

Danger of Russian-Turkish conflict grows as Armenian-Azeri ceasefire fails

Alex Lantier
18 October 2020

Three weeks into a bloody war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Caucasus, the danger is mounting that the conflict could trigger a broader regional and indeed global war.

Casualties are rapidly rising as artillery and missile strikes rain down on civilian and military targets on both sides. Yesterday, Armenian authorities in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave increased their confirmed military losses to 710 deaths. However, neither side has issued precise figures on their total military and civilian losses, while claiming that they have killed thousands of their opponents' soldiers and civilians.

Fighting continued after a first truce negotiated a week ago by Russia, and then a new truce set to enter into effect at midnight Sunday, brokered by the so-called Minsk Group on the Karabakh conflict led by the United States, Russia and France. This latest ceasefire was presented as a "humanitarian" truce to allow an exchange of bodies and prisoners of war.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called his Armenian and Azeri counterparts before the truce was announced to call upon both to adhere to the earlier ceasefire. The Elysée presidential palace in France also called on both sides to "strictly" respect the truce and said that France, which has a substantial Armenian population, would closely follow events.

US officials, who had until now maintained a deafening silence on the Armenian-Azeri war, also made statements last week suggesting support for a truce. "We're hopeful that the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azerbaijanis are doing," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told WBS radio in Atlanta on Thursday.

Saying he wanted the two sides to "get the ceasefire right," Pompeo blamed Turkey for the escalation: "We now have the Turks, who have stepped in and provided resources to Azerbaijan, increasing the risk, increasing the firepower that's taking place in this historic fight over this place called Nagorno-Karabakh." Pompeo claimed Washington does not want "third-party countries coming in to lend their firepower

to what is already a powder keg of a situation."

US Democratic Party presidential candidate Joe Biden also criticized Ankara's support for the ethnic-Turkic Azeris, stating, "Turkey's provision of arms to Azerbaijan and bellicose rhetoric encouraging a military solution are irresponsible."

On Sunday, however, Armenian and Azeri officials denounced each other for violating the truce. After Armenian Defense Ministry spokeswoman Shushan Stepanyan blamed Azeri forces for artillery and rocket attacks, the Azeri Defense Ministry accused Armenian forces of launching an early-morning artillery and mortar barrage. On Saturday, Armenian forces had fired missiles on Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city, leaving 13 civilians dead, including two children, and dozens wounded.

There are signs that Azeri forces have, for now, the upper hand. US military analyst Rob Lee told Al Jazeera that high-altitude Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones have "dramatically" affected Armenian forces. Lee said: "TB2s initially targeted air defence systems. The ones we've seen destroyed are from the 1980s. I think the radars are struggling to pick up these small [drones]. Then, the TB2s started going after tanks, artillery and now, because they've been going through a succession of targets of priority, we see them targeting squads of soldiers."

Azerbaijan is buying drones from Turkey, which has used them extensively in the civil wars triggered by decade-long NATO imperialist interventions in both Libya and Syria. Fuad Shahbaz, an official at the Centre for Strategic Communications think-tank in Baku, told Al Jazeera, "We have seen Bayraktar drones actively used in Syria and Libya by the Turkish air force against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and General Khalifa Haftar's Army in Libya."

A large-scale Azeri ground invasion, Al Jazeera noted, would still face "well-fortified [Armenian] defensive positions occupying high ground in mountainous territory." However, Lee added, "TB2s are just sitting overhead and waiting for targets of opportunity. Ultimately, Armenians don't have a good plan for destroying them. They have to do

something or Azerbaijan will keep hitting them.”

The bloody conflict over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave first erupted in the lead-up to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. None of the subsequent negotiations proved able to resolve the 1988-1994 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which led to over 30,000 dead and 1 million displaced. Armenian forces ended up in control of Nagorno-Karabakh and several surrounding Azeri territories connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, leading to permanent and insoluble conflicts between the two former Soviet republics.

This conflict, which shows the inviability and reactionary character of the nation-state system, has now become deeply enmeshed with the conflicts provoked by the decades of imperialist wars led by Washington in the Middle East and Central Asia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In particular, it comes amid renewed US war threats against Iran and growing proxy wars between Turkey and Russia. In Syria, Russia and Iran have backed President Bashar al-Assad’s regime against NATO-backed Islamist militias resupplied from Turkey, while Russia and Turkey have backed opposed factions in Libya.

As the Armenian-Azeri war drags on, the risk that it could escalate into a direct conflict between the major powers rises. While Ankara has openly called for Azerbaijan to expel Armenians from the Karabakh, Moscow, which has an alliance and troops stationed in Armenia, has not yet intervened.

While Moscow still calls for peace and de-escalation, there are growing signs that it is considering direct involvement. On October 16, Russia held military exercises in the Caspian Sea, which borders both Azerbaijan and Iran, involving four warships armed with cruise missiles, two escort ships, warplanes and troops. The Russian Defense Ministry stated that the exercise did “not restrict the economic activity of the Caspian littoral states.”

There is undoubtedly concern in Moscow and Tehran about reports of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist fighters deploying to Azerbaijan, which borders both Russia and Iran. These fighters could be used to inflame Turkic-separatist sentiment in Iran or revive civil wars in nearby Muslim-majority areas of Russia, like Chechnya or Dagestan, that erupted after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In Iran, *Mashregh News*, close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, warned that Turkish private security firms and Syrian Islamist militias are sending fighters to Azerbaijan. It wrote that if the Karabakh “is captured by [Azeri President Ilham] Aliyev’s forces and the terrorists sent by Erdoğan, there will be a serious threat to Iran in terms of national security and territorial integrity.”

As the Russian drills began in the Caspian Sea, Russia’s

Kommersant published detailed allegations of Turkish involvement. It wrote that 600 Turkish troops including drone pilots stayed behind in Azerbaijan after Turkish-Azeri military exercises in July-August. Relying apparently on access to Georgian authorities’ records of Turkish flights through their airspace to Azerbaijan, *Kommersant* identified the aircraft type and flight numbers of alleged Turkish flights of ammunition and troops to Azerbaijan on September 4, 18, 30 and October 1, 3 and 9.

It also alleged that Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and army chief of staff General Ümit Dündar traveled to Azerbaijan on September 28-30 and “are in charge on the ground of overall operational leadership on the Karabakh front.”

“Turkish representatives are recruiting mercenaries to participate in fighting in the Karabakh on the Azeri side among Islamist militias loyal to Ankara fighting in Syria and Libya,” the paper added. It said that in the first week of October alone, 1,300 fighters from Syrian militias and 150 fighters from Libyan militias had deployed to fight in the Karabakh war. It alleged that Islamist militias recruit fighters in Syria’s Afrin province, transport them to the Turkish city of ?anl?urfa and by plane to Azerbaijan.

The danger of a horrific escalation in the region, already torn apart by decades of war, is very real. Moreover, none of the regional regimes—the Turkish or Iranian Islamist regimes or the post-Soviet capitalist kleptocracy in the Kremlin—have anything to offer to workers. They are jockeying to assert their interests and position themselves for a deal to be endorsed by the imperialist powers that have plundered the region for decades. Against this, the way forward is the unification of workers in the region, across all ethnic lines, and beyond in a socialist struggle against war and capitalism.



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