

Russia, France denounce Turkey as Armenian-Azeri war escalates

By Alex Lantier
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Four days after fighting broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, tensions between the major powers are escalating. Amid reports that Turkey and Syrian Islamist militias are sending mercenaries to Azerbaijan to fight a war on Russia's borders, the risk is growing of a clash between Russia and Turkey, launching a regional or global war.

While Azeri forces do not appear to have advanced far into Nagorno-Karabakh, casualties are mounting as precision weapons rain down on towns across the region. Armenian officials said yesterday they had lost 104 troops and that at least seven civilians had been killed since the fighting began. Azeri officials gave no statistics on military losses but confirmed that 15 Azeri civilians were killed.

Online videos show air and drone strikes inflicting substantial losses to military units and equipment. Armenian officials claim to have destroyed 83 drones, seven helicopters, 166 armored vehicles, one warplane and one missile battery, and to have caused 920 casualties. Azerbaijan claims to have destroyed 130 armored vehicles, 200 artillery and missile launch systems, 25 air defense missile batteries and one S-300 air defense system, while inflicting 2,300 casualties.

Arayik Harutyunyan, the president of the unofficial Armenian authority in Nagorno-Karabakh, warned: "We must be prepared for a long war. ... The war will end with the defeat of Azerbaijan, or at least not with a victory."

Significantly, Harutyunyan added that Iran is one of the main targets of Turkish-backed Azeri operations. He said, "I want to say that one of the targets of this war (fighting on the contact line) is Iran because this war is directed, among other things, against Iran. We are aware of regional problems related, in particular, to the north of Iran," where there is a substantial Azeri population. Iranian officials fear separatist sentiment could emerge among Iranian Azeris in favor of possibly seceding from

Iran and joining Azerbaijan.

This is the bloodiest Armenian-Azeri fighting since the 1988–1994 war between the two ex-Soviet republics, which erupted shortly before the Stalinist regime dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. It is now however deeply enmeshed in the innumerable geopolitical rivalries, imperialist wars and local ethnic conflicts that have spread across the Middle East and Central Asia in the three decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In particular, the war is unfolding amid a growing campaign by US imperialism to isolate and threaten both Iran and Russia.

Turkish officials are aggressively supporting the ethnically-Turkic Azeris against Armenia. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has called on Azeris to expel Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh and pledged that the "Turkish people stand with their Azeri brothers with all our means." This intensifies tensions with Armenia's main regional backer, Russia, under conditions where Russia and Turkey are already waging bloody proxy wars against each other in the civil wars triggered by NATO regime-change operations in Libya and Syria over the last decade.

Armenian officials said that they are discussing military aid with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes the post-Soviet republics of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan called Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron to discuss the war. On Russia's Rossiya 1 channel, he called the war "a threat to the Armenian people's very existence."

Last week, Russian-Turkish talks over Syria's northwestern Idlib province broke down. There are expectations of a Russian-backed offensive by Syrian government troops against Islamist rebels supported by Turkey and the NATO powers. Turkish drone and air

defense systems have, however, proven an obstacle to deploying Russian and Syrian aircraft and heavy artillery to support Syrian and Iranian infantry against the Al Qaeda-linked, CIA-backed Islamist militias.

There had already been reports that Islamist militias and Turkish private security firms are hiring fighters to deploy to Azerbaijan. On Tuesday, the *Guardian* interviewed Syrians from Idlib hired by Islamist militias for 7,000–10,000 Turkish liras (US\$900–1,300) monthly, for “security” work in Azerbaijan. “There are no jobs available. I used to work as a tailor in Aleppo but since we were displaced to Azaz [after Aleppo fell to Assad in 2016], I’ve tried many times to practice my craft but my family and I can’t earn enough,” one explained to the *Guardian*.

The Center for Global Policy think-tank in Washington D.C. cold-bloodedly confirmed the story to the *Guardian*: “The international community regards the lives of Syrians as expendable, with Syria serving as an arena to settle geo-strategic scores and advance the interests of countries intervening in the country at Syrians’ expense. ... [T]he economic ruin stemming from the war and the recent depreciation of the Syrian currency mean that most Syrians are now struggling to feed themselves. Faced with few choices, many are now willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder.”

The Turkish government responded with an ambiguous statement that “The Turkish ministry of defense does not deal with recruiting or transferring militiamen anywhere in the world,” without addressing the role of private firms or militias.

These reports drastically increase diplomatic and military tensions between the major powers. In the 1990s, as ethnic tensions mounted in Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, civil wars broke out in nearby, Muslim-majority areas of Russia, like Chechnya and Dagestan. Moscow no doubt views the arrival of Syrian Islamist militias on its doorstep in Azerbaijan with alarm.

The Russian Foreign Ministry published yesterday a statement declaring: “Militants of illegal armed groups, in particular from Syria and Libya [have traveled to Azerbaijan] to directly participate in the hostilities.” It stressed that it was “deeply concerned” about deployments of Islamist militias, which create “long-term threats to the security of all countries in the region.” Without naming Turkey or Azerbaijan, it demanded the “leaderships of the states concerned” stop such transfers and “immediately” withdraw Islamist troops from Azerbaijan.

President Emmanuel Macron of France, which backs opposing sides to Turkey in the Libyan civil war and supports Greek maritime claims against Turkey in the Mediterranean, also attacked Turkish policy in the Caucasus yesterday. “France is very worried about Turkey’s warlike statements in recent hours, that basically give a green light to Azerbaijan to reconquer Nagorno-Karabakh. That we do not accept,” Macron said at a press conference in Riga, Latvia, where he was traveling to discuss the election crisis in Belarus.

A striking aspect of this Armenian-Azeri war has been the silence of Washington, which together with Moscow and Paris nominally chairs the Minsk Group tasked since 1992 with overseeing talks to manage the Armenian-Azeri conflict. However, Washington made no significant call for restraint. US President Donald Trump made only a brief statement, saying, “We’ll see if we can stop it.”

Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Foundation-Europe called Washington “unusually disengaged,” and “the risk of further escalation and mass destruction alarmingly high.” He added, “Washington was the last major international actor to issue a statement, indicating a retreat from interest in this region. It is arguably also a sign that President Donald Trump—sponsor of the never-completed Trump Tower in Baku—views Armenia and Azerbaijan solely through a business perspective.”

In fact, Washington has for decades sought to dominate the Middle East and Central Asia as the key to its geopolitical strategy towards Europe, Russia and East Asia. As US forces threaten Russia with military exercises in neighboring Ukraine and bomb Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq, it appears that Washington is content to let this conflict escalate while it focuses on threatening Moscow and Tehran.

The war in the Caucasus is a stark warning of the bankruptcy of the nation-state system and the rising danger of large-scale war posed by national and ethnic conflicts across Eurasia. It is urgent to mobilize and unify the working class in an international movement against imperialism, nationalism and war.

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