

Casualties mount in Armenian-Azeri war as US-brokered ceasefire collapses

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Casualties are mounting rapidly in the war between the former Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan over control of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. The conflict, which erupted in the run-up to the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, led to a 1988-1994 war that claimed 30,000 lives and forced over one million to flee their homes.

Thousands have already died in this year's conflict, which broke out again on September 27, as both sides deploy heavy weapons and bomb each other's populations. On October 10 and 18, Moscow brokered ceasefires between Armenia and Azerbaijan in an attempt to halt the fighting that failed only hours after going into effect. This week, Washington made its own failed attempt at brokering a cease-fire, which collapsed as Azeri forces advance into Armenian-held territory.

US officials tried to negotiate a deal after an appeal by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Last week, Putin declared in a televised meeting: "There are a lot of casualties from both sides, more than 2,000 from each side." He said the number of deaths was "nearing 5,000," a far higher number than what has been publicly admitted by either side, and said he speaks "on the phone several times a day" with both Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azeri President Ilham Aliyev. Putin called on Washington to "work in unison" with Moscow to end the Caucasus fighting.

Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Azeri Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov traveled to Washington in October and met with Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun. The next day, the US State Department issued a statement praising the "intensive negotiations" it had overseen and announcing a "humanitarian ceasefire" taking effect "at 08:00 a.m. local time on October 26, 2020."

US President Donald Trump published a tweet

congratulating the US officials for negotiating the deal. "Many lives will be saved. Proud of my team [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo] & Steve Biegun & [National Security Council] for getting the deal done!"

Azeri officials however accused Armenian forces of shelling the town of Terter in "gross violation" of the ceasefire only minutes after the deal went into effect, while Armenian officials denied this and alleged that Azeri artillery had fired on their troops after the ceasefire went into effect.

Deadly attacks on civilians are mounting. On Wednesday, Azeri officials accused Armenia of firing Smerch missiles with cluster bomb warheads at the Azeri city of Barda. The attack reportedly hit a densely populated civilian neighborhood, killing at least 25 and wounding dozens more.

Armenian officials in turn accused Azeri forces of firing five missiles at Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, including one which destroyed the town's maternity hospital. "This war crime, which is a gross violation of international humanitarian law, customary law, clearly shows that Azerbaijan's target in Artsakh is the people—infants, mothers, the elderly," the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared.

Azeri forces are advancing through the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave towards the Lachin Pass, which connects the enclave to Armenia proper. They have closed the distance between their troops and the pass from over 60 to 30 kilometers, placing the road link between Armenia and the Karabakh in range of Azeri heavy artillery. One report in the *Bangkok Post* claimed that Azeri troops had in fact already seized the pass—which would mean that half the civilian population of 146,000 that has not fled would be trapped, largely cut off from resupply.

There are several reports that Turkish and Israeli

drones sold to Azerbaijan have given it a decisive military edge over Armenian forces. Hikmet Hacıyev, an Azeri official, told the *Financial Times*: “What we see is that there was a factor of invincibility that Armenia had tried to propagate over many years... but they relied too much on old military doctrine and thinking: tanks, heavy artillery and fortifications. It simply reminded us of the second world war. Instead, mobile forces, drone technology and a modern approach has been applied by us.”

The FT also cited Jack Watling of the Royal United Services Institute think-tank, who said: “The Armenians have been caught flat-footed. One side is deploying modern weaponry, and the other is using weaponry from the 1970s and 1980s.” Watling added that given Azeri skill in using drones against Armenia, “it’s obvious that they have received significant levels of advice from Turkey.”

In this war, the nationalist conflicts encouraged by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union come together with the explosive geopolitical conflicts triggered by three decades of imperialist war since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While Turkey aggressively backs the ethnic-Turkic Azeris, Russia and Iran have indicated sympathies for Armenia while trying to remain more neutral.

Tensions are mounting between these major regional powers, which are already in bitter conflict as a result of the decade-long NATO war in Syria. While the Turkish government supports NATO-backed Sunni Islamist militias aiming to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia and Iran have both deployed forces to Syria to support the Assad regime against the NATO powers. The longstanding Armenia-Azeri conflict over the Karabakh is further inflaming these tensions, which have seen Turkish and Russian forces directly clash inside Syria.

Azerbaijan’s increasingly powerful position in the conflict is stepping up pressure on the Russian and Iranian governments. After Azeri and Armenian shells and missiles landed in Iran, the Iranian government on Tuesday strengthened its air defense along its borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia. On Wednesday, it deployed ground troops to reinforce the border, as Iranian official Abbas Araghchi began a tour to visit Azeri, Armenian and Russian officials to try to work out a ceasefire.

This came as Moscow, who has a military base at Gyumri in Armenia, deployed border guards to the Armenian border with the Karabakh. This is apparently aimed at discouraging Azeri forces from launching an invasion of Armenia if they conquer the Karabakh.

Moscow and Tehran are both increasingly concerned at multiple reports that Syrian Islamist militias and Turkish private security forces are sending Islamists to Azerbaijan to fight Armenia. There are also unconfirmed reports that the Al Qaeda-linked Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), recruited among Muslims of China’s Uighur minority in Xinjiang, are deploying to Azerbaijan. These deployments all raise the question of whether CIA-backed Islamist militias could be sent to exploit religious or ethnic conflicts inside Russia, Iran or conceivably China.

These conflicts underlying the Azeri-Armenian war are made all the more explosive by the uncertainty hanging over the US presidential elections, what foreign policy American imperialism will pursue after those elections, and whether it will attack Iran. The Al Monitor news site noted: “Azerbaijan is supported by both Israel and Turkey, which causes concern for Iran, and therefore Iran has additional urgency in wanting to end the fighting as soon possible for fear of giving either country more influence on its borders, should a wider war break out.”

These conflicts underscore the extraordinary danger of escalation posed by the war in the Caucasus, and the necessity to mobilize workers and youth internationally in a socialist, anti-war movement against the risk of a large-scale regional or global war triggered by the conflicts in the region.



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