

1 **Meeting the Health and Psychosocial Needs and Ensuring the Human Rights of Refugees From**  
2 **Nagorno-Karabakh**

3  
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6

7 Abstract

8 Wars of all types are harmful to health, but wars aiming to remove entire populations are particularly  
9 threatening. While the term “ethnic cleansing” has garnered varied definitions over the years, the United  
10 Nations describes it as a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove, through  
11 violent and terror-inspiring means, the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from a  
12 certain geographic area. The Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, in the mountains of the South Caucasus,  
13 are in need of a coordinated set of interdisciplinary approaches to address their health and psychosocial  
14 needs. The public health community calls on political powers at all levels to protect health and save lives  
15 by providing security and protection, human rights monitoring, humanitarian aid, refugee support,  
16 medical assistance, psychosocial support, education, peace mediation, amnesty and legal support,  
17 sanctions and diplomacy, reconstruction and economic support, accountability, and regional cooperation.  
18

19 Relationship to Existing APHA Policy Statements

20 APHA has repeatedly adopted action statements that affirm the importance of social, political, economic,  
21 and health justice and has opposed the blockade of ports. The blockade of entry to the Nagorno-Karabakh  
22 territory was the precursor to armed invasion and occupation of the area, which has resulted in a  
23 humanitarian catastrophe and a health emergency. APHA similarly opposed the blockade of Yemen’s  
24 ports in 2020. These vital passageways are required to permit the unimpeded flow of food, medicine, and  
25 other humanitarian goods.  
26

27 Previous statements adopted by APHA related to war and health include the following:

- 28 • APHA Policy Statement 201910: A Call to End Violent Attacks on Health Workers and Health  
29 Facilities in War and Armed Conflict
- 30 • APHA Policy Statement 201810: International Food Security and Public Health: Supporting  
31 Initiatives and Actions
- 32 • APHA Policy Statement 20158: Preventing Occupational Transmission of Globally Emerging  
33 Infectious Disease Threats
- 34 • APHA Policy Statement 20095: The Role of Public Health Practitioners, Academics, and  
35 Advocates in Relation to Armed Conflict and War

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- 36 • APHA Policy Statement 20089: Strengthening Health Systems in Developing Countries
- 37 • APHA Policy Statement 200718: Opposition to U.S. Attack on Iran
- 38 • APHA Policy Statement 200617: Opposition to the Continuation of the War in Iraq
- 39 • APHA Policy Statement 200211: Opposing War in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf
- 40 • APHA Policy Statement 20208: A Call to End the Bombing of Yemen and the Blockade on Its
- 41 Ports

42 The statements below are to be archived but represent historical APHA positions in this field:

- 43 • APHA Policy Statement 200030: Preventing Genocide
- 44 • APHA Policy Statement 9923: Opposing War in the Middle East
- 45 • APHA Policy Statement 9817: Arms Trade Code of Conduct
- 46 • APHA Policy Statement 9715: Impact of Economic Embargoes on Populations Health and
- 47 Wellbeing
- 48 • APHA Policy Statement 8926: Foreign Assistance Act
- 49 • APHA Policy Statement 8531(PP): The Health Effects of Militarism
- 50 • APHA Policy Statement 7913: World Peace and the Military Budget
- 51 • APHA Policy Statement 7632(PP): Policy Statement on International Health
- 52 • APHA Policy Statement 6716(PP): International Health
- 53 • APHA Policy Statement 20188: Advancing the Health of Refugees and Displaced Persons

54 'Problem Statement

55 Armenia's history is scarred by a legacy of oppression and coerced displacement, most notably by the  
56 tragic occurrence of the world's first genocide during the onset of World War I under the Ottoman  
57 Empire. This genocide saw the mass murder of more than a million Armenians, carried out through  
58 harrowing death marches into the Syrian Desert. Although scholars and historians have consistently  
59 labeled these events as a genocide, not until 2019 did the United States government officially recognize  
60 these massacres as such.[1] Escaping the carnage, approximately 80,000 Armenians migrated to the  
61 United States at the end of World War I.[2,3] The United States actively organized assistance to  
62 Armenians by providing aid to survivors under the Woodrow Wilson administration.[4] Today, one of the  
63 largest Armenian populations living outside of Armenia resides in California, with more than 200,000  
64 Armenians living in Los Angeles County alone. There are also large Armenian Diaspora communities in  
65 Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and Florida totaling approximately 2 million in the  
66 United States, almost as many as in Armenia itself. For more than a century, the United States has been  
67 home to Armenians who have contributed to its economic growth, ethnic diversity, and cultural richness.

68

69 In 1923, the Soviet Union established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (“Artsakh” to  
70 Armenians)—home to a 95% ethnically Armenian population—within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist  
71 Republic.[5] Nagorno-Karabakh’s regional legislature passed a resolution in 1988 declaring its intention  
72 to join the Republic of Armenia, despite its official location within Azerbaijan. Armed fighting between  
73 the two republics, which have a long history of ethnic tension, was kept under relative control during  
74 Soviet rule. As the Soviet Union began to unravel, so did peace in the region. Amid Soviet dissolution in  
75 1991, just as Armenia and Azerbaijan achieved statehood, Nagorno-Karabakh officially declared  
76 independence. War erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan, resulting in roughly 30,000 casualties and  
77 creating hundreds of thousands of refugees.[6,7] By 1993, Armenia had gained control of Nagorno-  
78 Karabakh and occupied 20% of Azerbaijan’s geographic area. In 1994, Russia brokered a ceasefire  
79 known as the Bishkek Protocol, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh de facto independent, with a self-claimed  
80 democratically elected government based in Stepanakert, but still heavily reliant on close economic,  
81 political, and military ties with Armenia.[8]

82

83 Geopolitical history shaping the health and well-being of Armenian people: In 2020, Azerbaijan initiated  
84 a large-scale war against Nagorno-Karabakh with the open military and political support of Turkey.  
85 Ballistic missiles, drones, and other heavy artillery have been used, resulting in multiple civilian deaths  
86 and injuries. Hospitals, churches, kindergartens, and schools were hit during the bombardment and  
87 missile attacks, which included the use of internationally banned cluster bombs. As a result of the  
88 intensive bombardment of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 by the Azerbaijani armed forces, it was reported  
89 that half of Nagorno-Karabakh’s residents, mainly women, children, and the elderly, were displaced.[9]

90

91 The history of Nagorno-Karabakh is marked by centuries of cultural, ethnic, and political complexity.  
92 Despite having a historically Armenian majority, the Soviet Union under Stalin incorporated Nagorno-  
93 Karabakh into Soviet Azerbaijan (rather than Soviet Armenia) in the 1920s, making it an autonomous  
94 oblast. Repeated efforts by the Armenians to free themselves of Azeri domination were denied by both  
95 the Soviets and the Azeris. The failure to obtain freedom, despite the promise of Glasnost in the late  
96 1980s, sparked a full-scale war in 1992. A 1994 ceasefire failed to lead to lasting peace. Nagorno-  
97 Karabakh subsequently functioned as a de facto independent state, albeit unrecognized by the  
98 international community, for nearly three decades. In September 2020, hostilities flared again, resulting in  
99 about a 30% loss of territory to the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. In an effort to finally regain total control  
100 of the region, Azerbaijan instituted a blockade of the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia  
101 (the Lachin Corridor) on December 12, 2022. For 10 months the international community decried the  
102 blockade but was unable to force Azerbaijan to lift it. Then, on September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan attacked  
103 Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing the weakened population into a full surrender. Within a few days, nearly the

104 entire population of indigenous Armenians fled to Armenia through the now open Lachin Corridor. In a  
105 span of one week, the nation of Armenia increased its population by more than 3%, creating a  
106 humanitarian crisis.[10]

107  
108 Humanitarian conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh were already poor when Azerbaijan’s 2023 invasion was  
109 launched, after Azerbaijan’s months-long punitive blockade on food, medicine, and other essential goods.  
110 The Lachin Corridor “Road of Life” became the only route connecting the estimated 120,000 ethnic  
111 Armenians living in the Azerbaijan-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh region with the Republic of Armenia  
112 after the 2020 war.[11]

113  
114 Three years after the 44-day war of 2020, without brokering a peace treaty, Azerbaijan instituted a  
115 blockade of the Lachin Corridor—the vital lifeline that connected the Armenian people of Nagorno-  
116 Karabakh with the Republic of Armenia—on December 12, 2022, under the guise of an environmental  
117 protest. Subsequently, severe shortages of food, medical supplies, drinking water, and other essentials  
118 created a dire humanitarian crisis for the 120,000 people living in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan also  
119 sabotaged important civilian infrastructure such as power transmission lines and fixed-line Internet. The  
120 blocking of access to essential goods such as food, water, and heat by the Azerbaijani government was  
121 unconscionable.[12]

122  
123 Azerbaijan emerged from the 2020 conflict reclaiming all of the territory it had lost to the Armenians in  
124 the early 1990s, in addition to one third of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh that it included under the  
125 Soviet Union.[13] During the nearly yearlong blockade, the United States unsuccessfully called for the  
126 lifting of the blockade and worked to allow humanitarian assistance to reach the population of Nagorno-  
127 Karabakh. Furthermore, the United States urged officials from Baku (the capital of Azerbaijan) and  
128 representatives from Stepanakert (Nagorno-Karabakh’s primary city) to convene without delay to agree  
129 on the means of transporting critical provisions to the men, women, and children of Nagorno-Karabakh—  
130 including additional supply routes—and resume discussions on all outstanding issues. U.S. spokespersons  
131 stated that basic humanitarian assistance should never be held hostage to political disagreements.[14]

132  
133 A Los Angeles Times editorial described Azerbaijan as using the blockade to make living conditions so  
134 unbearable that Armenians would be forced to leave the region.[15]

135  
136 Within 24 hours of the Azeri assault on September 19, 2023, the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities  
137 surrendered. When Azerbaijan lifted the Lachin blockade a few days later, an exodus of 90% of  
138 Armenians indigenous to this land fled in a massive displacement to Armenia. Others were killed,

139 kidnapped, or arrested. At the tail end of the exodus, in the first week of October, a United Nations  
140 mission arrived in Nagorno-Karabakh for the first time in three decades to assess the situation.[16]  
141 Registration intake centers in the Republic of Armenia became overwhelmed with huge numbers of  
142 exhausted and traumatized refugees, a third of whom were children. The United States, Armenia, and  
143 others have accused Azerbaijan of ethnic cleansing. Armenia's European Union envoy has urged Western  
144 nations to sanction Azerbaijan, including its lucrative oil and gas industry, and requested military aid for  
145 Armenia.[17]

146  
147 On September 26, 2023, ethnic Armenians were queueing at overwhelmed petrol stations, desperate to  
148 leave the territory after it surrendered to Azerbaijan, and an explosion at a crowded gas station in  
149 Nagorno-Karabakh region left at least 170 people dead and 290 injured.[18] Hospitals were already short  
150 on supplies because of the blockade, impeding their ability to care for those in the explosion or those  
151 attempting to flee. Some of the injured were evacuated by Armenian helicopters to hospitals in Yerevan,  
152 Armenia's capital. The United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting to discuss the  
153 worsening humanitarian situation in mid-August 2023.[19] The International Committee of the Red Cross  
154 (ICRC) alerted the humanitarian world that its aid had been blocked, rendering the relief organization  
155 unable to take supplies of food and medicine in or out.[20] Tatiana Oganessian, doctor and head of a  
156 foundation of health professionals that is now helping refugees in Goris, told the BBC that people who  
157 came to the doctors were exhausted, malnourished and psychologically crushed. Her report also warned  
158 that those who stayed could face ethnic cleansing.[21]

159  
160 External parties have benefited from Azerbaijan's military victories, and these alliances stand in the way  
161 of lasting peace. For example, Turkey stands to gain from the erasure of Armenians from Nagorno-  
162 Karabakh. Turkey seeks to complete the "Zangezur land corridor" to give Baku (Azerbaijan's capital)  
163 unimpeded access to the Nakhchivan territory (previously captured from Armenia in the 2020 conflict).  
164 Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev hosted talks with Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan in late September  
165 2023, expressing his interest in creating a land corridor between Turkey and Azerbaijan via Armenia that  
166 would cut off Armenia from its southern and only border with Iran.[22] Armenia's decoupling from  
167 Russia, Russia's growing alliance with Azerbaijan, and the attempt of the Russo-Azerbaijani axis to keep  
168 the United States and the West out of the region have led to Russia's tacit support in obstructing and  
169 discrediting the Western-led peace process to control regional instability and obstructing Armenia's  
170 democratization, its escape from Russia's orbit, and Armenia's Western pivot. Furthermore, Russian  
171 peacekeeping forces have facilitated the Lachin blockade and the subsequent humanitarian crisis that  
172 preceded the Azeri bombardment campaign. In the wake of the operation, Armenian lawmakers approved  
173 a key step in joining another international court based in The Hague: the International Criminal Court

174 (ICC).[23] This infuriated Armenia’s traditional ally Russia because the ICC has issued an arrest warrant  
175 for Kremlin chief Vladimir Putin on allegations of abducting Ukrainian children during Moscow’s  
176 invasion.

177  
178 As well, one of Azerbaijan’s most powerful allies, Israel, is entangled in this conflict, primarily because  
179 of its interests in the geopolitical power axis vis-à-vis Iran.[24] After the dissolution of the Soviet Union,  
180 Israel was one of the first states to recognize the newly independent Republic of Azerbaijan on December  
181 25, 1991, and has been the source of weapons to fight Armenians. Israel sought to increase its legitimacy  
182 in the Muslim world with newfound post-Soviet majority-Muslim republics, reduce Arab influence, gain  
183 additional United Nations votes, and garner the new states’ cooperation in facilitating Jewish immigration  
184 to Israel.[25]

185  
186 Health status assessment: Hybrid warfare strategies in the Nagorno-Karabakh setting include  
187 weaponization of health care, use of nonconventional weapons, and strategic displacement of civilian  
188 populations via direct targeting, sexual violence, disinformation campaigns, and disruption of essential  
189 services such as water, food, gas, and access to health care.[26] The 2020 second Nagorno-Karabakh war  
190 between Azerbaijan and Armenia harmed public health by displacing, wounding, disabling, and/or killing  
191 ethnic Armenians; the subsequent blockade of the Lachin Corridor compounded health risks. The large-  
192 scale attack by Azerbaijani forces in September 2023 escalated that campaign, weakening the ability for  
193 resistance by people who had been subjected to a punitive blockade since December of the previous  
194 year.[27]

195  
196 With limited evidence provided by authorities, media outlets, and human rights organizations, little is  
197 known about the death toll caused by the 44-day conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. In  
198 one study, age-sex vital registration data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the de facto Republic of  
199 Nagorno-Karabakh were used to assess differences in 2020 observed mortality values from expected  
200 deaths based on trends in mortality between 2015 and 2019 and offer estimates of excess mortality  
201 resulting from the conflict. The war was found to have produced almost 6,500 excess deaths among  
202 people 15 to 49 years of age. Nearly 2,800 excess losses occurred in Armenia, 3,400 in Azerbaijan, and  
203 310 in de facto Nagorno-Karabakh. Deaths were highly concentrated among late adolescent and young  
204 adult males, suggesting that most excess mortality was directly related to combat rather than COVID-19.  
205 Beyond the human tragedy, for small countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, the loss of a generation  
206 of young men represents a considerable long-term cost in terms of future demographic, economic, and  
207 social development.[28]

208

209 The war led to a significant mental health burden of disease among this population, including depression,  
210 anxiety, and stress-related psychosomatic illnesses such as dissociative disorder. However, access to  
211 medical and psychological services is limited.[29] A study of combat-exposed military service members  
212 in Nagorno-Karabakh revealed more than half (54.3%) of service members admitted to an inpatient  
213 residential treatment program for evaluation of fitness to serve and treatment of trauma-related conditions  
214 met the provisional posttraumatic stress disorder diagnosis. The most common symptoms rated  
215 moderately or higher included sleep troubles, disturbing memories and dreams, avoidance of memories,  
216 and negative feelings.[30]

217  
218 During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, 93 Armenian soldiers with severe burns were transferred to the  
219 National Burn Center in Yerevan, Armenia. Among these soldiers, 87 had their cases assessed by a team  
220 of surgeons from Assistance Publique–Hôpitaux de Paris. Their average age was 24 years, and the  
221 average affected total body surface area was 14%. An array of unusual injuries and/or clinical evolutions  
222 were noted in this cohort. The 16 surviving patients managed in intensive care were examined under  
223 ultraviolet light, and all had fluorescence either in their external ear canals and/or on the burn lesions.  
224 Cavitary lesions associated with acute hypocalcemia were highly in favor of white phosphorus burns.[31]

225  
226 Prisoners of war: After this most recent blitz (September 19, 2023), the Azeris began arresting heads of  
227 the Nagorno-Karabakh government, including Ruben Vardanyan, philanthropist cofounder of the Aurora  
228 Humanitarian Initiative, who headed Nagorno-Karabakh’s government between November 2022 and  
229 February 2023. According to the ceasefire agreement of 2020, Armenian prisoners of war (POWs) taken  
230 during the war of 2020 should have already been released (but many have not), and no accounting has  
231 been made of either civilians or military missing in action. While Armenia had allowed the ICRC access  
232 to its Azeri prisoners (and has now released them all), the ICRC has not been allowed to visit imprisoned  
233 Armenians.[32]

234  
235 The Lancet has reported evidence of increased death rates in the early years after severe POW captivity  
236 experiences from accidents and infection. Relative to their combat counterparts, POWs are also at  
237 increased risk of somatic complaints, musculoskeletal disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and peripheral  
238 neuropathies.[33]

239  
240 Evidence-Based Strategies to Address the Problem

241 A just resolution of the armed conflict is required to achieve peace and improve health. The United States,  
242 working with the international community, supports an internationally implemented peace agreement that

243 protects the territorial integrity of Armenia and the long-term security needs of Armenians in the  
244 region.[34]

245  
246 For those who have endured war trauma, researchers recommend organizing programs such as support  
247 groups to share wartime experiences. Resilience promotion, psychosocial support for health care  
248 providers, integral COVID-19 management, and education support are recommended to enhance the  
249 condition of displaced Armenian populations.

250  
251 **Opposing Arguments/Evidence**  
252 The politics of the blockade, invasion, and wholesale population displacement in Nagorno-Karabakh  
253 attract multiple viewpoints. It must be acknowledged that, although it is a disputed territory, Nagorno-  
254 Karabakh is recognized by the United Nations Security Council as a territory of Azerbaijan,[35]  
255 regardless of the ethnic identity or political preferences of its inhabitants. Since the conflict's beginning in  
256 the late 1980s, ethnic Azerbaijanis, too, have felt compelled to flee their homes. Despite nearly 30 years  
257 of negotiations involving international intermediaries, a peace agreement has not been achieved.[36]

258  
259 **Alternative Strategies**  
260 Recent military events in Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in a resolution of the conflict, although this  
261 resolution is unsustainable without justice. After Azerbaijan's seizure of the region in September, more  
262 than 100,000 ethnic Armenians fled Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's government has stated that it will  
263 accommodate the refugees as "equal citizens" as best as possible with limited resources.[37]

264  
265 It is antithetical to APHA principles to rely on military resolution of conflicts over land and sovereignty.  
266 War crimes should be prosecuted in courts with international legitimacy. Failure to ensure accountability  
267 for war crimes will undoubtedly result in this scenario being played out with greater frequency globally,  
268 erasing the public health wins of the previous century.

269  
270 **Action Steps**  
271 APHA is committed to justice and peace as social, political, and economic determinants of health. As a  
272 means of reaching this commitment, APHA recommends the following action steps.  
273 1. Security and protection: We urge Azerbaijan to take concrete measures to respect the rights and  
274 security of any ethnic Armenians remaining in Nagorno-Karabakh, including ensuring unimpeded  
275 humanitarian access to the civilian population in need. Going forward, civilians and humanitarian  
276 organizations must have unimpeded access via the Lachin Corridor. As is the right of all refugee



- 277 populations, Azerbaijan should ensure the right of expelled Armenians to return to Nagorno-  
278 Karabakh.
- 279 2. Human rights monitoring: We urge the U.S. Congress to condemn Azerbaijan's blockade of the  
280 Nagorno-Karabakh territory and call for continued monitoring of ongoing human rights  
281 violations.
- 282 3. Humanitarian aid: We urge Azerbaijan to refrain from further hostilities toward Armenians either  
283 remaining in or fleeing from Nagorno-Karabakh and provide unhindered humanitarian access to  
284 support Armenian health and social needs, including allowing the International Committee of the  
285 Red Cross unfettered access to Armenian prisoners to ensure just and humane treatment and to  
286 Nagorno-Karabakh.
- 287 4. Refugee support: We urge relief agencies and bilateral donors to support Armenia's efforts to  
288 accommodate displaced persons and refugees, including providing funding to support the full  
289 integration of the refugees into Armenia's health system and strengthening that system with  
290 improved primary health care, better quality of care, and universal coverage, all of which are  
291 aligned with the priorities of the Armenian Ministry of Health. Also, the United Nations should  
292 be able to conduct an international observer mission into Nagorno-Karabakh to ensure that any  
293 remaining Armenians are safely allowed to leave if they so choose or to remain in their homes  
294 safely.
- 295 5. Medical assistance: We urge international organizations to finance medical teams in providing  
296 equipment and supplies to address the health care needs of those affected by the crisis, including  
297 treatment for injuries and trauma. Also, these organizations should ensure that health care  
298 providers are trained in trauma-centered care and that they, too, have access to mental health  
299 services.
- 300 6. Psychosocial support: We urge the United Nations to adopt and support policies, health care  
301 services, information systems, and social initiatives promoting social integration and improving  
302 the health of Armenian refugees.
- 303 7. Education: We urge that children displaced by the crisis continue to have uninterrupted access to  
304 their educational needs, especially as schools are important centers of support and service  
305 delivery. Also, it is important that sufficient numbers of teachers are available and trained in  
306 trauma-centered approaches and that teachers have access to mental health support as well.
- 307 8. Sanctions: We urge the U.S. federal government to enforce U.S. law (Section 907 of the 1992  
308 FREEDOM Support Act) that generally prohibits assistance other than specified support for  
309 nonproliferation and disarmament to the government of Azerbaijan.
- 310 9. Reconstruction and economic support: We urge global agencies to ensure economic assistance to  
311 stabilize Armenian communities absorbing thousands of new refugees, stimulate economic

312 recovery, and create sustainable livelihoods. Also, there should be assistance for postcrisis  
313 reconstruction efforts, including rebuilding infrastructure and essential services, and long-term  
314 development programs to support resettled refugees in making new lives.

315 10. Accountability: We urge the United Nations to hold perpetrators of human rights abuses and  
316 violations to account, including third-party countries that aided the blockade and subsequent  
317 invasion.

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