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www.afgazad.com

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By Alex Lantier
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Armenian-Azeri fighting escalates as war danger surges across Middle East

Dozens of soldiers and civilians were killed yesterday in a second day of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Heavy fighting involving tanks and armored vehicles, fighter-bombers and drones is by far the bloodiest since the 1988–1994 war between the two former Soviet republics broke out in the run-up to the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Armenian authorities who run Nagorno-Karabakh said they lost 28 soldiers, bringing total casualties to 59, while Armenia has suffered 200 wounded. The Human Rights Defender Office in Artsakh, the Armenian name for the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, claimed all its towns including Stepanakert, Askeran, Martakert, Martuni, Hadrut and Shushi were hit; a grandmother and her granddaughter were killed. Armenian forces claimed to have destroyed 15 drones as well as several Azeri armored vehicles and killed hundreds of Azeri soldiers.



In this image taken from footage released by Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry on Sunday, Sept. 27, 2020, Azerbaijan's soldiers fire from a mortar at the contact line of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan. (Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry via AP)
Azeri forces, who have not given their military losses, said 26 Azeri civilians had been wounded as towns were shelled. They also reportedly made small advances on the ground.

Videos they released showed their drones, reportedly provided by Turkey, destroying Russian-made Armenian armored vehicles and short-range anti-aircraft missile batteries. Turkish forces have already used drones to destroy such batteries fielded by Russian-backed forces in the wars in Libya and Syria.

Azerbaijan issued a “last warning” to Armenia after Armenia reportedly shelled the Azeri city of Terter. “The Ministry of Defense gives the last warning to Armenia that adequate retaliatory measures will be taken against them if needed,” it said.

This war is the disastrous product of both the Stalinist bureaucracy’s nationalist policy to dissolve the Soviet Union and restore capitalism, and decades of imperialist war in the region since 1991. Vast geopolitical tensions are now concentrated on the Caucasus—a strip of land at the center of Eurasia, between the Black Sea and Europe to the west, Russia to the north, the Caspian Sea and China to the east, and Iran and Turkey to the south. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan warned Sunday that fighting could “spill outside the region and acquire a much larger scale.”

In particular, the fighting comes amid a growing US military escalation against Iran, China and Russia. After NATO, the European Union, Russia, Iran and France issued statements calling for restraint in the Armenian-Azeri conflict early Sunday, Washington did so as well. Asked about the Armenian-Azeri conflict at a Sunday evening press briefing, US President Donald Trump simply said: “We’re looking at it very strongly. We have a lot of good relationships in that area. We’ll see if we can stop it.”

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government thrust aside these perfunctory statements, however, calling for aggressive Azeri action.

The 1988–1994 war that ended with Armenia in control of Nagorno-Karabakh was a bloody conflict that exposed the reactionary nature of the nation-state system. One million people were displaced and over 20,000 killed in an Armenian-Azeri war between states with only 3 and 10 million in population, respectively. However, Erdoğan called to reverse the war’s outcome, help Azerbaijan retake the Nagorno-Karabakh, and deal a bloody defeat to Armenia.

“The time has come for the regional crisis that started with the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh to be put to an end,” Erdoğan declared yesterday in Istanbul. “Once Armenia immediately leaves the territory it is occupying, the region will return to peace and harmony.” Erdoğan dismissed calls for restraint from the United States, Russia and France, who traditionally brokered Azeri-Armenian peace talks in the post-Soviet period. “They basically did everything they could, but this did not resolve the issue,” he said. “Now Azerbaijan must take matters into its own hands.”

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar reiterated his regime’s ethnic solidarity with Turkic Azeris against Armenia, saying: “Ties between Turkey and Azerbaijan are based on ‘two states one nation’ principle. We are always together, on good or bad days. We are on the side of our Azeri brothers in their defense of homeland.”

This support for Azerbaijan could escalate into a war between Turkey, a NATO member state, and Armenia’s main backer, Russia, which has a military base at Gyumri in Armenia.

This risk is all the higher in that NATO wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria have inflamed tensions between Russia and Turkey, who have supported rival factions in the civil wars in Libya and Syria that followed the NATO proxy wars launched in these countries in 2011. On Sept. 25, talks collapsed between Russian and Turkish officials over control of Syria’s Idlib province. Fighting may soon erupt again between Russian-backed Syrian government troops and Turkish-backed Islamist “rebel” militias there.

Russian- and Turkish-backed troops are also fighting in Libya, while offshore, Greek warships backed by France are disputing control of the large areas of the eastern Mediterranean with Turkey.

More broadly, however, growing Russian-Turkish tensions driving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are only one element of the accelerating breakdown of the nation-state system across the Middle East and Central Asia, and the drive towards a new imperialist world war.

There is a growing danger that the Trump administration, which has already announced it plans to launch a coup and ignore the results of the November presidential election, may try to start a war with Iran in a pre-election “October surprise.” Yesterday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Iraqi President Barham Salih that he aims to withdraw US troops and diplomats stationed in Iraq since the illegal 2003 US-led invasion. If they stayed, they would be vulnerable to attack, if Washington went to war with Iran.

Already, Iran launched limited missile strikes on US bases in Iraq after Washington’s state murder of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in January.

In a dispatch titled “Threat to evacuate US diplomats from Iraq raises fear of war,” Reuters noted: “Any move by the United States to reduce its diplomatic presence in a country where it has up to 5,000 troops would be widely seen in the region as an escalation of its confrontation with Iran ... That in turn would open the possibility of military action, with just weeks to go before an election in which President Donald Trump has campaigned on a hard line towards Tehran and its proxies.”

Reuters cited unnamed Western diplomats who said Pompeo was announcing this because Washington does not “want to be limited in their options” against pro-Iranian forces in Iraq. “Asked whether he expected Washington to respond with economic or military measures,” Reuters writes, “the diplomat replied: ‘Strikes.’”

These threats are bound up with Washington’s confrontation with both China, which is negotiating a military alliance and \$400 billion trade deal with Iran, and Russia. Washington is threatening to enforce a ban on renewed Russian and Chinese arms exports to Iran, which could lead US warships to try to seize Russian and Chinese vessels on the high seas.

Turkish officials clearly see Erdoğan’s inciting of pan-Turkic sentiment as linked to threats against nearby Iran. Turkey’s state-run TRT World news agency denounced Iran for “quietly backing Armenia in the conflict” against Azerbaijan, asserting that “Iran’s Turkic problem” is due to ethnic-Turkic minorities in northern Iran.

TRT World cited Professor Bülent Aras at Istanbul’s Sabancı University: “Increasing Turkish nationalism in Iran has been seen as a serious political problem by Iran. Connections and relations between the country’s north and Azerbaijan have been an important factor in Tehran’s political problems with Azerbaijan.” TRT speculated that “the idea of Greater Azerbaijan” might inflame ethnic separatism in Iran.

These conflicts are a warning of the rising danger of all-out war across the Middle East and internationally, bound up with the collapse of American democracy at home. It underscores the urgent necessity of building an international, anti-war movement unifying the working class in socialist opposition to nationalism and war.

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