

# Armenian-Azerbaijan war turns Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia into a powder keg

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The war between Armenia, whose population is Christian, and Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim country, in the South Caucasus has turned the entire region into a military and ethnic-religious powder keg.

The war began on September 27, when Azerbaijan launched a major offensive, involving heavy artillery, tanks and warplanes, against the Armenian-controlled enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both Baku and Yerevan have now bombed major cities, and civilian casualties are estimated to be in the hundreds.

Military analyst Leonid Nersisyan told the Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* last week that the scale of the fighting was unprecedented, and that the military losses incurred in a single day already went beyond what occurred during the war of 1992-1994.

In an address to the nation on October 4, Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, declared that his country would not stop the offensive until Armenia formally agrees to withdraw its forces from Azerbaijani territory. He also demanded a public apology from Armenia. These conditions are generally deemed unacceptable to Armenia.

On Monday, Iran announced a peace plan, offering itself as a mediator between the two warring sides. However, the Russian press reported that Baku and Turkey, which is heavily backing Azerbaijan, are preparing for a prolonged war that might eventually draw in both Russia and Iran. Russia has an important military base in Armenia, and the war threatens to cut off supply routes to this base.

The war has major implications for Europe, Russia and the Middle East, as it directly intersects with the conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Africa that have been ignited by the intervention of US imperialism in the past decades.

War between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno Karabakh enclave first broke out in 1988. It was directly connected to the push by the Stalinist bureaucracy toward capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union, which was accompanied by the whipping up of extreme nationalist and separatist sentiments. The war lasted over six years, killing an estimated 40,000 people and displacing hundreds of

thousands.

By virtue of its geographic position as a bridge between Europe, the Black Sea and the Middle East, the energy-rich Caucasus has long been a hotspot for geopolitical rivalries. Since the break-up of the USSR in 1991, the religious and ethnic tensions in the region, which had been exacerbated by decades under the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy, have systematically been exploited, especially by the US and its allies, to further their interests.

Today, these conflicts are deeply enmeshed with the US-led wars in the Middle East. Initial reports that thousands of Islamist mercenaries from Syria and Libya are being deployed on the side of Azerbaijan have been confirmed by French President Emmanuel Macron. He suggested that the Islamist fighters are entering the Caucasus through Turkey, which has also been heavily involved in the wars in Syria and Libya. The arming and training of Islamist militias has been a key component of the strategy of Washington in the civil war in Syria.

Moreover, over the past decade, Azerbaijan has been closely integrated into US and Israeli war preparations. The Russian press noted that the Azeri missiles that have destroyed civilian targets in Armenia have all been manufactured by Azad Systems, a company co-owned by the Azeri Defense Ministry and the Israeli company Aeronautics Defense Systems. The Trump administration granted Azerbaijan aid worth \$100 million in 2018-2019, up from \$3 million the year before.

However, statements from the White House have left Washington's position on the war unclear. The rapid escalation of the war in the Caucasus coincided with a week that was dominated in Washington by Trump's public threats of a coup in November, followed shortly thereafter by the news that Trump and an ever-growing number of White House personnel have been infected with the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, in France, calls are growing for Paris to take the side of Armenia.

Iran, like Russia, has refrained from openly taking sides,

insisting on negotiations and a ceasefire. Russian media reports suggest that there are growing anti-Armenian sentiments within Iran, whose population is predominantly Muslim and includes 20 million ethnic Azeris, a fifth of the total population. The vast majority of them live in the north of Iran, which directly borders Azerbaijan. There are also an estimated 150,000-300,000 ethnic Armenian Christians living in Iran.

Both Turkey and Azerbaijan have portrayed the war as one in defense of the Muslim world and Muslim values against the onslaught of Christian Armenia. Russia itself is home to a Muslim minority of about 14 million people (10 percent of the total population), many of whom live in the North Caucasus.

In an indication of just how explosive the Kremlin considers the situation, all official statements have been limited to a call for a ceasefire and negotiations between the two sides. According to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have taken matters into their own hands and don't want other officials interfering in their negotiations.

A piece published by the think tank journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, whose authors have close ties to the Kremlin, stressed that the war in the Caucasus broke out on the fifth anniversary of the beginning of Russia's military involvement in the civil war in Syria. It noted: "One of the tasks of Russia at the time was to contain the threat of Islamist terrorism and prevent it from coming closer to its borders. However, now...fighters from Syria and Libya are fighting in Karabakh."

The journal advocated a negotiated settlement with Ankara in order to prevent a further escalation of the war and limit the bolstering of Turkey's influence. It noted that "perhaps the main task of Erdogan consists in creating a mechanism for mutual cooperation with Russia over Karabakh. The series of deals between Putin and Erdogan on the southern flank of the Russian borders in recent years have been very beneficial to both sides."

It pointed out that even though Turkey was a NATO member, recent years have shown that Ankara "is no longer ready to play the junior partner of the Americans in the broader region from Northern Africa and the Balkans to the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, which it [Turkey] historically has seen as 'its own.'" The piece argued that Moscow should try to slow Ankara's offensive, create the basis for a ceasefire between the warring sides and strengthen the role of the Minsk group of the OSCE—which does not include Turkey—and then find a way "to politely say 'nyet' [no] in Turkish."

The central fear of the Kremlin is that the war on its southern borders and especially the presence of Islamist

fighters could reignite long-simmering regionalist, ethnic and religious conflicts within its own borders. Just to the north of Armenia, in the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus, the Kremlin fought two bloody wars against a US-backed Chechen separatist movement from 1994 to 2009 to prevent the secession of the region from the Russian Federation. The wars resulted in the death of about a tenth of the Chechen population and have left the region in shambles.

Fears of ethnic and regional conflicts in Russia have already been heightened in recent months as major protests under regionalist banners have broken out in Khabarovsk, a city in Russia's economically underdeveloped Far East. The US- and German-backed liberal opposition is systematically encouraging these regionalist and separatist sentiments and tendencies.

Moreover, on Russia's western border, the regime of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus has been shaken by mass protests since August, raising the specter of his replacement by a government aligned more directly with NATO and the EU. At the same time, the civil war in East Ukraine on Russia's border, which was triggered by the US- and German-backed coup in February 2014 in Kiev, continues to rage.

The Russian oligarchy, which emerged out of the Stalinist bureaucracy that betrayed the 1917 October Revolution and destroyed the USSR, has no way out of an unfolding catastrophe that it itself has helped create.

For the working class, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan poses enormous dangers. The only path to halt this war and avert the threat of much broader ethnic and military conflicts lies in the struggle for socialism. This fight must be consciously based on the lessons of the struggle of Trotskyism against Stalinism.

*In November 1991, the International Committee of the Fourth International held a World Conference of Workers Against Imperialist War and Colonialism. It analyzed the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and the eruption of neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and outlined the basis for a socialist anti-war movement in the working class. The documents of this conference can be found here.*



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