

WASHINGTON DECLARATION: THE LAST STEP TOWARD PEACE

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"Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia is possible but fragile, and it requires not merely mediation but also genuine political will on both sides." (Illustration by Erhan Yalvaç)

A historic peace deal signed in Washington aims to end the decades-long Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict

Soviet Armenia initiated the former conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s, as Armenia claimed territory and occupied Azerbaijani land amid political turmoil. Ever since, for nearly three decades, talks have failed to produce any meaningful results, while U.N. Security Council resolutions repeatedly asked Armenia to withdraw.

In September 2020, following escalating provocations, fighting broke out on a grand scale once more. During the period of 44 days, effective counter-offensive actions were taken by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces and freed Shusha, along with more than 300 other settlements from occupation. Armenia, nonetheless, could not withstand these victories and, on Nov. 10, 2020, signed a Russia-mediated cease-fire.

From the 44-day war to Washington

The result of the 44-Day War in 2020 radically changed the course of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and formed the first concrete steps toward peace. The trilateral statement signed on Nov. 10, 2020, by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia framed the post-war settlement. The agreement established "a general cease-fire and cessation of all hostilities in the zone ... at 00:00

hours Moscow time on Nov. 10, 2020" and required Armenia's withdrawal from the occupied zones of Aghdam, Kalbajar and Lachin within specific time limits (Article II, VI).

Also significant were the provisions for connectivity and regional cooperation. Article 9 of the declaration assured that "all economic and transport links in the region shall be restored," and Armenia committed to ensuring the security of transit between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan exclave. This provision indicated the possibility for long-term regional integration.

The 2020 declaration was not, however, a bilateral peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The document contained no reference to a general peace agreement and there were still unresolved issues about the end status of the relations between the two nations.

For this reason, follow-up efforts were needed. On Jan. 11, 2021, in Moscow, the first top-level talks between the Azerbaijani, Armenian and Russian leaders after the cease-fire in November 2020 took place. The meeting was predominantly devoted to humanitarian questions, the activities of Russian peacekeepers and the issue of the restoration of transport and economic communications in the region. The trilateral statement signed at the end of the summit established a working group co-chaired by the deputy prime ministers of the three nations that would oversee the implementation of the ninth article of the November cease-fire agreement – i.e., the opening of rail and automobile roads and guaranteeing transit via each other's territory.

From the peace process perspective, this meeting saw progress and also limitations. On one hand, it initiated a formal regional connectivity mechanism, which could potentially be a stepping stone toward normalization. On the other hand, the fact that there were no talks of a comprehensive treaty served to underscore that many substantive matters remained pending, leaving room for future mediation efforts by other international actors.

In December 2021, following a series of earlier trilateral negotiations, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met for a five-hour discussion with European Council President Charles Michel at the helm. One of the most significant developments at the meeting was setting up mechanisms for direct contact between the ministries of defense of Azerbaijan and Armenia, aimed at preventing incidents on the border and facilitating de-escalation on the ground.

On July 10, 2024, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, on the initiative of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, met in Washington. The session, held during the margins of the NATO 75th anniversary summit, represented a new degree of American involvement in the peace process. Both sides spoke about progress toward a treaty, and Blinken underlined that peace would also create regional connections and benefit the South Caucasus in general. Although the two sides had agreed on a demarcated section of their border in 2024, they were unable to agree upon the restoration of transport links, and the issue of Armenia's constitutional claims to Azerbaijani territory remained a principal stumbling block.

These events highlight that peace is possible but fragile and that lasting peace requires not merely mediation but also genuine political will on both sides. It is against this backdrop of deadlocked talks and successive but half-hearted breakthroughs that the Washington Declaration of Aug. 8, 2025, arrived, offering the most categorical attempt to anchor relations into a formal peace format.

Trump's remarks on the peace agreement

What separates the Washington meeting's past efforts is its particular aim to transcend cease-fires of limited duration and move toward a final settlement. All of the previous negotiations, whether in Moscow or Brussels, tended to bog down on technical issues – border demarcation, or transportation links – without ever addressing the heart of the conflict. In Washington, the atmosphere was different and clear on the table. It was more than a circle of negotiations; it culminated in the signing of the Joint Declaration, a concrete deed that gave life to the talks as a shared commitment toward lasting peace. As U.S. President Donald Trump said at the ceremony, "This is not a cease-fire, this is a peace agreement." The statement captured the spirit of the moment: for the first time in three decades of aborted talks, the goal was not to pause the war but to end it. In accordance with U.S. President Donald Trump's remark, Aliyev said in an interview with Al-Arabiya TV, "The 8th of August is

actually the end of the confrontation and the end of the standoff."

For years, constitutional demands by Armenia for Azerbaijani territory and failure to create a safe corridor to Nakhchivan had been sticking points. The Washington document dealt directly with those issues, calling for the so-called "Trump Route" to secure linkages under international oversight. In doing so, it attempted to break the cycle that had broken all earlier attempts at peace since 2020. Instead of merely institutionalizing the military realities of the 44-Day War, the declaration sought to institutionalize them as a permanent political and legal concept of regional order.

The Washington Declaration represented a break from the past: an American intervention more active in character, with the U.S. playing the role of sponsor as much as guarantor of the accord. The change had far-reaching consequences. To Azerbaijan, it was a gesture to the post-war reality that it had established, promising protection against the diplomatic stalemate that had so long defined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group process. To Armenia, patronage by the U.S. offered a degree of international legitimacy that could render the concept of normalization more acceptable to a regionally skeptical domestic audience.

The Peace and Inter-State Relations Agreement is a radical break with the past patchwork of ad hoc agreements in providing an unequivocal legal framework for sustainable peace. Politically, it places the settlement on solid international legal ground by recalling the U.N. Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and the Almaty Declaration. It overcomes the main stumbling blocks by having both sides recognize each other's sovereignty and the inviolability of frontiers and by including a non-claim provision not allowing either side to reopen territorial disputes on historical or constitutional grounds (Articles I-II).

While the Constitution of Armenia does not itself state ownership of Azerbaijani territory, the 1990 Declaration of Independence did include calls for the reunification of Karabakh with Armenia. While the present Constitution followed this and is legally ineffective, its mention in the Constitution's preamble has troubled Azerbaijan as potentially a future basis for claiming land. The Armenian Constitutional Court ruled that the declaration is inferior to the Constitution and carries no legal force. However, in Azerbaijan, any reference to it continues to be politically charged. It is because of this that Article XII of the Agreement, which prohibits both parties from invoking domestic laws or constitutional provisions as an excuse not to adhere to the agreement, becomes so paramount. By prioritizing international commitments, Azerbaijan maintains its sovereignty and territorial integrity on a stronger foundation of long-lasting peace (Article XII).

Apart from that, it has clauses on missing persons and enforced disappearances, integrating reconciliation elements beyond geopolitical interests (Article IX). By moving bilateral relations from crisis management to organized cooperation in diplomacy, economy and culture (Articles V, X), it dramatically increases the chances for an enduring and meaningful peace.

Given the steps and deals leading up to the Washington meeting, it is clear that this session was special. Unlike other discussions, ranging from Moscow and Brussels meetings to trilateral cease-fire announcements, this one focused solely on negotiating technicalities, humanitarian concerns and interim cease-fires. This time, there was a signing in principle of a concrete peace agreement. This initiative constituted a firm political commitment on both sides and specifically attempted to overcome the main impediments to earlier negotiations, including Armenian constitutional wording regarding Azerbaijani land and the insistence on safe regional connectivity. By going beyond provisional measures and placing the agreement within an international juridical structure, the Washington conference made the eventual signing of a long-term peace accord significantly more probable.

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