



Understanding the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

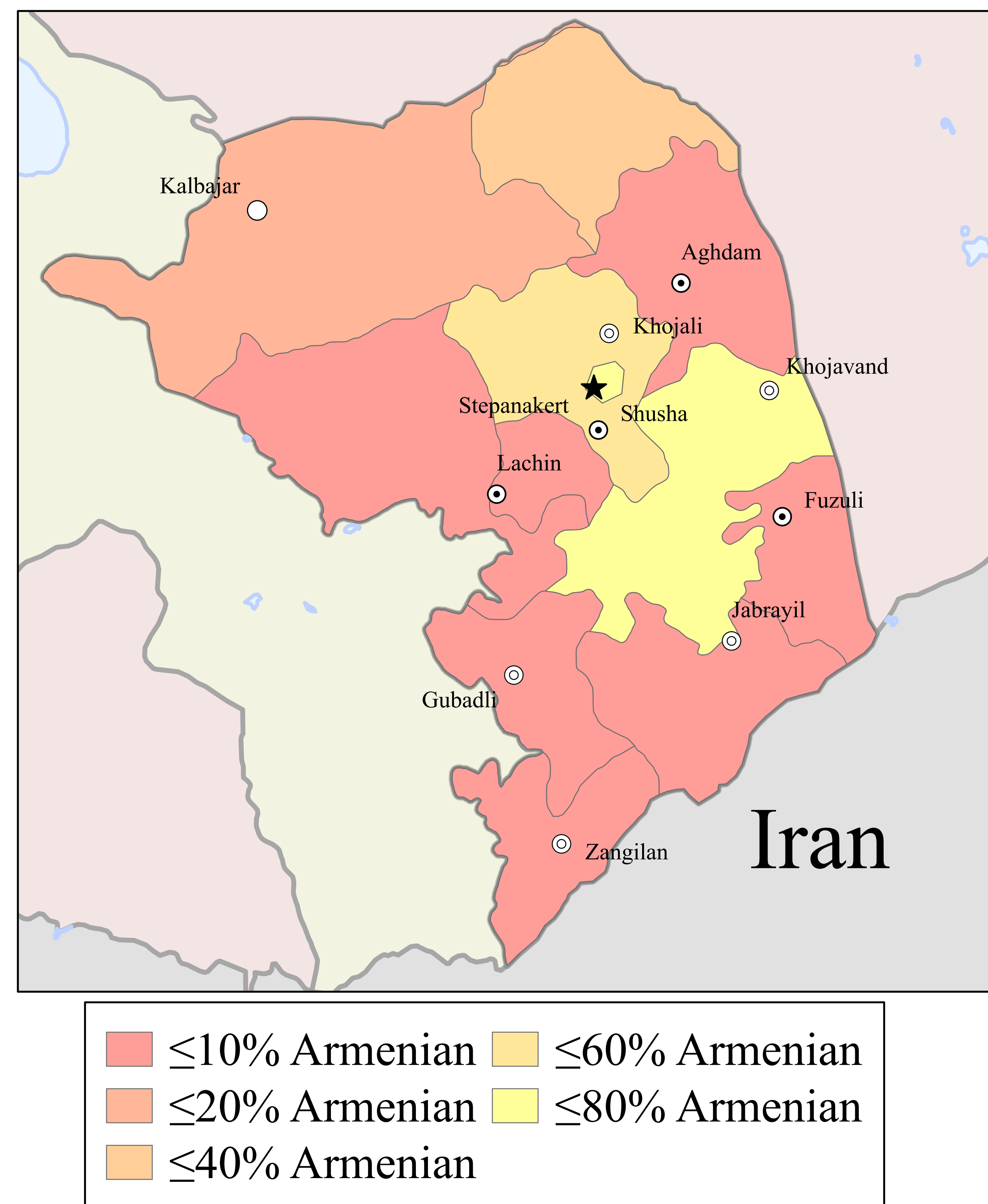


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Ethnic Tensions

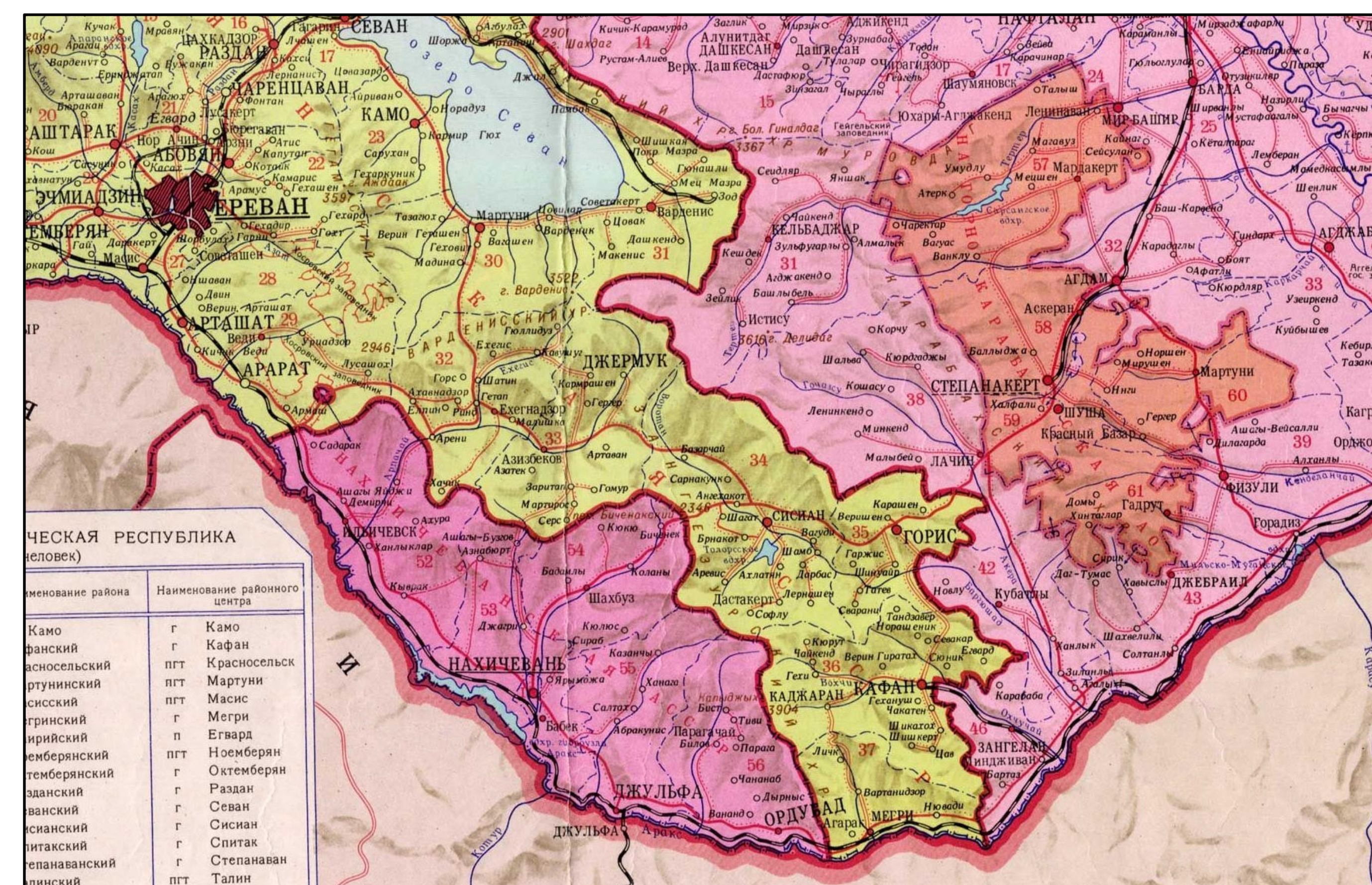
Armenia and Azerbaijan are home to a number of ethnic groups, predominately the namesake Azeris and Armenians. The densely populated Nagorno-Karabakh is predominantly Armenian, even more so after the expulsion of Azeri residents during the 1988-1994 war. Many of the occupied surrounding areas remain majority Azeri.

The below map highlights demographics in 1989 before the first conflict.



Soviet Origins

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be traced back to the Soviet era. Stalin, then the People's Commissar for Nationalities, decided to incorporate the disputed region as an autonomous oblast in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, perhaps as means of control or as a diplomatic overture to Turkey.



The 2020 Conflict

The disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region is situated in the Lesser Caucasus. Recognized as de facto part of Azerbaijan by the United Nations after a 1998-1994 war, for over two decades since the region has been populated mostly by ethnic Armenians and was under the majority control of the Armenian-backed breakaway government of the Republic of Artsakh.

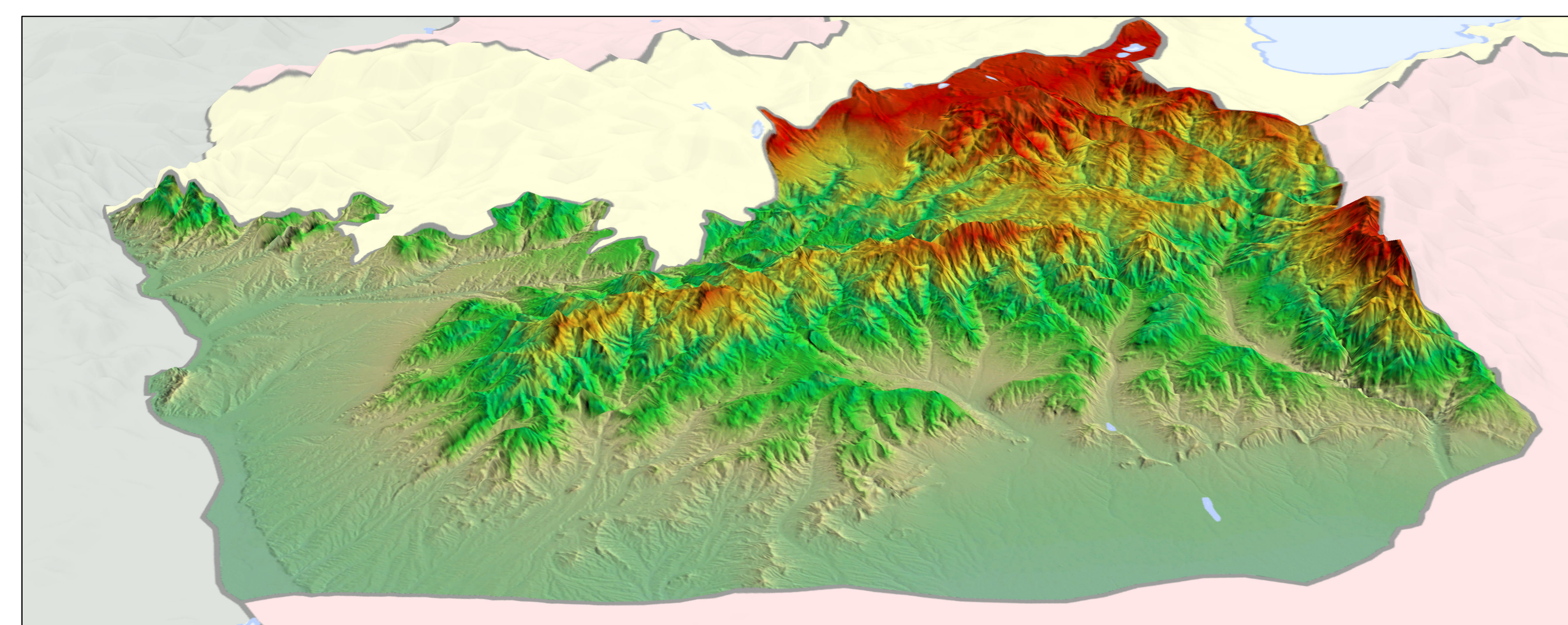
Tensions exploded in late September 2020, with an Azerbaijani offensive into the southern reaches of the territory, leading to a tenuous Russian-brokered ceasefire on November 9.



- a. Ganja** is Azerbaijan's second-largest city and was a repeat target of Armenian missile strikes, with many civilian casualties.
- b. The Murovdag Range** is part of the Lesser Caucasus mountains and forms the northern border of the Karabakh plateau, acting as a natural defense for the contested region. Its peak was seized by Azerbaijani forces during the 2020 conflict.
- c. Stepanakert**, known to Azeris as Khankendi, is the capital and largest city of the proclaimed Republic of Artsakh. Stepanakert was a frequent target of shelling throughout the conflict, resulting in civilian casualties and mass evacuation.
- d. Shusha** is situated atop sheer cliffs near Stepanakert. It was the location of the last major battle of the 2020 conflict, cementing the Azeri foothold. Its capture by Armenian forces was similarly crucial in the 1988-1994 conflict.
- e. The Lachin Corridor** is the major land route from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. Capture of Shusha blocked this lifeline.
- f. Heydarabad** in the Azeri exclave of Nakhchivan was the site of an accidental Azeri shootdown of a Russian helicopter on November 9, threatening the planned ceasefire.

A Mountainous Region

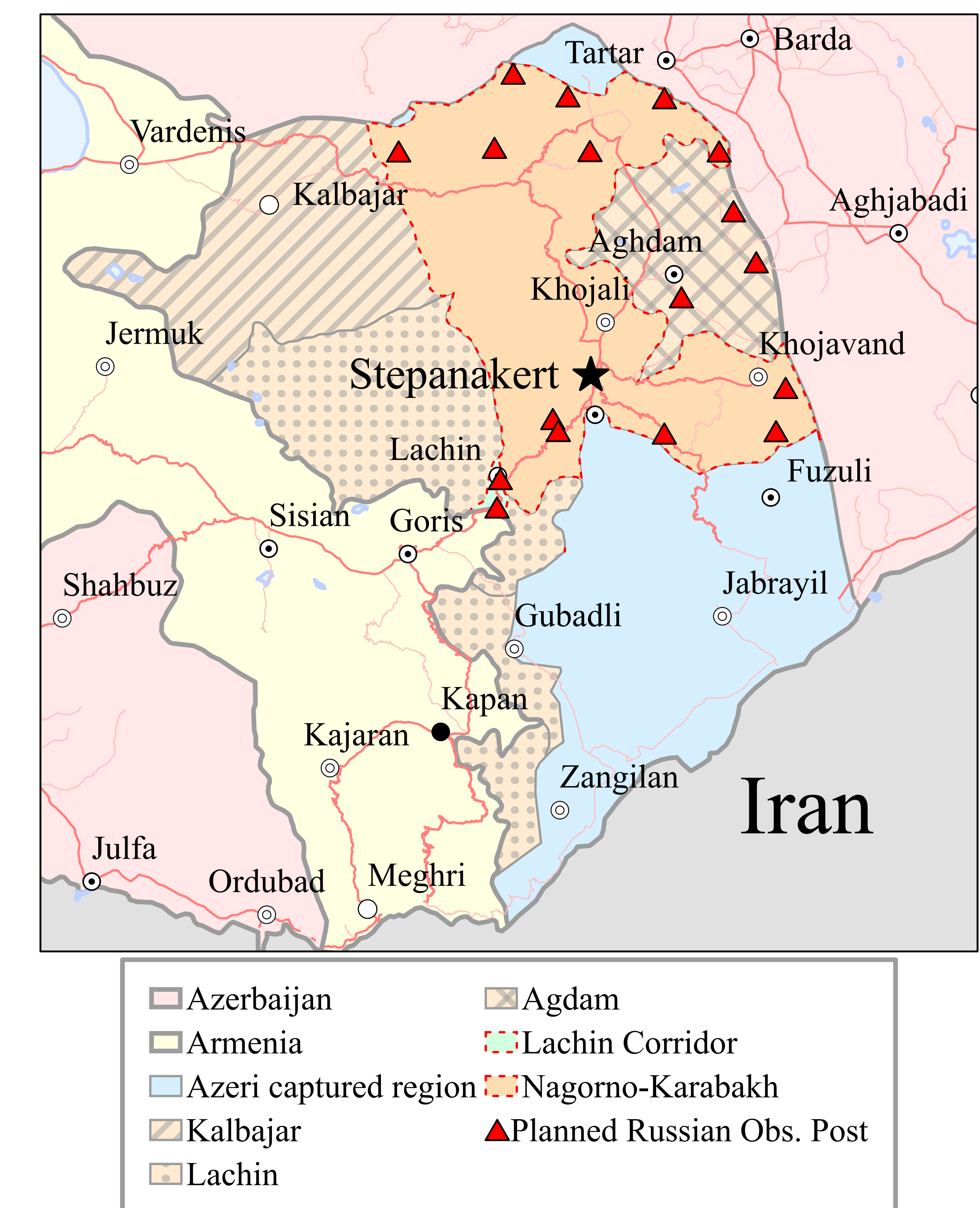
Viewing the contested region from the Azeri border in three dimensions shows how difficult fighting can be. Azeri offensives were initially confined to the narrow valley passes in the north and low-lying south, they then proceeded northward.



Tenuous Peace

Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire on November 9 brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin shortly after the fall of Shusha.

In addition to the region captured by Azeri forces, it calls for Armenia to cede the occupied regions of Kalbajar, Lachin, and Agdam in the ensuing weeks. The fate of Nagorno Karabakh itself remains unclear. Russian peacekeepers will be deployed for the next five years to Nagorno-Karabakh, Agdam, and to the Lachin Corridor.



An Uncertain Future

Though fighting may have concluded, true peace in the region may still be far off. With restored Azeri control over the regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, forced population transfers are likely. Anger persists; following the ceasefire, fiery protests broke out in Yerevan against what some felt was a capitulatory peace deal.



Protesters storm the National Assembly Building in Yerevan on 11/9/20 (Stanislav Krasilnikov, TASS)