

Azerbaijan-Armenia fighting erupts over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region

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Over the weekend, fierce fighting broke out between Azeri and Armenian forces over the disputed breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region, adjacent to southwestern Azerbaijan and eastern Armenia in the South Caucasus. Clashes reportedly left a total of 30 soldiers dead and caused civilian casualties.

Both countries blamed each other for the fighting, and it remains unclear how it began. On Saturday, Azerbaijan said that 12 Azeri forces had been killed and a Mi-24 helicopter shot down in the fighting. According to the Armenian government, 18 of its troops were killed and 35 wounded.

Armenia accused Azerbaijan of carrying out a “massive attack along the Karabakh front line using tanks, artillery, and helicopters” on Friday night. For its part, Azerbaijan said that it retaliated after coming under fire from “large-calibre artillery and grenade-launchers.”

The conflict threatens to escalate into a broader war between Russia, Armenia’s main backer, and Azerbaijan’s ally, Turkey, and behind Turkey the entire NATO alliance. Turkey backs Azerbaijan, where the Turkic Azeris are the ethnic majority, but relations between Turkey and Armenia are particularly fraught due to the massacre of Armenians by the Ottoman empire in 1915.

In this context, it is significant that American press reports attributed responsibility for the fighting to the Azeri side. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote, “Late Friday, Azeri forces launched a bid to seize positions in Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic Armenian enclave that lies within Azerbaijan’s borders and was overtaken by Armenia during a six-year war that ended with a 1994 cease-fire.”

Azeri officials indicated they were pushing for a military rather than a diplomatic solution to the

conflict. Azeri ambassador to Russia Polad Bulbuloglu told state-owned Russia Today, “The attempts of a peaceful solution to this conflict have been underway for 22 years. How much more will it take? We are ready for a peaceful solution to the issue. But if it’s not solved peacefully then we will solve it by military means.”

On Sunday, although Azerbaijan announced a unilateral ceasefire in fighting Armenian forces, Armenia denounced Baku’s claim, stating that the fighting was continuing and that Armenia was preparing to intervene.

“Armenia has violated all the norms of international law. We won’t abandon our principal position. But at the same time, we will observe the ceasefire and after that we will try to solve the conflict peacefully,” President Ilham Aliyev said.

“The statement by the Azerbaijan side is an information trap and does not amount to a unilateral ceasefire,” said Artsrun Hovhannisyanyan, spokesman for the Armenian Defence Ministry. Deputy Defence Minister David Tonoyan said Armenia stood ready to provide “direct military assistance” to Nagorno-Karabakh forces if necessary.

The fighting between the two countries over the disputed region is the most intense since the 1994 Russian-brokered ceasefire ended a war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Nagorno-Karabakh, a majority-Armenian mountainous region in Azerbaijan, declared independence in 1991. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh had begun in 1988, when Azerbaijan and Armenia were still part of the Soviet Union, and escalated into a full-scale war in the early 1990s, after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. The war between Azeri troops and Armenian

separatists killed some 30,000 people by the time of the 1994 ceasefire.

The current fighting comes amid escalating tensions between NATO and Russia due to the US and European intervention in the region. The NATO powers orchestrated a fascist-led coup to oust pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine in February 2014. Since the coup, NATO powers have stepped up a massive military buildup against Russia in Eastern Europe as part of a plan to reduce Russia to semi-colonial status.

Russia and the NATO powers also clashed over Syria: while Russia backs President Bashar al-Assad's regime, the US and the EU stoked a proxy war, backing various Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces, including ISIS, to oust Assad. After the Kremlin oligarchy mounted its own reactionary military intervention to back Assad last year—fearing that the loss of its Syrian ally could undermine its global influence, encouraging Washington to step up Islamist destabilisation operations in Russia itself—Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet outright last November in Syria.

Such reckless actions by the NATO powers have put conflicts in the region on edge and threaten to escalate conflicts like the one in Nagorno-Karabakh into a disastrous, all-out war.

The *Christian Science Monitor* quoted Jeffrey Mankoff, a former adviser on US-Russia relations at the US State Department, currently deputy director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Russia and Eurasia Program. He said, "Russia is not just looking for peace, but is rather looking for some arrangement that maximizes their regional influence over both countries. If there's going to be a settlement, it will have to be on Russia's terms."

"Russia doesn't want conflict because it's trying to increase its influence over both countries. If they can do that through resolving the conflict, then that's an option, but failing that, the status quo benefits Russia fairly well," said Mankoff.

Russia has 5,000 troops in Armenia, in order to deter a Turkish war against Armenia, with the threat that this would escalate into a war with Russia, Mankoff explained: "The Russian troops' main role is to deter Turkish involvement, should there be a serious resumption of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan."

The war danger posed by the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis points to the disastrous geopolitical consequences of the dissolution of the USSR, and the reactionary character of the nationalist politics that predominate in all the former Soviet republics, including Russia. This provided the basis for the emergence of explosive ethnic conflicts and imperialist intrigue across the region.

In a statement, the US State Department declared, "We urge the sides to show restraint, avoid further escalation, and strictly adhere to the ceasefire. We reiterate that there is no military solution to the conflict." It also condemned "in the strongest terms the large-scale ceasefire violations ... which have resulted in a number of reported casualties, including civilians."

In regard to recent conflict, the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned Armenia and took an aggressive stance. Declaring that he would back Azerbaijan "to the end," Erdogan said, "We pray our Azeri brothers will prevail in these clashes."

Erdogan also blamed the Minsk Group (France, Russia and the United States) for failing to implement a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. "If the Minsk Group had solved the problem in due time, we wouldn't have witnessed the events now taking place on the contact line," said Erdogan in the US during an opening ceremony of a Turkish-American Culture and Civilization Center in Maryland.

For their part, Russia and Iran urged Azerbaijan and Armenia to immediately cease fire. "President Putin calls on the parties in the conflict to observe an immediate ceasefire and exercise restraint in order to prevent further casualties," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"We invite both of our northern neighbours to restraint and avoiding any action that can turn the situation more difficult," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hossein Jaber Ansari said.



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