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Postwar Karabakh: What Is the Resettlement Potential?

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Abstract

The aftermath of the 44-day Second Karabakh War resulted in the significant superiority and final victory of Azerbaijan, and the liberation of occupied territories revealed a nationwide plan for socioeconomic development. Currently, the rising actuality of the resettlement of internally displaced people (IDPs) in their freed homeland is the primary focus of both governmental and societal discourse. This article highlights the resettlement potential in Azerbaijan’s postwar territories. A survey unveils a high rate of repatriation intention among IDPs and substantial resettlement potential among non-IDPs.

Introduction

Towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first ethnic identity-based crises within the Union after World War II emerged in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Askerov, 2020). The conflict left approximately 1 million ref-

ugees and internally displaced people (IDP) related to Azerbaijan, while the country lost 20% of its internationally recognized territory as well. During the war, residents of the occupied settlements witnessed ethnic cleansing and the massive violation of human rights by the

Armenian military forces (Cornell, 1997). The number of people living in the occupied districts in 1990 is represented by the following figures: Khankendi—56.9 thousand; Khojaly—21.2 thousand; Khojavend—41.7 thousand; Shusha—21.3 thousand; Agdam—145.5 thousand; Fuzuli—96 thousand; Jabrayil—49.4 thousand; Kalbadjar—56.6 thousand; Gubadli—28.7 thousand; Lachin—52.7 thousand; and Zangilan—31.4 thousand (SSCAR, 2022). While the population of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was primarily ethnic Armenian (77% out of 189 thousand people), only 5–6% of them were located in Lachin (European Court of Human Rights, 2015). Ethnic Azerbaijanis were dominant in Lachin and the surrounding districts.

This conflict has been “unfreezing” since 2011 and culminated with the Four-Day War in April 2016 (Shirinyan, 2016). The next critical clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan military forces emerged in July 2020—less than 3 months before the 44-day war.

On September 27, 2020, the conflict erupted into a war that lasted 44 days. Azerbaijan declared the liberation of Jabrayil (October 4), Fuzuli (October 17), Zangilan (October 20), Gubadli (October 25) and Shusha city (November 8) during the war. On November 9, 2020, a trilateral agreement signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia ended the hostilities. As per the conditions of the agreement, Armenia returned the remainder of the occupied territories to the Azerbaijan districts of Agdam (November 20), Kalbadjar (November 25) and Lachin (December 1) within the same year.

Now, the primary issue for Azerbaijan is whether the government will be able to resettle the liberated regions and allow to the return of IDPs. Will IDPs return? What is the resettlement potential in Karabakh?

Postwar Challenges: What Comes Next?

The war ended, yet a new challenge began. Liberated districts were found to be destroyed, with no infrastructure remaining for the resettlement of IDPs. However, the more crucial challenge consists of the landmines planted by the Armenian military forces, which threaten the lives of civilians. The magnitude of the problem is clear in the context of the provision of landmine maps presented by Armenia (Wolkov, 2021; Mehdiyev, 2021). The number of landmines in the region is still unknown. The presence of massive landmines and unexploded ordnance in liberated areas make resettlement difficult, and the removal process will take several years to conclude.

Despite these hurdles, transformation is happening at a breathtaking speed (Troianovski, 2021). In 2021, Azerbaijan allocated 1.5 billion USD for the reconstruction of liberated territories, followed by 1.2 billion USD (2.2 billion AZN) in 2022 to be used to restore infra-

structure (including electricity, gas, water, communications, roads, education, health), as well as cultural and historical monuments (Azernews, 2022). Repatriation to liberated areas is one of five key national priorities up to 2030. The construction and inauguration of the Fuzuli International Airport within less than a year, as well as the building of airports in Lachin and Zangilan, the opening of a new road (“Zəfər Yolu”) to Shusha, and the confirmation of master plans of development for liberated territories (for example, Agdam city), are some of the works that have been conducted in Karabakh. The frequent visits of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, to the region also reconfirms that the rebuilding and resettlement of Karabakh is a strategic issue.

However, the repatriation of IDPs depends on many factors. After 28 years of occupation, IDP families have new realities that will affect their decision about a return, considering that the threat of landmines and unexploded ordnance could undermine their resettlement intentions. On the other hand, the majority of Azerbaijani IDPs lived in the most deplorable conditions and experienced psychological trauma over the course of decades, which might be a driving factor for their willingness to return (Guliyev, 2020).

Data and Methodology

The examination of a large-scale national self-administered survey conducted by a nongovernmental independent agency (ASERC, 2021) allows some predictions about resettlement intentions among IDPs and non-IDPs. The survey does not specifically focus on the repatriation issue; rather, it aims to study welfare in society and public opinion about selected issues. There are three related questions about the subject. The primary question is “*Would you like to settle and permanently live in Karabakh?*” with the following response options:

1. Yes, as soon as possible upon being allowed.
2. Yes, but I must be sure that my life standards will be better there.
3. I have never thought about this.
4. No.

Pragmatically, the respondents who choose option 1 or 2 can be considered returnees and are much more likely to be potential repatriants. In particular, the “more valuable” category is those who choose the first answer option.

Another question asks whether the respondent is an IDP or non-IDP (originally from Karabakh or other regions). The third related question identifies whether the respondent would like to assist with the rebuilding and development of Karabakh as an employee. This question aims to check the reliability of responses. Logically, potential repatriants should be interested in

engagement in the rebuilding process, which would bring them earlier prospective employment guarantees.

It must be noted that the survey used a self-administered questionnaire conducted online from September 10 to November 6, 2021. Among 2208 respondents (mean age is 34.6), 44.7% are males, 54.2% are females, 7.7% (169 persons) are IDPs and 4.3% are non-IDPs but originate from the Karabakh region.

The Big Question: Will IDPs Return?

According to the survey, repatriation intentions among IDPs are quite high, while a substantial portion of non-IDP respondents are also interested in settling in Karabakh and permanently living there (Table 1). Among the surveyed IDPs, 46.2% want to settle in Karabakh as soon as possible. Among the others, 40.2% intend to settle on the condition of having better life standards. Overall, the repatriation potential among the IDPs is approximately 87.3%. Regarding the non-IDPs, the rate is higher among those who have origination ties with Karabakh compared with those who do not (89.3% and 72.1%, respectively). Slightly less than 1/3 of the remaining respondents are interested in settling and permanently living in Karabakh.

Among the IDPs, repatriation intention represents the highest rate among those aged 50–64, of whom 89.5% want to settle in Karabakh as soon as possible. The underlying factor is that these individuals witnessed the Karabakh region before its occupation. The repatriation intention slightly decreases to 90.2% among those aged 35–49. Among young adults, the repatriation intention is comparatively lower. Although the respondents aged 17–34 have mostly never seen Karabakh before, 38.7% of them emphasize their desire to settle in the region as soon as possible.

Simultaneously, respondents show a high level of intention for engagement in the rebuilding of postconflict areas (Table 2). A total of 13.8% of all respondents intend to take a role in the rebuilding process if they receive any job offer, while 28.2% expect an appropriate

(related) job offer. In contrast, the overall engagement intention among IDPs is 79.8%. A total of 26.6% are open to any job offer, while 40.8% expect to have a relevant job offer.

Conclusion

Effective repatriation to postwar Karabakh is a strategic goal for Azerbaijan in the current decade. Despite the fact that the war has ended and active military operations have ceased, the presence of massive landmines and unexploded ordnance and the destruction of infrastructure in the liberated areas make immediate repatriation challenging. The changes in the lifestyle of IDPs over the past 2.5 decades or more also negatively affect repatriation intention.

Nevertheless, a recent social survey conducted among people in Azerbaijan (including IDPs) presents evidence of high repatriation intention (over 80%) in all age groups. Simultaneously, many respondents who represent non-IDPs also report an intention to permanently settle in Karabakh. Current observations show that a large portion of potential repatriants are waiting for the government's decision regarding the details and start of the general movement process. Table 3 tabulates the basic sociodemographic profile of potential repatriants, which represents a total sample ratio for each category.

To efficiently manage repatriation and promote permanent settlement, it would be preferable if the Azerbaijani government could sustain prospective repatriants' involvement in the rebuilding activities of freed lands (as shown in Table 2). Overall, the preferences of potential repatriants will be unveiled during the massive resettlement period. An online platform that brings employers and potential repatriants together would further enhance the permanent settling probability of individuals. Without such measures in place, the enormous numbers of repatriants could cause serious failures and management gaps during resettlement in postwar Karabakh.

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Tables

Table 1: Repatriation Intentions to Karabakh

Would you like to settle and permanently live in Karabakh?	IDPs	Non-IDPs		
		Registered but has no IDP status	Originally from Karabakh	All others
Yes, as soon as possible upon being allowed.	46.2%	42.9%	25.0%	6.7%
Yes, but I must be sure that my life standards will be better there.	40.2%	46.4%	47.1%	23.8%
I have never thought about this.	5.3%	0.0%	17.6%	30.3%
No.	8.3%	10.7%	10.3%	39.2%
Total by column	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2: Intention of Permanently Settling and Being Involved in the Rebuilding Process in Karabakh

<i>Would you like to be involved (on a paid basis) in the rebuilding of Karabakh?</i>	<i>Yes, as soon as possible upon allowed</i>	<i>Yes, but might be sure that my life standards will be better over there</i>	<i>I have never thought about this</i>	No	All respondents
<i>Yes, I am ready for any job engagement.</i>	42.3%	14.7%	0.0%	14.3%	26.6%
<i>Yes, but only for employment opportunities relevant to my area of specialization.</i>	47.4%	42.6%	22.2%	7.1%	40.8%
<i>Yes, but this is impossible now (family reasons, etc.).</i>	3.8%	22.1%	22.2%	7.1%	12.4%
<i>I have never thought about it.</i>	2.7%	11.8%	55.6%	7.1%	9.5%
<i>No.</i>	3.8%	8.8%	0.0%	64.4%	10.7%
Total by column	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: Sociodemographic Profile of Potential Repatriants

	Potential repatriants		Ratio of the whole sample
	IDPs	Non-IDPs	
By gender identity			
Male	45.8%	50.1%	45.2%
Female	54.2%	49.9%	54.8%
By marital status			
Married	56%	49.5%	51.2%
Unmarried	44%	50.5%	48.8%
By highest educational attainment			
Prebachelor	35.6%	25.1%	28.7%
Bachelor	42.5%	47.2%	46.1%
Post-bachelor	21.9%	27.7%	25.2%
By employment status			
Employed	60.3%	64.2%	61.2%
Unemployed	19.2%	18.4%	18.1%
Not in labour force	20.5%	17.4%	20.7%