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Armenia-Azerbaijan War Regional Implications



Armenia and Azerbaijan war over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2020, 6,500 people lost their lives. Photo Credit - Umit Bektas/Reuters

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Map of the Caucasus: Source: Wikipedia

On Tuesday September 15, 2022, border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan surfaced, with at least 100 Armenian and 50 Azeri soldiers dead. Baku and Yerevan have accused each other for starting the recent clashes and violating the ceasefire mediated after the end of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. The Russians have mediated a tentative ceasefire between the two countries.¹

Brief History

The Armenians are a Christian majority ethnic group, and belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Christian denomination. The Azeris are a Shi'ite majority Turkic speaking group. The South Caucasus have historically been a battleground for various powers, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Safavid/Qajar Empires. The modern-day states of Armenia and Azerbaijan were formed in 1920, after it was annexed by the Soviet Union. The region in contestation. Nagorno-Karabakh was populated by Armenians but the Soviets gave it to the Azeris. Like after the fall of communism in Yugoslavia, the collapse of the Soviet Union reignited previous ethnic tensions and the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament voted to be a part of Armenia. A devastating war ensued during the 1990s, with atrocities committed by both sides. The war ended with a ceasefire mediated by the Russians in 1994 and relinquished control of the area to Armenia as well as a sizable portion of Azerbaijan.²

¹ Faustine Vincent, "Conflict returns to Armenia-Azerbaijan border," *Le Monde*, September 14, 2022. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/>

² "Armenia-Azerbaijan: Why did Nagorno-Karabakh spark a conflict?" *BBC*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com>

Since then, while minor skirmishes occurred, it was not until 2020, that a major war broke out again. While this war was short, lasting only 44 days, it significantly shifted the power dynamics in the region with Baku emerging as the clear victor. Both countries argue that this territory has always been a part of their territory, but the other side is “occupying” it.

Tehran’s Security Concerns

As recently as September 19, 2022, the Iranian government stressed that a diplomatic effort to find a solution as conflict would not serve the interests of both countries and regional powers.³ Iranians accuse Baku of allowing the Israelis to stage actions which may harm Iranian interests. The Iranians have accused the Azeris to be a staging ground in an Israeli operation that uncovered Iranian nuclear facility secrets. “Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has warned all of Iran’s neighbors against what he called ‘interference of foreigners in the region’ as a “source of discord and damage,” and “Khamenei promised retribution to those neighboring states that collaborate with the Israelis.”⁴ However, one can argue that at the core of Baku’s close alliance with the Israelis is due to a fundamental difference in ideology. Azerbaijan is a staunchly secular state and while it is also a majority Shi’a state, it has been worried about what it deems of Tehran’s export of “extremism.” Moreover, Iranian support (albeit covertly) to Armenia has been another strain in relations between Baku and Tehran.

In addition, given the sanctions placed on Iran, Armenia remains a vital country in which the Iranians can lessen the impact with sanctions, reflecting their broader policy on the need for regional trade. Yet there is only so much the Iranians can do in supporting Yerevan, since Iran is home to a large Azeri community. The worst fear for Iran is that the Iranian Azeris, under provocation from Baku, will want to join Azerbaijan, intensifying Iranian fears that its enemies (Riyadh, Washington) are supporting and encouraging separatist groups to divide the country. The chances of this happening are minimal as Iranian Azeris are well integrated with the state with many top officials – Ayatollah Khamenei and former empress Farah Pahlavi – having an Azeri background. Yet, it nevertheless illustrates the broader Turkish-Iranian competition in the South Caucasus, with many in Iran viewing Baku as a mere tool for Ankara’s pan-Turkism agenda, backed by the Israelis. This perception was symbolized by the negative reaction by the Iranian government after Erdogan read a poem about how the Azeri people were separated between Russia and Iran during the 19th century. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted, “President Erdogan was not informed that what he ill-recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas

³ Maryam Sinaee, “Tehran Says Diplomacy Needed To Resolve Baku-Yerevan Conflict,” *Iran International*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en>

⁴ “Leader urges regional states to prevent foreign intervention,” *Presstv*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.presstv.ir>

... from [the] Iranian motherland.”⁵ However, for the moment, Iran’s ability to influence events in the South Caucasus is relatively low, as it has often ignored the region and instead devoted more attention to Syria and Iraq. Importantly, the countrywide protests over the death of Mahsa Amini illustrates the deep domestic challenges the Iranian government must deal with, notwithstanding economic hardships due to sanctions and an overall public dissatisfaction with the theocracy.



Armenia is purchasing India rockets - Pinaka is a multiple rocket launcher produced in India and developed by the DRDO for the Army. Photo Credit: Twitter/@DRDO_India

Ankara’s Strive for Influence

The Turkish role in the South Caucasus was only made possible after the end of the Cold War, when Ankara was the first to recognize Azerbaijan in 1991. In addition, the domestic shift within Turkey, from the Kemalist dominated foreign policy to a more balanced approach allowed for Türkiye to seek a greater role in the South Caucasus. The two countries have extremely close cultural affinity, both being Turkic states and Azerbaijan is the only another Turkic speaking country in which its languages are mutually intelligible with Anatolian Turkish.⁶ Ankara’s relations with Armenia have been fraught, due to the negative memory over the Armenian Genocide. The official Turkish position on the Armenian genocide is that Armenian claims are overexaggerated

⁵ “Iran protests to Turkey over ‘meddling’ poem recited by Erdogan,” *Al Jazeera*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com>

⁶ Kevork Oskanian, “Turkey’s global strategy: Turkey and the Caucasus,” *The London School of Economics and Political Science* (2011), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43497/>

and more Muslims than Armenians died, and the event didn't constitute a genocide since they cooperated with the Russians, and hence their political leanings – not ethnicity – resulted in the mass killings and dislocation.⁷ In addition, Türkiye and Azerbaijan share close economic ties, with the latter being a huge supplier of energy for Türkiye, and a major desire of the Turkish government is to be an energy transit hub.⁸ It can be argued that the deep dependency Ankara has on Baku with regards to energy is a constraint that prevents the Turks from reducing tensions with Armenia.

In addition, the Turkish involvement in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is part of the broader rivalry between Ankara and Tehran. Relations between Türkiye and Iran are not like Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the Turks and Iranians are close economic partners, and the sectarian element is not as important. In many regional conflicts, the two countries are on the opposite sides. In the Syrian Civil War, the Iranians have supported the Syrian government while the Turks have assisted various Syrian rebel groups. In addition, despite the two having problems with Kurdish insurgency, on many occasions the Turks have accused the Iranians of tacitly aiding the PKK.

Yet at the same time, Türkiye does have limitations in being overly ambitious in the South Caucasus. For starters, the South Caucasus is a traditional Russian “sphere of influence.” Yet, Moscow is more preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, which does not translate to allowing more Turkish involvement in what they perceive as their “backyard.” Moreover, much of Ankara's grandiosity has been costly, resulting in diplomatic isolation and economic challenges. Thus, the government has realized the need to reduce tensions with Israel, with the West, and the Gulf States. Even though Ankara has a subtle rivalry with Tehran, it still values the economic relations, while finding ways to avoid the impact of US sanctions.⁹

Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a significant spillover effect in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Traditionally, the Russians have sided with the Armenians and the South Caucasus have been a region of Russian influence. However, due to the war, the ability of Russia to influence outcomes between Baku and Yerevan is in question. In addition, the war has prompted many European countries to rethink their dependency on energy from Russia and Azerbaijan is one of the alternative sources under consideration.¹⁰ However, within many European capitals and the West at large, there is immense support for Armenia,

⁷ “The Armenian Allegation of Genocide: The issue and the facts,” *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/default.en.mfa>

⁸ Evanthia Balla, “Turkish and Iranian interest and policies in the South Caucasus,” *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center* (2013), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/noref/0029896/f_0029896_24202.pdf

⁹ Tulay Karadeniz, “Turkey looking at new trade mechanisms with Iran to avoid U.S. sanctions,” *Reuters*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com>

¹⁰ Gabriel Gavin, “Azerbaijan and Armenia plunge back into war, complicating EU hunt for energy,” *Politico*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu>

especially when President Biden recognized the Armenian Genocide and how President Macron voiced his support for Armenian sovereignty.¹¹ Armenian support was further illustrated by the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Armenia in midst of the conflict.



Nancy Pelosi visits Armenia after the crisis, Photo Credit: Reuters

¹¹ “France's Macron reaffirmed support for Armenia's sovereignty in phone call with Armenia PM,” *Reuters*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com>

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