats who claimed Azerbaijan's destruction was "restoring" the monument. Azerbaijan organized an exhibit in Warsaw to present historical Armenian churches

19 Lindsey Snell (@LindseySnell), X (formerly Twitter) (21 May, 2021) <https://x.com/LindseySnell/status/1395491977052016643>

20 The Mokhernes village has been the target of Azerbaijani attacks, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/the-mokhernes-village-has-been-the-target-of-azerbaijani-attacks/>

21 Complete destruction of the village of Karintak by Azerbaijan, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/complete-destruction-of-the-village-of-karintak-by-azerbaijan/>

22 Албанский Гандзасарский монастырь. Агдере - 01.10.2024, Ризван Гусейнов (@rizer001), YOUTUBE (5 October, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UeplvPZPP10> [Accessed, January 2025].

23 Dadivank monastery: the khachkar of 1182 AD, MONUMENT WATCH, [https://monumentwatch.org/en/facts\\_and\\_details/details-dadivank-monastery-the-khachkar-of-1182-ad/](https://monumentwatch.org/en/facts_and_details/details-dadivank-monastery-the-khachkar-of-1182-ad/) [Accessed, January 2025].

as Albanian. By presenting a narrative that erases thousands of years of indigenous Artsakh-Armenian to the international community, Azerbaijan seeks to gain global support for their cultural genocide and eventual expansion into the Republic of Armenia, claiming it to be “Western Azerbaijan”. The international community continues to provide passive support as Azerbaijan destroys and appropriates Armenian culture with impunity.

In Mekhavan, where the *All Mighty Holy Mother of God* church once stood, satellite images and verified reports from international media now confirm that nothing remains.<sup>24</sup> Azerbaijan also boasted of this attack, circulating videos of the desecration of the church, as the Azeri government seeks to garner popular support for their policy of ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide.<sup>25</sup> *Saint Yeghishe* is an XIX century church in Mataghis. A video that went viral on multiple Azeri telegram channels shows a group of soldiers ripping icons and frames from the walls, throwing them on the ground, and kicking them – including a painting of the Last Supper. Soldiers can be heard proclaiming “I will now enter and desecrate it” and “I will now perform a namaz [Muslim prayer in Iranian] in it.”<sup>26</sup> This shows the culture of hatred, hostility, and violence that Azerbaijan has cultivated towards indigenous Armenian culture.

### Impact on people

For displaced indigenous Armenians, Azerbaijan continues to destroy what is integral to their life and identity. This is a direct assault on their right to maintain their traditions and practice their religion, creating long lasting cultural, psychological, and emotional damage. Speaking to the Center for Truth and Justice, one Artsakh Armenian stated, “After hearing the news [that *Dadivank* had to be handed over to Azerbaijan] people who visited *Dadivank* were in tears, they were kissing the ground and stones. People would also stay at night.” On November 11, 2020, the minister for culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan tweeted images of the *Dadivank* monastery, writing: “*Khudavang* monastery is one of the best testimonies of ancient Caucasian Albania civilization. Built in 9-13th century by wife of Albanian prince Vakhtang in Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan, this complex is composed of *Church of Arzu Khatun*, *Church of Hasan*, basilica and 2 chapels.” Beyond manufacturing consent for their occupation and cultural genocide, Azerbaijan seeks

to psychologically torture Artsakhi-Armenians who are forced to watch the destruction of their homeland from a distance. One Artsakhi Armenian said, “As a kid, I would very often go to the *Shoshka Monastery*, which is a 13th-century Christian Monastery. We would visit the Monastery together with the relatives and pray, mostly for peace all over the world. *Shoshka Monastery* was very dear to my heart. We would even try to hold all our family gatherings there.” This shows how Artsakh’s churches are integral to the lives and culture of Armenians. Intentionally demolishing places essential to Armenian life, history, and culture is a way for Azerbaijan to further their policy of **ethnic cleansing** and **cultural genocide**.

### Conclusion

The sheer size of destruction in occupied Armenian land clearly demonstrates Azerbaijan’s intent to deny that Armenians ever lived in their ancestral lands. The destruction of key religious, cultural, and social sites also demonstrates Azerbaijan’s aim to prevent a return of Armenian life to the region. Their rhetoric around Armenian architecture and artifacts being of non-Armenian origin also set a dangerous precedent that is being used to stage further territorial claims and deny displaced Armenians the right to return. Unless the global community takes action, Azerbaijan’s campaign of occupation, ethnic cleansing, and cultural genocide will continue.

24 Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan: Attack on Church Possible War Crime (December 16, 2020), available at

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>.

25 A video recording of the vicinity of the Cathedral has been posted on social media and is available here: <https://twitter.com/KarabakhRecords/status/1386609875816484864>.

26 The video has been made available on the facebook page of the Armenian Human Rights Defender, available at

<https://www.facebook.com/100017676420633/videos/829108177688389/>.