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Nagorno-Karabakh: slowly but surely, Baku is weaponising the green movement to cut off the region’s supplies

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Azerbaijani environmental activists protest what they claim is illegal mining at the Lachin corridor, the Armenian-populated breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region’s only land link with Armenia, in December. Tofik Babayev/AFP

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The clashes that left three Karabakhi Armenian police officers and two Azerbaijani soldiers dead on 5 March 2023 are part of a tally of casualties that observers of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are unfortunately well acquainted with. This latest incident, however, takes place in the context of a blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh that has been ongoing for exactly three months today.

Since 12 December 2022, the movement of goods and people on the Lachin corridor, the only road connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, has been reduced to a bare trickle. Backed by Azerbaijan’s government, demonstrations by self-described Azeri environmentalists who claim to oppose the exploitation of Karabakh’s mineral resources have blocked the road for all but a few vehicles of Russian peacekeepers and of the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). As a result, the estimated 120,000 residents of Nagorno-Karabakh have been plunged into a humanitarian crisis in the midst of the winter and Nagorno-Karabakh’s project of self-declared independence is being dramatically undermined.

These events fit into a wider campaign by Azerbaijan to increase its control of Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory within its internationally recognized borders mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians. Nagorno-Karabakh declared its independence in 1991, and a full scale war ensued. Since a ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994, the region has existed as a de facto state, backed by Armenia. In September 2020, Azerbaijan carried out a successful military offensive that led it to capture vast territories around and in Nagorno-Karabakh. This war is often referred to as the “second Nagorno-Karabakh war”. A ceasefire agreement was signed on November 9, 2020, but violence has resumed between Armenia and Azerbaijan since.

In late 2022, Azerbaijan’s approach has morphed into a strategy to render Nagorno-Karabakh unviable as a de facto state. This tactic is meant to bring about an outflow of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh through the creation of a humanitarian crisis and to delegitimise the project of de facto statehood and the authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh.



2020–2022 map of the Lachin corridor following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement. The new route currently in use is located to the south of the Goris-Stepanakert highway. Wikimedia

The Lachin corridor

The road that runs from the Armenian city of Goris to Stepanakert, the de facto capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, is known as the Lachin corridor. It has been under the control of Armenian troops between 1992 and 2020, ensuring a stable connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. The Lachin Corridor (together with a few other land connections on minor roads) has guaranteed the viability of Nagorno-Karabakh as a self-declared independent entity for almost 30 years: goods and fuel could be brought in from Armenia and further afield; residents of Nagorno-Karabakh could access services in Armenia or even emigrate and then return; and military equipment and personnel could transit from one entity to the other. This, however, began to change with the end of the war of 2020.

Since the signing of the Armenia-Russia-Azerbaijan trilateral agreement that put an end to the war on November 9, 2020, the Lachin corridor has been under the control of Russian Peacekeepers and no other minor road connects Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. As part of the agreement, Azerbaijan agreed to guarantee the security of persons, vehicles and cargo moving along the corridor in both directions. But Azerbaijan seems to have adopted the view that the ceasefire agreement needs not to be respected *à la lettre*. It helps that Russian peacekeepers are limited to 1,960 and are lightly armed; their initial mandate, vast and ill-defined, is for a five-year period. More than two have already passed. What is more, since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia shows little vigour in arbitrating among sides.

Weaponising the green movement

Officially, the blockade is carried out by Azerbaijani ecological activists, civil society members, and volunteers. The protesters claim that they are not blockading the road but simply demanding an end to the exploitation of Karabakh’s mineral resources, which they denounce as illegal and environmentally destructive. They point to the fact Russian Peacekeepers and the ICRC have been able to circulate on the Lachin corridor and even to evacuate patients who needed urgent treatment in Armenia.

However, one barely has to scratch the surface to understand the ecological movement is a ploy by the Azerbaijani government to gain control over the territory. The complaints centre on pollution caused by mining and deforestation, which Azerbaijan describe as an ‘ecocide’. A 2022 report by the United Nations’ Environment Programme (UNEP) is much more ambivalent about the environmental impact of the 30-year long administration of the region by Karabakhi authorities. At the same time, Azerbaijan wrestles with extensive environmental pollution throughout its territory, largely linked to hydrocarbon and mineral extraction. It has shown little resolve in dealing with it, nor any sympathy for bottom-up mobilisation on these issues.

Most of the protesters have no previous experience in environmental activism and many have been identified as civil servants, former military personnel and members of NGOs affiliated to Azerbaijan’s government. And as if this weren’t enough evidence against the movement’s authenticity, Azerbaijan’s government has also mounted a campaign to denounce what they describe as Armenia’s widespread environmental destruction.

In January 2023, Azerbaijan filed a demand for an arbitration process against Armenia under the 1982 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, selectively referring to the UNEP report.

Objective #1: forcing Armenians out

The blockade has a double objective: the first is to create enough privation that the Armenian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh will see no other option but to leave. For three months now, the transport of essential goods such as food, fuel and medication into the territory has been disrupted.

Speaking 10 January on national television, Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, laid out the blockade’s objective:

“For whoever does not want to become our citizen, the road is not closed, but open. They can leave. They can go on their own, or they can ride with peacekeepers, or they can go by bus.”

This means that he gives the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh either the option of becoming Azerbaijani or of moving out of the region. The first is not a real option though: rather, more than thirty years of inter-ethnic violence and war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis make it a terrifying possibility. Leaving is what Azerbaijan encourages.

Goal #2: Making the Nagorno-Karabakh state unviable

The second objective of the blockade is to make Nagorno-Karabakh unviable and deprive it of whatever legitimacy it had accumulated during the previous 30 years as a largely functioning de facto state.

There are other entities that claim de facto independence around the world, similarly to Nagorno-Karabakh: Abkhazia, Somaliland, Transnistria, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, among others. To shore up support for the political project of independence, their authorities strive to keep the lights on, to ensure that the shops are stocked, and to provide a certain level of public services and stability, regardless of their juridical status in the international arena.

However, Azerbaijan’s blockade along the Lachin corridor make this a tough job for Nagorno-Karabakh’s government. There is little they can do to improve the situation: there are no alternative roads, an air bridge is out of the question, and there is no spare capacity within Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

Denouncing Baku’s attempts at “ethnic cleansing”, Arayik Harutyunyan, the de facto President of Nagorno-Karabakh, has urged the international community to pressure Azerbaijan on lifting the blockade. So far, the calls to order by several states, international organisations and NGOs (the EU parliament, the Council of Europe, and Amnesty International, among others) have had little effect. On 22 February, the International Court of Justice ruled on a case of provisional measures filed by Armenia, requiring Azerbaijan to ensure unimpeded movement through the Lachin corridor. However, the ruling comes with no enforcement mechanism.

The frailty of the situation was evident since the signing of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, which deprived Nagorno-Karabakh authorities of their capacity to ensure its own security through military means and of a land bridge to Armenia. By engineering a blockade, Azerbaijan is exploiting its loopholes to the full, and slowly but surely demonstrating the state’s unviability.

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