

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh

September 19, 2024 – 10:30 a.m.
2118 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Prof. Adam T. Smith
Distinguished Professor of Arts and Sciences in Anthropology, Cornell University
Co-Director, Caucasus Heritage Watch

Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) is a non-partisan academic research group centered at Cornell and Purdue Universities. We were founded in 2020 in the wake of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War to monitor cultural heritage that the international scholarly community deems to be at risk of damage, destruction, and appropriation. We use high-resolution satellite imagery to provide regular condition assessments for hundreds of historic sites in our database. Due to their association with the region's indigenous Armenian community, and considering Azerbaijan's prior record of deliberately targeting Armenian cultural heritage on its territory, these sites are gravely endangered. At issue in their preservation is not only the fate of the region's centuries-old art and architecture, but the cultural traditions of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and their ancestral connections to this land.

There are three critical reasons why the global community, the U.S. Government, and this Committee should be concerned for the fate of Armenian cultural heritage caught up in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

1. The region's architectural inventory includes irreplaceable examples of the medieval to 19th century ecclesiastical architecture, including Christian churches and monasteries built and used by the region's peoples for centuries.
2. Attacks on cultural sites distort the region's archaeological and historical records, opening pathways for false, polemic histories that enflame hatred, extend conflicts, and promote the denial of atrocities, frustrating the search for a durable peace.
3. The systematic erasure of heritage sites violates a basic human right: the right to culture, including the right to freely engage in the practices and places of shared meaning and memory that bind a community together.

The U.S. government and international community have yet to respond to Azerbaijan's policy of cultural erasure which began in 1997 in the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan. CHW documented the near [complete erasure](#) (98%) of that region's Armenian cultural heritage. Hence, scholarly fears for Armenian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh rest on firm foundations.

Between Spring 2021 and Fall 2023, we conducted nine (9) observation missions, tracking approximately 280 sites. With Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2023 and the subsequent expulsion of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population, our Spring 2024 monitoring (Mission 10) expanded to include 170 additional sites. Our current monitoring mission (Mission 11), now

underway, will provide detailed new assessments for approximately 520 historic Armenian sites in Nagorno-Karabakh distributed across more than 7000 km².

The pages that follow provide an overview of our current assessment of the condition of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as sample satellite imagery showing recent cases of destruction, damage, and imminent threat documented by our work. To date, the most visible impacts continue to take place in and around the town of Shusha/Shushi where last spring we documented the demolition of the 18-19th century Ghazanchetsots cemetery and the 1847 Surb Hovhannes Mkrich (or St. John the Baptist) Church. We also have documented damage to historic cemeteries surrounding the town, such as the Yerevan Gate Cemetery, and imminent threats to an 1841 church and associated cemetery in the adjacent, destroyed village of Karin Tak.

Churches and cemeteries across Nagorno-Karabakh have borne the brunt of cultural heritage abuses since 2020. In Spring 2024 alone, we documented three (3) newly destroyed sites and nine (9) more under immediate threat. The impacts to Armenian cultural heritage continue to arise out of large-scale earth moving conducted as part of regional redevelopment and road-building schemes.

Since the end of the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Baku has been signaling its plans for massive infrastructure and redevelopment projects in Karabakh. This Fall, Baku will host the 29th Session of the Conference of Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. CHW is deeply concerned that the preparations for this event will have a grave impact on the region's Armenian cultural heritage, as the state rapidly develops the ethnically cleansed territories. Massive construction of highways, hydroelectric plants, airports, and housing are threatening cultural properties in the path of the omnipresent earth movers.

The brief that follows provides a summary assessment of the condition of Armenian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh based on our most recent data from Spring 2024. Overall, our spring 2024 monitoring cycle revealed the greatest number of impacted sites since Spring 2021 when we began our monitoring efforts. The full [report](#) on that monitoring mission is available on our [website](#). Updates from our current monitoring mission will be made available on our [dashboard](#), [social media](#), and our next report.

CAUCASUS HERITAGE WATCH BRIEF

THE CURRENT STATE OF ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Prepared for:

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
US House of Representatives
Date: September 16, 2024



By:

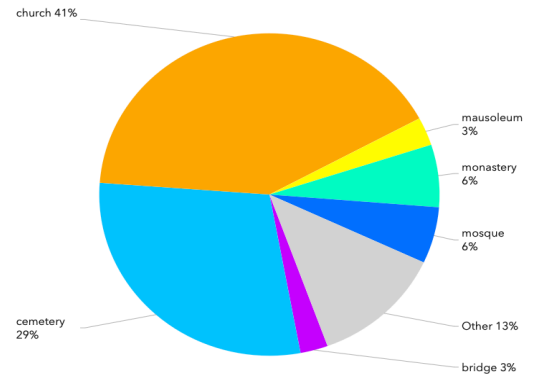
Adam T. Smith (Cornell University)
Lori Khatchadourian (Cornell University)
Ian Lindsay (Purdue University)

The Armenians who fled Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) in Fall 2023 left behind not only their homes, villages, and towns, but a rich cultural landscape comprising hundreds of historic churches, monasteries, and ancestral cemeteries. Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) assesses that these cultural and religious sites are at extreme risk of erasure. This assessment rests on two lines of evidence.

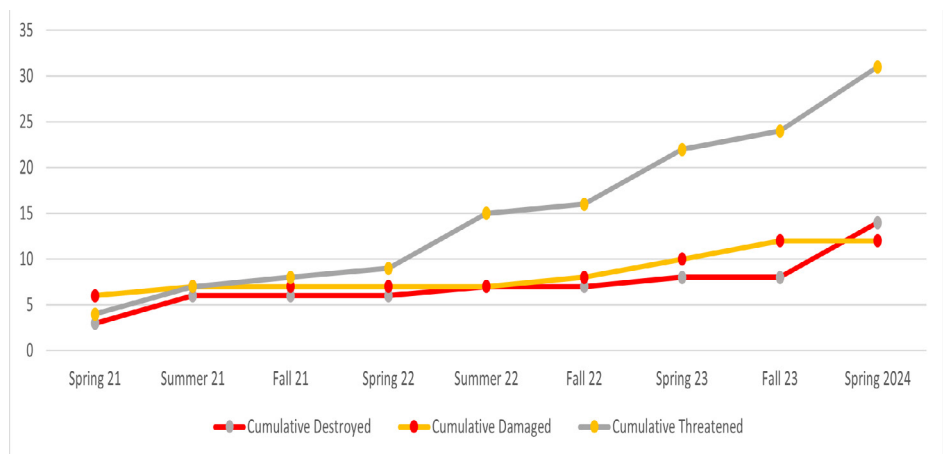
1. In September 2022, CHW released a detailed examination of Armenian cultural heritage in Nakhchivan, an autonomous region within Azerbaijan. We found that between 1997 and 2011, 108 of 110 sites (98%) were completely destroyed in a state sponsored program of [cultural erasure](#). With the eradication of historic monasteries, churches, and cemeteries, the entire Armenian heritage landscape of Nakhchivan was eradicated. This was arguably the most extreme case of cultural erasure in recent history and it was conducted entirely in secret. Our investigation and resulting report provides painstakingly detailed documentation of the erasure based on declassified American satellite imagery and other spatial evidence. The government of Azerbaijan not only denies the program of erasure but has argued that Armenians never lived in the region despite documentary, photographic, testimonial, and satellite imagery to the contrary.

2. Since Spring 2021, CHW has maintained a program of regular satellite [monitoring](#) of Armenian cultural heritage under the control of Azerbaijan in NK. We are currently conducting our 11th mission and are receiving new satellite imagery daily. In sum, CHW has established that since 2021 Azerbaijan has destroyed 14 heritage sites, including historic churches and cemeteries and damaged 12 more. CHW currently assesses 31 cultural properties as facing immediate threat of damage or destruction due to earth moving activity in close proximity.

SITES MONITORED BY TYPE



CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OVER TIME

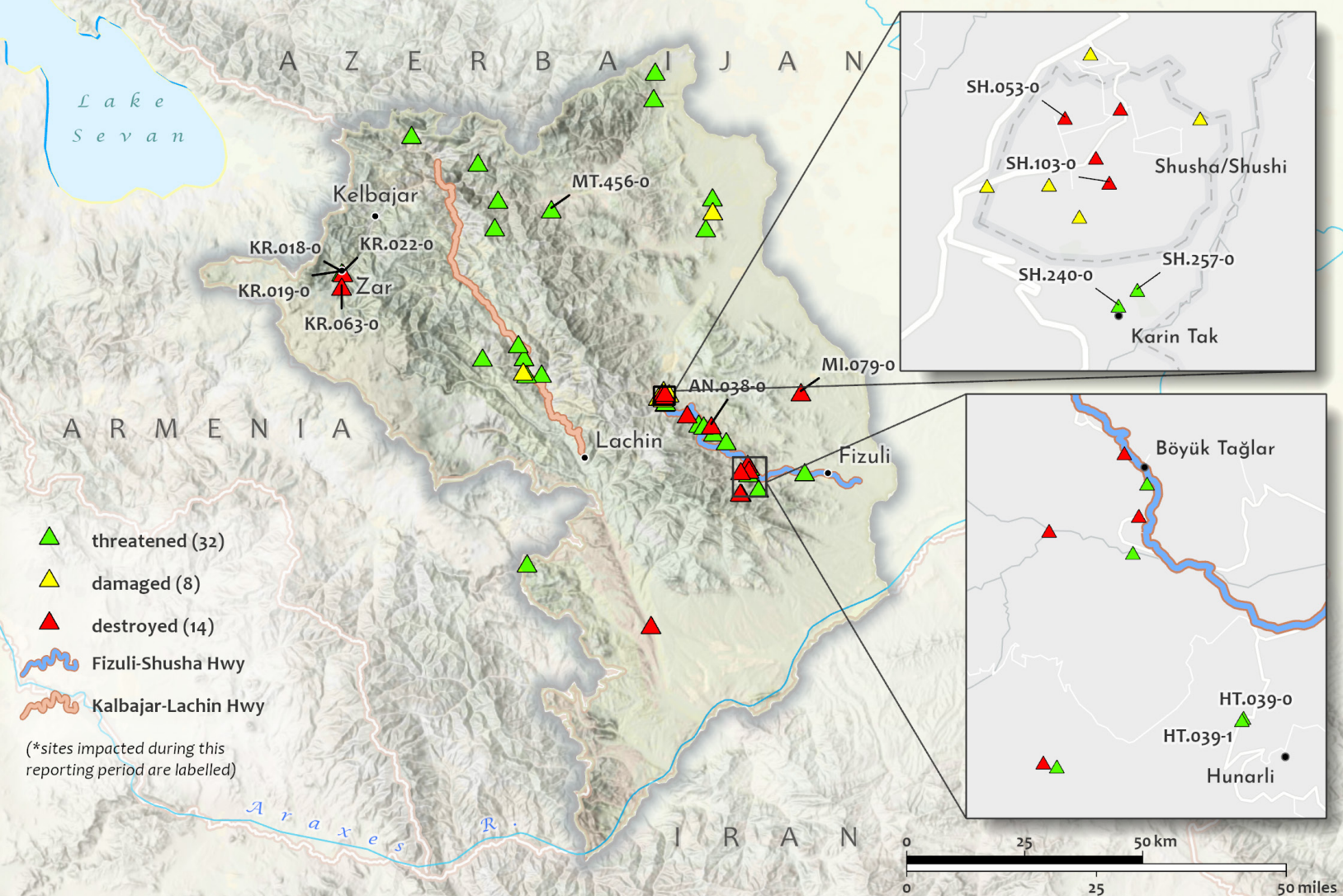


520
Sites currently monitored

14
Heritage Sites Destroyed

12
Heritage Sites Damaged

31
Heritage Sites Threatened



We offer four overall observations based on our work to date.

1. The pace of heritage abuse appears to be accelerating as Azerbaijan's development work gains speed. Much of the damage and destruction of Armenian cultural heritage in NK to date has been in connection with road work and redevelopment in villages and towns, especially in Shusha. It is not clear whether Azerbaijan is following its own cultural property laws concerning the regulation of construction work around cultural heritage sites; but even if so, those laws grant the executive branch expansive authority to decide on the significance and value of cultural properties. This creates a legal loophole for the destruction of sites that the state deems insignificant and lacking in value.
2. Damage and destruction seems to be focused primarily on historic cemeteries, but we have also documented the demolition of two 19th century Armenian churches. Some of the historic cemeteries in Nagorno-Karabakh contain "khachkars", an Armenian art form consisting of an engraved cross stone that is listed on the UNESCO list of intangible heritage. These are at grave risk of destruction.

3. Churches and monasteries are undergoing cultural appropriation. Since the late Soviet era, Azerbaijan has promoted a fictional story of ethnogenesis that suggests a poorly known medieval kingdom called Caucasian Albania was actually the origin of modern Azerbaijan. This claim is factually incorrect according to the international scholarly consensus. But it is invoked by the Azerbaijani government to legitimize the erasure of historic Armenian art and inscriptions.
4. The global response to Azerbaijan's program of heritage erasure has been insufficient. The US and others were quick to deplore the depredations of the Taliban, ISIS, and now Russia as they assaulted cultural heritage. But Azerbaijan has not faced any consequences or censure. Yet their erasure of Armenian cultural heritage stands alongside assaults on Jewish heritage in WWII, Bosniak heritage in the Yugoslav Wars, and Uyghur heritage in Western China as among the worst heritage atrocities in history. A case currently before the International Court of Justice is one important exception to this collective silence. But the US Government and international agencies can do more.

The future of Armenian heritage in NK is a matter of grave concern. CHW predicts with high confidence that the next 2-3 years will see an acceleration of both heritage destruction and appropriation.

CHW is committed to monitoring cultural heritage at risk in NK. Our goal is to establish the possibility of deterrence through visibility and accountability. CHW seeks to provide institutions and stakeholders with real-time data on heritage-at-risk in the hope that visibility could potentially save irreplaceable heritage from demolition.

We see three important pathways toward preservation and deterrence that would be most effective operating together.

- Research: Monitoring of heritage at risk is a critical first-line response to the crisis. This is where CHW's work seeks to intervene by providing fact-based expert analysis.
- US Policy: In order for monitoring to be impactful, it must be amplified by policymakers. The

treatment of cultural heritage, as documented in our reports, should play a role in shaping U.S. relations with Azerbaijan. The US Government through entities like this and other relevant Congressional committees and Heritage at State are key to translating monitoring into deterrence.

- International Law: International legal bodies (most notably, the ICJ and ICC) have emphasized international interest in preservation. A pathbreaking case at the ICJ is establishing new precedents for heritage preservation which can back US policy.

The protection of Armenian heritage in NK is an imperative not only to preserve historic monuments but more importantly to assert the basic human right to culture.

Supporting links:

- Cultural heritage erasure in Nakhchivan: [report](#) and interactive [storymap](#).
- CHW's most recent [monitoring report](#).

RECENT IMPACTS DESTROYED HERITAGE

Caucasus Heritage Watch
SH.053-0 St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church (Kanach Zham), Shusha/Shushi



Image Set #1. An April 4, 2024 Airbus image (right) shows the complete demolition of the 1847 Church of St. John the Baptist. Damaged in the 2020 war, the church had been the site of several propaganda visits promising repair. CHW's last image of the intact historic church was taken on December 28, 2023 (left)



Image Set #2. Damage to the historic Ghazanchets'ots cemetery in Shusha detected in a November 2023 SkySat image (above center) progressed to complete destruction as seen in the April 4, 2024 image above (at right). The cemetery was intact as of October 5, 2023 (above, left)

RECENT IMPACTS
DAMAGED HERITAGE

Image Set #3. A November 2023 SkySat image shows a new road cut through the historic Yerevan Gates cemetery on the western edge of Shusha.





Image Set #4. An October 2023 SkySat image shows the medieval Surb Sargis (A.D. 1279) and Surb Grigor (A.D. 1274) Churches intact amongst the ruins of the village of Zar. As of June 2, 2024, Zar's ruins had been cleared leaving the two churches standing alone.

ABOUT CHW: THE DIRECTORS



LORI KHATCHADOURIAN

Associate Professor, Near Eastern Studies & Anthropology, Cornell University

Prof. Khatchadourian has been working in the South Caucasus since 1995, first in political development and since 2003 in archaeology. Her work has been supported by the NSF, NEH, and ACLS, among other granting organizations. She is the author of [Imperial Matter](#).



IAN LINDSAY

Associate Professor, Anthropology Purdue University

Prof. Lindsay has been studying the history and prehistory of the South Caucasus since 2000, with support from the National Science Foundation and other agencies. His archaeological practice incorporates the use of GIS and terrestrial and aerial remotes sensing techniques.



ADAM T. SMITH

Distinguished Professor of Arts and Sciences, Anthropology, Cornell University

Prof. Smith has been conducting archaeological research in the Caucasus since 1992. He is the co-founder of [Project ArAGATS](#), the oldest international archaeological collaboration in the region. He is a former Guggenheim fellow and author of numerous [works](#) on the region.