



Letter to art museums, art historians, and churches:

We write with urgency regarding the unstable situation in the Republic of Artsakh (also known as Nagorno Karabakh), an ethnically Armenian autonomous region between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The Armenians of Artsakh have been defending their right to self-determination for decades, ever since Joseph Stalin in 1923 arbitrarily placed them within the newly-created Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, and dropped the majority Armenian-populated region into the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched an armed attack on the region, resulting in a 45-day war between the people of Artsakh, supported defensively by Armenia, and Azerbaijan, supported offensively by Turkey. During these recent hostilities, Azerbaijan targeted and shelled many cultural heritage sites of great significance to the Armenian people—a flagrant violation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and of customary international law.

On November 10, 2020, the parties agreed to a Russian-brokered ceasefire, which requires Armenians to evacuate from and cede a great portion of Artsakh to Azerbaijan by the end of November. Already, we see first-hand reports of destruction and vandalism of Armenian cultural heritage in the areas that Azerbaijanis control, including photographs and videos uploaded to social media by Azerbaijani military officers.

Armenians and non-Armenians around the world have expressed grave concern for Armenian cultural heritage, which is at risk of destruction (*see [A Plea to Save Artsakh's Armenian Heritage by Catholicos Karekin II](#) and [Open Letter from Academics to Preserve Artsakh dated November 13, 2020](#)*).

Many of the regions of Artsakh that will be ceded to Azerbaijan have had a majority Armenian populace since the calendar era B.C. and include thousands of churches, monasteries, and archeological sites of immense import to the rich cultural heritage of the Armenian people. A pillar of ancient Christendom, Armenia was the first nation to accept Christianity as its official religion, in 301 A.D., and as such, its cultural heritage also bears great significance to Christian history and humanity.

If the international community does not act to protect these sites, they likely will be destroyed, defaced of their distinctive Armenian elements, or appropriated and reclassified as sites of the “Caucasian Albanian” people (proto-Azerbaijani) in an effort to carry out the wholesale erasure of Armenian cultural heritage in the region.



This alarm is, unfortunately, supported by historical evidence, as we saw with the exclave of Nakhichevan (another region of Armenia’s ancient homeland that was transferred to Azerbaijan) in 1991, when Azerbaijan destroyed over 89 medieval Armenian churches and monasteries and thousands of inscribed and carved medieval tombstones (*see, e.g., [Simon Maghakyán and Sarah Pickman, “A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture,” HyperAllergic, Feb. 18, 2019](#) and [Video of “Azeri Soldiers Destroying Armenian Khachkars at Armenian Cemetery”](#)*). This tragic loss to the Armenian people and to the world was well-documented and admonished by UNESCO, the [International Council on Monuments and Sites](#), the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the European Parliament, among others. We believe that further irreversible destruction of Armenian cultural heritage looms on the near horizon in Artsakh.

We are calling on you to take urgent action.

Specifically, we are calling on you to:

1. Catalog, inventory and maintain accurate records of the Armenian cultural heritage sites in Artsakh. A partial list is attached. Refute inaccurate claims and attempts to reclassify these Armenian sites as Caucasian Albanian (a confederation of tribes in the Caucasus that were dispersed by the Arabs in the 7th century and assimilated into the Armenians in Artsakh) and call attention to any illegal attempt to transfer, in whole or in part, ownership of these sites.
2. Offer assistance for the urgent tasks of conducting proactive protection and risk preparedness, including placement of continuous in-person and electronic monitoring systems of the cultural heritage sites. Conduct missions to the region if feasible to perform such assistance. Lend institutional capacity-building to Armenian and Artsakh cultural heritage experts to perform these tasks on ongoing basis.
3. Raise awareness within your network or membership of the vital importance of protecting Armenian cultural heritage sites in Artsakh and the imminent danger they now face. Call on Azerbaijan to protect all cultural heritage sites in their effective control. Remain seized of the matter and liaise with your partner organizations and colleagues to ensure that Azerbaijan understands the world is watching and the international community will not allow the world to lose these significant contributions to humanity.



Cultural heritage is a vital component of the very identity of our community and of social cohesion. Its intentional destruction will have adverse and irreversible consequences on the human rights of the Armenian people and on the human dignity of worldwide civilization.

We appreciate your urgent attention to this matter, as time is of the essence.

Sincerely,

Etchmiadzin,

The Armenian Bar Association,

*Association internationale des études
arméniennes (AIEA),*

Society for Armenian Studies