

# Armenian-Azeri conflict erupts in Caucasus, threatening wider war

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Large-scale military clashes erupted yesterday in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus. Artillery, drone and tank fire killed many soldiers and civilians on both sides, with each one accusing the other of starting the conflict.

Armenia said that there were 16 killed and over 100 injured, while Azerbaijan acknowledged taking significant losses without giving figures. Yerevan and Baku posted videos of strikes against each other's forces and pictures of a blackout in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Azeri defense ministry claimed it seized seven border villages in the region, while Armenia claimed to have destroyed four helicopters and hit 10 tanks and 15 drones.

This is the most intense Armenian-Azeri fighting since the 1988-94 conflict between the two former Soviet republics that began before the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union. This war is, in the final analysis, a disastrous product of the restoration of capitalism of the Soviet Union and the reactionary character of the nation-state system. It is now directly caught up with global geopolitical rivalries stoked by the imperialist wars in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

An Armenian-Azeri war could rapidly spiral out of control and escalate into a broader conflict involving Russia, Turkey and the other NATO powers in Europe and North America.

In July, Armenian-Azeri clashes erupted at Tayush in northeastern Armenia and the Toyuz district in Azerbaijan, killing 12 Azeri and four Armenian soldiers.

Since then, military tensions have escalated. Turkey, a NATO member state and key ally of Azerbaijan, conducted joint military exercises of air and ground forces with Azerbaijan in Baku, Nakhchivan, Ganja, Kurdamir and Yevlakh immediately after the July clashes. Russia, backing Armenia, announced a "surprise combat readiness check" involving 150,000 troops, over 26,000 weapon systems, 414 aircraft and 106 warships.

NATO wars in Libya and Syria have undermined the ability or willingness of states that brokered earlier Armenian-Azeri ceasefires—the United States, France, and Russia—to do so again. Their relations with Turkey have

collapsed: Russia is waging a proxy war against Turkish-backed forces in Libya, France is backing Greece against Turkey in eastern Mediterranean oil disputes, and America is backing Kurdish-nationalist guerrillas opposed by Turkey in Syria. Armenia declared its support for Greece in the eastern Mediterranean, and Azerbaijan announced it was backing Turkey.

Olesya Vartanyan, an International Crisis Group analyst, wrote on Twitter: "There were numerous signals, all saw them and did nothing for weeks. There was a need for proactive international mediation. Many found reasons to OK this attack. If they stay silent now, expect a real war."

Instead of brokering peace, however, the major powers are in fact preparing for war with each other. Across the Black Sea, US and British troops together with German, Polish and Lithuanian advisers conducted joint exercises with Ukraine last week. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry stated: "For the first time, the military units of the armed forces of NATO member states will be involved in the strategic command and staff exercises."

Russia's Kavkaz-2020 (Caucasus-2020) war games involving 80,000 troops have also begun in the North Caucasus and the Black and Caspian seas. Up to 1,000 troops from China, Armenia, Belarus, Iran, Myanmar and Pakistan participated, as well as 250 tanks, 450 armored personnel carriers, and 200 artillery or multiple rocket launcher systems.

Statements by Armenian and Azeri officials make clear that all-out regional and even global war is a real and imminent danger in the South Caucasus.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated: "A full-scale military confrontation in the South Caucasus, which we stand on the brink of now, can have the most unpredictable consequences. It can spill outside the region and acquire a much larger scale, threatening international security and stability." He called on "the international community to pull every available lever to deter Turkey from any possible involvement."

A few hours earlier, however, he had announced martial

law and full war mobilization in Armenia: “Based on a decision by the government, martial law and a full mobilization have been declared in the Republic of Armenia. These decisions take effect immediately after official publication. I urge all personnel attached to the military to report at their territorial military commissions.”

Azerbaijan’s equally belligerent government responded by declaring a state of siege in several cities and regions. According to Turkey’s state-owned Anadolu Agency, the Azeri parliament passed a “measure partially and temporarily restricting the constitutional and property rights and freedoms of Azerbaijani citizens and foreigners in the country as long as the war situation continues.”

The ruling elites in both countries are pursuing an aggressive militaristic policy amid the explosive social tensions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Armenia has reported nearly 50,000 cases and 951 deaths in its population of less than three million, the highest death rate in Asia, but Pashinyan said on Thursday that Armenia “must live with the coronavirus.” Azerbaijan, with a population of 10 million, has registered over 40,000 cases and 586 deaths.

Both countries have drastically raised military spending at the expense of the working class. In 2019, military spending rose to nearly \$1.8 billion in Azerbaijan, an all-time high, and nearly \$650 million in Armenia—nearly five percent of its GDP, one of the highest rates in the world.

After bloodshed escalated yesterday, officials internationally began to call for the fighting to stop. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called on Armenia and Azerbaijan to “immediately stop fighting, deescalate tensions and return to meaningful negotiations without delay.” NATO stated that it is “deeply concerned by reports of large scale military hostilities along the line of contact in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone,” calling on both sides to “immediately cease hostilities.”

European Union Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell called for “an immediate cessation of hostilities,” while the French government declared it is “extremely concerned by the confrontation.”

The Russian and Iranian foreign ministries each called for “self-restraint,” with Moscow calling on “all parties to immediately cease fire and begin negotiations in order to stabilize the situation.”

Turkish officials denounced Armenia as the aggressor, declaring their full support for Azerbaijan. While President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan labeled Armenia, one of the region’s poorest countries with a population of only three million, as the “biggest threat to regional peace,” Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar called his Azeri counterpart to say: “Turkey will always stand by Azeri Turks by all means in their struggle to protect their territorial integrity.”

A 2010 Turkish-Azeri military pact requires both to respond militarily if either party is attacked by a third country. Pro-government Turkish media outlets are working to provide a pretext for Turkish military intervention, making unsubstantiated claims that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and People’s Protection Units (YPG) militias have gone to Nagorno-Karabakh to train Armenian militias. Both Kurdish groups are labeled as “terrorist” by Ankara.

Turkey’s bourgeois opposition is again lining up behind the government’s aggressive policy. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) denounced an “Armenian attack,” while the CHP’s far-right ally, the Good Party, declared that “Armenia’s attacks on Azerbaijan are unacceptable,” and that it is “standing with Azerbaijan in its legitimate cause.”

While Turkey aggressively backs Azerbaijan, Russia has traditionally supported Armenia and has a large military base in the country at Gyumri. Were full-scale war to ensue between Armenia and Azerbaijan, an intervention by either Russia or Turkey to avert defeat of their ally could lead to all-out war between Moscow and Ankara. This would inevitably pose the question of whether the entire NATO alliance would side with Turkey against Russia.

The growing war danger across the Caucasus, as well as in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, underlines the urgent necessity of building an international movement against war and herd immunity policies in the COVID-19 pandemic, unifying the working class on a socialist program.



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