

Syria's civil war destabilising the Caucasus

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The civil war in Syria is increasingly destabilising the Caucasus. Chechen Islamists fighting against the Kremlin are supporting the Syrian Islamist opposition. Russia fears that an Islamist regime in Damascus would change the whole balance of power in the region. At the same time, ethnic conflicts threaten to spill over from Syria into the southern and northern regions of the Caucasus.

Since the middle of last year, it has been known that the Syrian opposition has included up to 6,000 Chechen Islamists, who have been fighting for national independence from the Russian Federation since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In August, an air attack on Aleppo led to the death of Gelayev Rustam, the son of a prominent Chechen warlord who had fought for years against the Russian army.

Russia has conducted two wars in Chechnya against Islamic separatists since 1991. The second war officially ended in 2009, but the situation has remained tense ever since. Last year, the situation once more intensified, with many terrorist attacks in Chechnya and the neighbouring republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia. In October, the Kremlin despatched an army to the region for first time since the end of the second war.

Russia's liberal newspaper *Nezasivimaya Gazeta* commented at the time that Chechnya was gripped by civil war, and the invasion by the army meant the beginning of the third Chechen war. The deep social and economic crisis—unemployment is running at more than 50 percent, and infrastructure is practically destroyed—and outrage at the war crimes of the Russian army continue to feed support for the Islamists. Of the 1 million residents of the mountain republic, at least 125,000 have died in wars since the early 1990s.

Not without reason, the Kremlin fears that an Islamist government in Syria could strengthen Islamist tendencies in the Caucasus as well as the position of US imperialism, which might provide financial and

military support for Islamist insurgents.

The flow of refugees from Syria, where many peoples originally from the Caucasus live, also threatens to step up ethnic tensions in the region. The Islamist opposition, based mainly on Sunnis, regularly perpetrates massacres of ethnic and religious minorities living in Syria. Last year, a total of at least 700,000 people fled from Syria.

The various peoples from the Caucasus living in Syria include 100,000 Cherkessians, who are threatened by the civil war. The Cherkessians fled from the North Caucasus in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the region was captured by the Tsarist army in a bloody campaign. Since the end of 2011, representatives of the Cherkessians have asked the Russian government to help with emigration to Russia. So far, however, the Kremlin has only permitted the immigration of 500 people to Russia. The Cherkessians are also Muslim, and Moscow fears a settlement of the Cherkessians could strengthen Islamist tendencies in Chechnya.

For the diaspora from Armenia in the South Caucasus, Syria, along with Iran, has been an important destination for refugees. The Armenian diaspora in Syria includes 80,000 people. They mainly fled there following the genocide of the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Last year some 6,000 Armenian-born Syrians fled to Armenia, many more are hoping to take up residence there.

Like many other ethnic minorities in Syria, the Armenians, who are mostly Christian, are regarded as loyal to Assad. Although they have officially declared their neutrality in the civil war, some reports say they have come under fire from both sides. The so-called rebels have set fire to a number of churches, schools and residences in Armenian districts and killed several people.

In Armenia, which has been hit hard by the global

economic crisis and where the official unemployment rate is 40 percent, many refugees live in poverty and cannot find work. In the Armenian capital of Yerevan, rents have already skyrocketed due to the many refugees.

The escalation of the imperialist wars in the Middle East is exacerbating ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus. According to the Iranian media, Azerbaijan has helped to arm the Syrian opposition. In August of last year, Tehran accused Azerbaijan of secretly providing Syrian rebels with US\$500,000.

Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have deteriorated rapidly in the past year (see: “Growing tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan”). The Baku government is heavily involved in preparations for war against Iran by the US and Israel. For this reason, the American newspaper *Washington Post* described Azerbaijan as “anti-Iran”.

Azerbaijan has close economic and military relations with Israel, which is the second largest importer of Azerbaijani oil and gas. With support from the US and Israel, the regime in Baku has been systematically upgrading its military capacity for years.

According to the American magazine *Foreign Policy*, Baku has granted Israel access to several air bases on its border with northern Iran, which could be used for an air attack on Tehran. In 2011, Azerbaijan and Israel concluded a weapons deal worth more than US\$1.6 billion; the money would enable Azerbaijan to be equipped with sea-based missile systems and drones.

The British *Sunday Times* reported in December that Israel was planning the “preventive” use against Iran of armed drones stationed in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan and Israel have officially denied this report, however.

Nevertheless, for Washington and Tel Aviv, it is clear that Azerbaijan would be an important factor in a war against Iran. This is not only because of Azerbaijan’s strategically important geographical location, situated on the energy-rich Caspian Sea and adjacent to northwestern Iran. Another important aspect is that northern Iran is home to some 20 million people with Azerbaijani roots. Azerbaijan itself has only 8 million inhabitants.

Territorial conflicts between Azerbaijan and Iran flared up following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Azerbaijan 20 years ago. US imperialism is now exploiting these ethnic and regional

tensions specifically to advance its own geo-strategic interests. As part of the strategy of war against Iran, Washington is also discussing the secession of northern Iran.

Last summer, Republican US congressman Dana Rohrabacher from California sent a letter to then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton calling for a struggle “for the independence of South Azerbaijan from Iran and the possibility of a union with the Republic of Azerbaijan”. The American ambassador in Azerbaijan hastened to make clear that this merely represented the personal views of Rohrabacher.

For more than a year, the Azerbaijani parliament has been discussing renaming the republic “North Azerbaijan”—a clear provocation against Iran.

With the intensification of the Syrian civil war and preparations for war against Iran, the imperialists are very deliberately playing with fire. The Syrian conflict and a war with Iran would enflame the entire Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The aim of both wars is to destabilise the entire region and incite ethnic conflicts in order to weaken the position of China and Russia, and to prepare the ground for a new division of these resource-rich areas among the imperialist powers.



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