

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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Geopolitical Malpractice and the Conflict Over Ukraine

Bringing Russia Back in From the Cold

Nikolas K. Gvosdev & Damjan Krnjević Mišković

Strategic Developments Across the Silk Road Region

Implications of the CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan

Filippo Costa Buranelli

Sino-Iranian Relations and Their Impact on South and Central Asia

Stephen J. Blank

3+3 and the Prospects for Pax Caucasia?

Vasif Huseynov

Peace Implementation in the Wake of the Second Karabakh War

Repatriating Azerbaijani IDPs

Fariz Ismailzade

Mine Action and the Environment

Emil M. Hasanov

A New Multilateral Peace and Security Architecture

The Alliance of Civilizations and the Role of Spain

Ramon Blecuá

Repatriating Azerbaijani IDPs

Policy Priorities and Recommendations

Fariz Ismailzade

The conflict over Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which started in 1988 and resulted in the occupation of some 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories, produced a massive humanitarian catastrophe in the region. Around 350,000 ethnic-Azerbaijanis were driven from their homes in the Republic of Armenia in 1988-1989, becoming refugees in the Republic of Azerbaijan. At the same time, the armed conflict in and around the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) resulted in the ethnic cleansing of an additional 650,000 ethnic-Azerbaijanis from their homes in 1992-1993. By some estimates, back in 1993 Azerbaijan was one of the largest refugee- and IDP-hosting countries in the world,

given that 1 out of every 7 of the country's Azerbaijani population fell into one of those two categories. In addition to that, Azerbaijan also hosted large numbers of Chechen, Afghan, and Meskheta Turks.

Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs mostly came from towns and villages outside the former NKAO part of the Karabakh region. Forcibly driven from their homes, they first settled in temporary tent camps, railway wagons, university dormitories, public buildings, and old sanatoriums. After being ethnically cleansed, their houses in Karabakh were looted and destroyed by Armenian occupational forces. Towns like Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Agdam, Gubadly, and Zangelan were entirely raised to the ground.

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During the last 30 years, refugees and IDPs received significant humanitarian assistance from various foreign donors, a plethora of national charity organizations, and, of course, the Azerbaijani government. The latter had even launched a housing program for them with the funds accrued by the State Oil Fund, the country's sovereign wealth fund, which enabled many families to move from tent camps into purpose-built single-family home developments that oftentimes included land plots for agricultural activities. When Ilham Aliyev first ran for president in 2003, he had promised to eliminate the need for all tent camps in the country—a promise that he fulfilled in 2007 thanks to the priority allocation of resources from increasing oil revenues. Nevertheless, large number of refugees and IDPs continued to live in temporary housing in Baku and other urban centers that sometimes had significant safety issues and subpar sanitation facilities.

Despite the fact that refugees and IDPs receive many welfare benefits from the government of Azerbaijan

(e.g., free education, free utilities, monthly remuneration for food and other social payments), their living standards remain suboptimal, and the rate of poverty, health risks, and other social problems among the refugee and IDP community remains higher than the country's average. At the same time, serious concerns remain regarding the employability and religious education of young people belonging to refugee and IDP communities, with many

analysts fearing that this part of the population can be more susceptible to recruitment by foreign radical sects and similar such groups.

The Second Karabakh War, which ended the Armenian occupation of Karabakh, opened up new opportunities for the return of IDPs to their hometowns and the full restoration of their previous livelihoods in the liberated areas. Their joy and happiness, beamed by media outlets to the entire nation and, indeed, to the whole world, was unprecedented in the history of Azerbaijan. The whole country came together in rejoicing the return of

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its lands and the final settlement of what had been a longstanding frozen conflict.

Three Challenges

More than a year has passed since the end of the Second Karabakh War, and the sustainable repatriation of IDPs to their hometowns remains a priority policy issue for the government as well as international donor organizations.

Despite these high hopes, the return of IDPs has not been an easy process for three main reasons: the contamination of Karabakh by mines and explosive remnants of war, the physical destruction of the region, and outstanding security challenges. Each will be addressed in turn.

Karabakh is one of the world's largest and most heavily mined areas in the world. To take the Agdam district as an example, the Armenian side surrendered mine maps to Azerbaijan that contained over 97,000 mines. Similarly large figures

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exist in Fuzuli and other districts. Some 200 Azerbaijani civilians were killed and wounded in the past year due to their efforts to pass without permission into the formerly occupied lands to visit their native villages. Even some construction workers and journalists have been killed.

Right after the Second Karabakh War came to an end on 10 November 2020, the Azerbaijani authorities and influential external stakeholders began exerting pressure on the Armenian government to surrender all its mine maps, which the latter refused to do initially. Only after serious international pressure was applied on Yerevan were maps exchanged for Armenian detainees. Yet, according to Azerbaijani government sources, the accuracy of these maps is around 25 percent.

The Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) has been working intensively in the liberated territories, and some foreign governments (e.g., the U.S., the UK, France, Turkey) have donated specialized equipment and seconded

skilled professionals to ANAMA to speed up mine action activities, yet the large size of the liberated territory and the huge amount of mines delays the completion of these works while posing serious risks to the lives of repatriated IDPs.

The liberation of Karabakh was accompanied by the realization that its towns, villages, and infrastructure had been completely destroyed by Armenian forces during the occupation period. Even seasoned and jaded conflict-resolution experts were shocked by the level of destruction that had taken place in Karabakh. Houses belonging to Azerbaijani families were looted and the result was sold as construction material. Entire neighborhoods were razed to the ground. Whole towns and cities were destroyed. Agdam is now popularly called “Hiroshima of the Caucasus.” Religious and cultural sites were also not spared by the Armenian occupants: sanctuaries, graveyards, monuments, palaces—destroyed. As President Aliyev said during the Second Karabakh War, in liberated Fuzuli Azerbaijani soldiers could not even find a single building to post the Azerbaijani flag.

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Moreover, all other forms of infrastructure, including electric lines, power stations, roads, and railroads have been destroyed as well. The tracks of the famous Soviet-era railway, which connected Azerbaijani, Russian, Iranian, and Armenian railway networks, were taken apart and sold as scrap metal.

Thus, a precondition for the return of IDPs is the undertaking of serious infrastructure works. The Azerbaijani government has already started many of them, including several major highways and roads within Karabakh, the railway system via the Zangezur transport corridor, new international airports (one has already been finished in Fuzuli, two more are under construction in other parts of the liberated region), and dozens of electric modular hydro power stations. Special attention is being given to the construction of housing and agricultural farms. The village of Agali in the Zangelan district is being reconstructed according to contemporary “smart village” norms and systems. In the Agdam district, a new industrial park is under construction. The Sugovushan settlement in the

Tartar district will have major sport facilities near its water reservoir. Many cultural and religious sites, especially in Shusha, are being renovated and restored. Hotels and other tourism objects are under construction in Shusha and Agdam, as well. At the same time, some agricultural areas and fruit orchards are being utilized by Azerbaijani companies.

It is estimated that some initial groups of IDPs will be able to return to Karabakh by the end of 2022, but the numbers will be small. More funding, time, and resources are needed for massive housing construction as well as for the development of other necessary infrastructure objects like schools, hospitals, government offices, factories, and so on. International donor agencies, such as the UN and the World Bank, are also in the process of discussions and negotiations with the government of Azerbaijan in order to help and facilitate the process. In March 2022, the UN sent a large assessment mission into Azerbaijan and its liberated areas in order to plan its own programs, interventions, and assistance.

In this context, worth mentioning is the potential of Karabakh to become not only a large-scale agricultural, tourism, and industrial zone for the Azerbaijani and,

indeed, regional economy, but also to serve as transit hub for the Silk Road region as a whole. For that reason, the Azerbaijani government has offered to Armenia to develop the Zangezur transport corridor and thus to link the transport networks of two countries with Turkey, Russia, and Iran. This could open the potential not only for huge economic benefits for the entire region, but also serve as a strong foundation for the establishment of regional sustainable peace. Unfortunately, Armenia continues to delay this process and it seems like transport and connectivity projects will pass through Iranian territory, leaving Armenia isolated again from regional integration projects. In this regard, an agreement between Iran and Azerbaijan was signed in March 2022, while tri-party discussions between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia have not yet produced many results on this issue, with Armenia delaying the agreement on road construction and only giving consent for the railway connection in the context of the Zangezur transport corridor.

The third reason the return of IDPs has not been an easy process centers around outstanding security challenges. This relates to cross-border violations of the 10 November 2020 tripartite

agreement, lack of progress on the delimitation and demarcation of the state border with Armenia, continued attacks from armed Armenian groups in Khankendi, the unclear future status of the Russian peacekeeping forces, and many other elements of the aforementioned agreement.

Several times, Azerbaijan has offered to sign a peace treaty with Armenia and to peacefully reintegrate the Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijani statehood, but these efforts have so far been rejected.

During his 14 March 2022 speech at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov spoke of Azerbaijan's peace proposal. He indicated that this proposal consists of five key points: *one*, the mutual recognition of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of internationally recognized borders and political independence of each other; *two*, the mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and the acceptance of legally binding obligations not to raise

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such a claim in future; *three*, the obligation to refrain in their inter-state relations from undermining the security of each other, from threat or use of force both against political independence and terri-

torial integrity, and in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the UN Charter; *four*, the delimitation and demarcation of the state border and the establishment of diplomatic relations; and *five*, the unblocking of transportation and other communications, building other communications as appropriate, and the establishment of cooperation in other fields of mutual interest.

A lack of progress on the peace process front might also negatively affect the return rate of Azerbaijani IDPs and increase their concerns regarding their future safety.

IDP Social Survey

Given that some 30 years have passed since the First Karabakh War and the ethnic cleansing of one million Azerbaijanis, the government decided to con-

duct a social survey among IDP families in the wake of the Second Karabakh War in order to better gauge their repatriation needs, plans, concerns, and desires.

New generations of young people belonging to the Azerbaijani refugee and IDP community have been born and raised in camps and settlements, most of them living closer to urban centers and experiencing a lifestyle that is significantly different from the largely rural lifestyle their families led in the formerly occupied regions. The State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons had regularly held smaller-scale local surveys in the past years, mostly for the purpose of better planning the resettlement of IDPs from tent camps into new houses.

The new survey took place between January and December 2021, and ADA University was officially contracted to design the methodology, draft the survey form, and analyze the results. The academic team of the project included not only faculty and experts from ADA University, but also from the State University of Economics, the Institute of Economics of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, and several think tank representatives.

The overall project consisted of three parts: online survey among IDPs (the target number was 50,000 individuals), two successive face-to-face in-depth interviews with 3,000 randomly selected IDP families during home visits to their settlements and current places of residence, and, finally, a survey among Azerbaijani businessmen regarding their investment and business plans in the liberated territories.

The online survey was meant to serve also as an informational and motivational tool for the repatriation effort to come. The survey among the businessmen helped to provide an understanding of the scope of their future activities as well as their main concerns for contemplating investments in Karabakh.

Readers of *Baku Dialogues* are most likely to be interested primarily in the methodology and the results of the face-to-face in-depth surveys. The 3,000 families were selected in a reliable way with proper focus on sociological rules of representation and random selection. The survey form consisted of some 35 questions, and all formerly occupied regions of Azerbaijan were represented in the survey. The volunteers that conducted these surveys and visited IDP homes had passed a

multi-layered selection process and then a specially-designed training program at ADA University.

The survey mainly focused on the intention of IDPs to go back to their former hometowns and villages in Karabakh. It also inquired into the terms and conditions that would need to be met for the repatriation to be successful. Respondents were offered several scenarios and choices to make, ranging from the most minimalistic conditions (i.e., going back to Karabakh but only receiving from the government a secure and safe plot of land) to the most maximalist conditions (i.e., receiving from government land and a new house, free utilities, and jobs). In-between scenarios included only utilities and land; land and housing; land, housing, and other necessary infrastructure.

One should not be surprised that almost all the IDP families surveyed within this project expressed huge excitement and joy about the liberation of their native lands, for which they had been longing and eagerly awaiting for almost 30 years. The percentage of respondents willing

to go back to their hometowns was in the absolute majority.

Yet, obviously, the percentage of respondents willing to return to Karabakh went down more or less proportionate to the minimalization of repatriation conditions. IDP families asked serious questions and expressed concerns about safety issues, housing, jobs, and the general state of infrastructure in the area.

There were, of course, some respondents that expressed a desire to go back home even with their own funds, without waiting for government housing. But the numbers in this category of respondents was in the minority, due to the fact that

most IDPs still live in suboptimal financial and economic conditions. Nevertheless, this category also presents an important opportunity for the government and international donors, because it shows that some percentage of the IDPs surveyed do not need extra financial help in order to settle back in Karabakh. These people should be granted immediate access to secure lands in order to build their houses and secure their presence in the liberated areas.

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Several important observations caught the attention of the survey team, such as the difference in answers within families (depending on gender and age); the inability (and/or unwillingness) of young people to work in agriculture and their strong preference for an urban lifestyle; the strong desire of IDP families to go back to their exact native villages and their refusal to live in other parts of Karabakh (feelings of nostalgia and a longing for their former community of friends and relatives played a strong role in this issue). These issues will need to be considered by the government as it develops plans for the reconstruction of the liberated areas. Some IDPs have also expressed concerns about the continuation of their social welfare benefits and the future status of their IDP cards.

Seven Policy Recommendations

As more time passes since the Second Karabakh War came to an end, so the IDP population becomes more impatient and

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concerned about plans for repatriation. Many of them are eager to visit their native villages, liberated lands, and the graves of their ancestors. Although short bus tours to Agdam and Shusha are being organized by the authorities, such and similar events still do not address the needs and expectations of the entire IDP population.

How will the repatriation be organized, and when? What will be the conditions? And what will happen to the legal status and welfare benefits of the IDPs? Such questions remain largely unanswered.

It is important that the government authorities consider the following seven recommendation during the repatriation process.

First, for the time being, the Azerbaijani government seems to be focusing on the high tech construction of “smart” villages and towns. These are very commendable efforts, and it is likely that the modern way of construction will be appreciated by the future residents of these villages and towns. However, such a pace of development takes more time and financial

resources while at the same time reducing the speed of repatriation. It would be advisable to allocate some plots of secure and landmine free land to those IDPs that are willing to quickly repatriate and develop their own property and agricultural farms there. This would relieve the government of some of its financial burden towards these families while also helping to the repopulation of Karabakh. The latter is especially important in the postwar period, as an empty Karabakh does not look good either to the international community or the Azerbaijani population. Populating Karabakh will also bring economic dividends to the country. It is important to advocate that not all reconstructed villages need to be ultra-modern and high-tech. Letting IDPs develop their own, organic villages in modest ways will also serve the common goal and mission.

Second, sending IDPs back to new housing settlements is part of the effort. Another important element of the repatriation process is providing sustainable economic livelihood to them in future years. This could be possible only after creation of jobs and industries that match their skills, educational level, and professional backgrounds. Thus, a detailed understanding of their backgrounds is important for the development of relevant industries

in liberated Karabakh. Azerbaijani companies should receive strong stimuli from the government to quickly settle in Karabakh and begin operations. Subsidies, tax incentives, and other financial mechanisms must be rapidly developed by the government authorities.

Third, liberated Karabakh has several hundreds of towns and villages, some of which are extremely small and located in remote, hard-to-access mountainous areas. It will be impossible and economically inefficient to redevelop all of them. The government has proposed some initial plans to consolidate and unite some of the villages, which seems to be negatively perceived by the IDP community. They want to relocate back to their exact villages. A strong and persuasive communication and awareness campaign must be organized in order to better educate and inform the IDP families about these developments. It is unrealistic for IDPs to expect their neighborhoods to look exactly the same as they did 30 years ago. Many of their relatives and neighbors have passed away or moved to other countries.

Fourth, it is quite likely that the future economic composition of the Karabakh region will need specific qualifications and specialties that the IDP community presently

lacks or is deficient in. Moving experienced Azerbaijanis from other parts of the country could also become a priority in this regard. The same can apply to young, non-IDP families that are willing to work in labor-intensive sectors of economy. This process should not be delayed too long.

Fifth, the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan has always been renowned for its specific culture and traditions. Preserving these traditions is very important. Thus, repatriation efforts should consist not only of infrastructure works, but also of efforts to restore, preserve, and promote the local sub-culture, revive unique-to-the-region traditions, festivals, elements of cuisine, holidays, music, and handcrafts. This is especially important considering the generation gap between those who lived in Karabakh before the ethnic cleansing and those who grew up outside the liberated areas. Overall, it is important to create not only well-built settlements in Karabakh, but also to foster a sense of community, common values, kinships, relations, and united broad networks.

Sixth, a new law on repatriation must be written so as to bring clarity to the welfare benefits of the IDPs, their legal status, and the phased approach to the repatriation. President Aliyev has indicated that the repatriation must be voluntary, yet more information is needed on steps and procedures for the organization of this repatriation. A phased approach should also include some settlements and public buildings in Baku and other urban areas that have safety problems.

And *seventh*, the government of Azerbaijan should involve foreign companies, philanthropies, and other types of international organizations not only for subcontracting works, which are funded by the state budget, but also as independent investors, joint venture organizers, fully or partially owned subsidiaries, and even as suppliers of temporary humanitarian assistance to local communities. Strong emphasis must be made on increasing capacity for mine action. These efforts can create new jobs and employment opportunities in the

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region. The government will also need to create a transparent and easy-to-navigate process of inviting foreign companies to invest in concrete projects in Karabakh.

While the massive infrastructure projects undertaken by the government of Azerbaijan in the wake of the victory in the Second Karabakh War are commendable, the delay in the repatriation of IDPs raises some concerns. It is obvious that the government alone cannot handle such large-scale activities—at least not in a speedy way. Serious international partnership will be needed.

At the same time, it is important to lower some initially set maximalist goals and expectations regarding the type and style of the housing and infrastructure that needs to be built, and to liberalize the repatriation process, thereby granting more freedom and initiative to the IDP families that are ready, willing, and able to best take advantage of that sort of opportunity.

Diminishing Animosity

Special attention must also be paid to the issue of Karabakh Armenians and their reintegration plans into the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This issue, although not directly linked to the repatriation of Karabakh Azerbaijanis, could also affect the rate of return, especially in those areas inside the former NKAO, where ethnic-Azerbaijanis and ethnic-Armenians lived in close proximity before the First Karabakh War. Diminishing the sense of mutual animosity will be important for peaceful coexistence to take hold in the future. The survey included some questions on the prospect for renewed coexistence and, fortunately, the results, as expressed by Azerbaijani IDPs were quite favorable.

The government of Azerbaijan will need to repatriate Azerbaijani IDPs in parallel with offering to the Karabakh Armenians some incentives for the restoration of peaceful coexistence, the disarmament of their illegal military groups, and some basic steps for joint economic activity in the region. ^{BD}

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