

# ARTSAKH SHELTERS FOR SURVIVAL

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The destruction of the four villages during the Four-Day War in April of 2016 is testimony to the existential threat of the Armenian communities living along Artsakh's border with Azerbaijan. Next to food, the residents of the villages need shelters for refuge from the attacks by the Azeri forces which repeatedly have been in violation of the 1994 armistice. If we continue to ignore the dangers our border communities face because of Azeri attacks, we will end up losing our farmers--a situation earnestly sought by Azerbaijan.



Building a viable civil defense for Artsakh farmers along the line of contact will take years for many organizations and government agencies to collaborate on a workable program. Additionally, it would take an enormous amount of money. However, since civil defense means survival for the people of Artsakh, such a project cannot be put on a back burner.

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The Four-Day War has been a confidence-building adventure for belligerent Azerbaijan; for Armenians, it has been a wake-up call. The capture of 800 hectares, the destruction of four Armenian villages, and the barbaric beheading of an Armenian soldier rejuvenated the Aliyev administration. The so-called victor now is ready to wage stealth wars and armed incursions to take Karabakh inch by inch.

Based on practical and scientific evidence, a practical civil defense consists of the establishment of a forecast and alarm system to warn and alert the village farmers of impending danger; training the farmers to deal with fire and gas leaks; making provisions for food and water; providing basic medical and nursing aid; building shelters to weather enemy shelling; and drilling the villagers to become proficient in defending themselves to cite a few.

But money is in short supply for tackling these challenges concurrently. Therefore, we need to concentrate on the challenges that are crucial for survival.

According to conventional wisdom arising from the harrowing experiences of 1915, the most important element is the building of shelters. Without shelters, there could be no defense, no protection. Expenditures for shelters would take a lion's share of the budget for the establishment

of a viable civil defense program for Artsakh.

Some shelters are prohibitively expensive such as building an underground shelter (i.e., a self-contained bunker). Others are less costly (fortifying an existing building to serve as a shelter). Shelters come in a variety of shapes and forms: standalone, attached, and underground. Let's look at the characteristics of each design and suggest practical ideas for shielding Artsakh.

### **Standalone Shelter.**

It is considered a separate building, not within or attached to any other building. It is constructed to withstand a range of natural and enemy hazards. Among its attributes is that it's structurally and mechanically separate from any building and, therefore, it's not vulnerable to being weakened if part of an adjacent structure collapses or if fire occurs in the adjacent building. Additionally, it doesn't need to be integrated into an existing building design. Moreover, a shelter for Artsakh village protection may be as simple as an interior residential room or the traditional public shelter which can accommodate several hundred people.

In the 1970s, the United States Air Force built many standalone shelters at the Torrejon Air Base in Spain and at the Nouasseur Air Base in Morocco including others in North Africa for the United States 16th Air Force which operated SAC (Strategic Air Command) in Europe. These standalone metal shelters were covered with tons of dirt which appeared like geological mounds with natural vegetation on top when viewed from the sky. Generally speaking, ground level, standalone shelters are expensive and relatively less safe from enemy air raids.

### **Attached or Internal Shelter.**

Shelters could also be built attached to an existing building such as to a school room or a community center. This way, the shelter would have access to bathroom facilities, kitchen, and rest areas. It would be, comparatively speaking, inexpensive for a lot of the material to be used would come from the surrounding areas such as building stone and wood from the forests. Additionally, some of the farmers would volunteer to help with the construction to keep costs down.

Among its many valuable characteristics, an attached or internal shelter is specially designed and constructed room or area within or attached to a larger building that is constructed to be structurally independent of the larger building to withstand the range of natural and enemy hazards. In this way, it is partially shielded by the surrounding building and may not experience the full force of the blast. Furthermore, it is designed to be within a new building and may be located in an area of the building that the building occupants can reach quickly, easily, and without having to go outside, such as a conference room, gymnasium, or cafeteria. Finally, it may reduce the shelter cost considerably

because it is typically part of a planned renovation or a new building project.

A multi-function shelter such a community center built to withstand enemy shelling from social standpoint for the children would be an agreeable place to weather the storm of an attack. Currently, for example, some benevolent organizations or individuals are either building new or are renovating existing school houses in Artsakh rural areas. Why not coordinate the building plans with fortifying school houses or rooms to serve as shelters as well? Overall, it would be inexpensive to build attached shelters, but being above ground, this design would be less secure as a shelter from enemy artillery and air attacks.

### **Underground Shelter.**

A bunker is a typical underground shelter. Although a bunker would be the safest shelter, building it in thick concrete would be relatively expensive and time consuming. Because Artsakh lacks earth-moving equipment, excavation of the site alone will take many months and heavy building equipment. The construction of a new underground housing to serve as a shelter would prove to be expensive. The most inexpensive way to build an underground bunker, however, would be to dig a hole in the ground and drop a shipping container and cover it with soil for the grass to grow on it for the purpose of camouflage. In the event more room is needed, then two or more shipping containers in tandem or next to each other could be placed in the hole. Hundreds and hundreds of shipping containers cross the border from Georgia to bring merchandise to Armenia. Most of the containers command low prices. As for heavy equipment, one earthmover and one crane would be sufficient to begin the work for the villages along the border.

Compared to standalone and attached type of shelters, underground shelters have the advantage of being camouflaged in the landscape of the ecosystem of the rural areas. However, the shipping container shelters would suffer from lack of ready amenities such as a kitchen, a toilet, etc. However, these amenities can be added later on, budget permitting.

It has been accepted by the preponderance of shelter builders that shipping containers make great and cheap underground bunkers and serve short-term shelter needs quite well when funds are limited. Naturally, bunkers will be temporary places of refuge until rescue arrives from Stepanagert.

Some may argue that the trilateral meeting of President Sargsyan, President Aliyev and President Putin in St. Petersburg on June 20, 2016 after the Four-Day War have agreed to settle their differences by dialogue rather than by the bullet. I am one of the many who is skeptical whether the present or the future presidents of Azerbaijan would keep their word to honor the agreement.

As long as members of the United Nations and most European nations favor the territorial integrity

of Azerbaijan against Artsakh's right to self-determination in its ancestral province, Aliyev will be emboldened to strike Artsakh deadly blows periodically. The Armenian leadership's lack of oversight has left Armenian border villages vulnerable to Azeri brutality. The blunder and dereliction should stop.

And ruefully, since our military leaders have proven to be a bunch of bravados despite their self-portrayal as brave soldiers sporting a salad of medals on peacock chests, there is no question that the border communities will be living under the sword of Damocles. Unless our leaders abandon their complacency, the danger to our Artsakh village farmers would remain imminent. Hence, robust, shell-proof shelters are mission-critical for the people of Artsakh. It's said "better to be safe than sorry." I'd add to that by invoking another proverb: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

**Note:** Any person who wants to make a difference in the well-being of our Artsakhtsi compatriots through novel ideas, collaboration, and voluntarism so as to initiate a movement to provide shelters to Artsakh villagers, please contact the author of this article through the editor of Keghart.com

