

Turkey backs Azeri offensive on Armenia as Russia, Iran warn of escalation

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Azeri forces launched a large-scale offensive in the south of the Nagorno-Karabakh, nine days after fighting broke out again between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region.

On Facebook Tuesday, Armenian Defense Ministry spokesperson Shushan Stepanyan cited reports from Artsakh, the Armenian authority in the Karabakh: “According to the Artsakh Defense Army, this afternoon the Azeri Armed Forces launched a large-scale attack in the southern direction of the line of contact between Artsakh and Azerbaijan, throwing reserve forces, large amounts of military equipment, including tanks and artillery [into battle]. The enemy ignores also the security of the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” which Azeri and Armenian forces have both shelled.

The Armenian Foreign Ministry also noted that the offensive began during Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu’s visit to the Azeri capital, Baku, pledging support for the ethnic-Turkic Azeris against Armenia.

In Baku, Çavuşoğlu rejected cease-fire calls from France, Russia, Iran and other powers, demanding Armenia hand the Karabakh over to Azerbaijan: “Let’s have a cease-fire, OK, but what will happen after that? Will you be able to tell Armenia to immediately withdraw from Azerbaijan’s territory? Or are you able to draw up a solution for it to withdraw? No. We have supported efforts for a peaceful resolution, but Armenia has enjoyed the fruits of the occupation for 30 years.”

Azeri President Ilham Aliyev met Çavuşoğlu to thank him for Turkey’s support: “This support inspires us, gives us additional strength and at the same time plays an important role in ensuring stability and prosperity in the region.”

There have also been multiple independent reports in European media, not denied by Turkish officials, that Syrian Islamist militias and Turkish private security firms are sending fighters to join Azeri troops against Armenia.

On this basis, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan issued a pledge yesterday to continue fighting as part of the so-called “war on terror.”

The latest fighting continues the fratricidal 1988-1994 war between the two former Soviet republics that erupted in the run-up to the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism in 1991. After that war, in which over 20,000 were killed and over a million displaced, Armenian forces ended up controlling the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. Since then, fighting has erupted periodically between the two countries over the disputed region, and the Azeri military is now reportedly strengthened by its use of Turkish, Israeli or NATO drones.

As the military offensive continues, both sides are intensifying shelling and missile attacks against the civilian populations. Artsakh official Artak Beglaryan told AFP: “According to our preliminary estimates, some 50 percent of Karabakh’s population and 90 percent of women and children—some 70,000 to 75,000 people—have been displaced.” There are growing fears that fleeing civilians will accelerate the COVID-19 pandemic’s spread across the region.

Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh’s capital, is largely deserted and under constant bombing. Security camera videos posted on Twitter showed bomblets from cluster bombs, allegedly given by Israel to Azerbaijan, spreading out over empty streets and blowing up pavement and vegetation at regular intervals.

Gayane Sarkissian, a schoolteacher, told AFP she decided on Tuesday to leave with her child and 64-year-old mother: “Air raid alarms sounded twice this morning, there were two explosions in the suburbs around 9 a.m. I didn’t know what it was. We took shelter and we decided to leave.” She took the road linking Karabakh to Armenia, which has been regularly bombed.

Amnesty International noted unconfirmed reports that

Armenian forces are firing Smerch 300mm rockets loaded with cluster munitions at Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city, though this cannot be confirmed as Azerbaijan has blocked international media from reporting there. However, reports emerged of unexploded rockets and ordnance littering the streets of Ganja and houses destroyed by artillery fire in the city.

A farmer from the Azeri village of Aleskerli, Zabil Mamedov, told the Russian-language news site *Caucasian Knot*: "The firing has become more frequent and you don't know when it's going to start again. In the first days we sent women, children, and the old people to stay with friends and relatives. Now in the village it's mostly only young and middle-aged men."

The fresh escalation of the fighting, in which both sides claim to have killed over 2,000 people, provoked statements of concern from Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Rouhani said: "We must be attentive that the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan does not become a regional war. Peace is the basis of our work and we hope to restore stability to the region in a peaceful way. ... The issue of peace in the region is very important and, of course, the territorial integrity of our neighbors also has great importance to us."

Iran and Russia have both sent troops to fight CIA-backed Islamist militias in Syria, and Rouhani also reacted with concern at these militias' appearance directly on the borders of Iran and Russia, saying he would not allow terrorists to arrive "under various pretexts."

Putin made his first public statement on the war yesterday, saying, "This is a tragedy, we are very worried, because people living in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh are not strangers to us." Two million Armenians and two million Azeris live inside Russia, and Putin called for a ceasefire "as quickly as possible." However, he said that "apparently this is still a long way off" and that he was maintaining "lively working contact" with the Armenian prime minister.

Putin indicated that Russia, which has a military base in Armenia at Gyumri, does not currently plan to intervene in the conflict. He said that Russian security guarantees to Armenia under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) do not extend to the Karabakh, whose Armenian administration is not internationally recognized.

He said: "Combat operations, to our great regret, are still ongoing, they are not being conducted on the territory of Armenia. As for Russia's fulfillment of its treaty

obligations within the framework of this Agreement, we have always fulfilled, are fulfilling and will continue to fulfill our obligations."

This points both to the imminent danger of great-power war emerging from three decades of US-led wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, and the disastrous consequences of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union. Explosive national tensions unleashed by the dissolution of the USSR have provoked bloody wars and provided endlessly fertile ground for imperialist intrigue. Were Azeri forces to invade Armenia, or cross into its territory from Nagorno-Karabakh, the stage would be set for a direct clash between Russia and Turkey, a NATO member state.

There is also the possibility, clearly feared both in Tehran and in Moscow, that this war may set up CIA-backed insurgencies by Turkic minorities within their own borders.

In an analysis for CNN, the *Guardian's* Moscow correspondent Nick Paton Walsh spoke for the factions of the media and political establishment in the NATO powers who hope the Armenian-Azeri war will wear down Russia and its ability to block US foreign policy. Turkey, he wrote, "has left Putin in perhaps his most complicated spot in years," gloating at the "deafening silence from Moscow" on the Armenian-Azeri conflict.

Pointing to Russian intervention against NATO-led wars and coups in Libya, Syria and Ukraine, he added that the "Kremlin has been intervening a lot recently. Moscow currently has (proxy) forces in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya (according to US officials). It has also had to send emergency support to embattled Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, the extent and format of which are not public. That is four separate crises, all of which are very much alive. Does the Kremlin have the resources or stomach for a fifth?"

The Armenian-Azeri clash is another major flashpoint posing the danger of a war between the major, nuclear-armed powers. This threat can be answered only through the struggle to unite the working class internationally in a socialist movement against imperialism and war.



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