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Azeri-Armenian clashes erupt amid NATO war with Russia in Ukraine

Fighting broke out between Azeri and Armenian forces during the night of September 12-13, as Azeri forces crossed the border into Armenia and attacked Armenian positions around the towns of Vardenis, Goris, Sotk and Jermuk. Clashes continued yesterday between the two former Soviet republics, after a cease-fire brokered by Moscow on September 13 immediately broke down.

Yesterday, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan reported that 105 Armenian servicemen had been killed so far in this month's fighting. Azerbaijan reported 50 fatalities among its troops.

On September 13, Armenian and Azeri officials blamed each other for starting the conflict. The Armenian Defense Ministry reported "intensive shelling" from Azeri troops as well as drone attacks, announcing: "Armenia's forces have launched a proportionate response."

The Azeri Defense Ministry for its part accused Armenia of "large-scale subversive acts" along their joint border and claimed that it was repelling an Armenian attack.

Armenian civilians reported that heavy fighting prevented them from evacuating the area, as well as extensive damage to civilian infrastructure. "The entire village is being bombed, we can't even evacuate the children, we managed to evacuate only part of them," an

inhabitant of the village of Geghamasar told Radio Free Europe. “The fire is very intense in the area, the roads are also under shelling, we are hiding.”

Sevak Khachatryan, who lives in Sotk, posted a report on Facebook with pictures of burnt-out buildings that stated: “After night-time shelling in Sotk, the community building has been damaged, several houses have burned, roofs and windows are damaged. The full extent of the damage remains unclear. Currently, fighting is ongoing.”

Though Moscow had brokered a cease-fire to halt the fighting, which by most accounts was launched by Turkish-backed Azerbaijan, US officials tried to blame Russia for the conflict. “Whether Russia tries in some fashion to stir the pot, to create a distraction from Ukraine, is something we’re always concerned about,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared.

At the same time, the US State Department released a statement declaring, “We urge immediate steps to reduce tensions and avoid further escalation.” State Department spokesman Ned Price reported that Blinken had called Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, stressed his “deep concern” and urged Aliyev to “cease hostilities” against Armenia. Price said Blinken had called Pashinyan to tell him that Washington “would push for an immediate halt to fighting and a peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.”

French President Emmanuel Macron released a statement reporting that he had contacted Azeri President Ilham Aliyev to demand that he “end hostilities and return to respecting the cease-fire.” Macron also said he had spoken to Pashinyan to stress French support for “respecting Armenia’s territorial integrity.”

The resurgence of the Armenian-Azeri conflict points to the growing danger that NATO’s war on Russia in Ukraine could spread into a broader war across the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Yesterday, Pashinyan appealed to Russia and to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to intervene militarily against Azerbaijan. “We asked support from CSTO, including military support to restore Armenia’s territorial integrity and ensure the withdrawal of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces from the territory of Armenia,” Pashinyan told the Armenian parliament.

Pashinyan also spoke with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who declared that a new war would be “unacceptable” and called to ensure that Iranian trade routes with Armenia remain open.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a bellicose statement of support for Azerbaijan yesterday. “We hope that Armenia will turn away from this wrong path as soon as possible and devote its time and energy to strengthening peace. Of course, this attitude will have consequences for the Armenian side,” he said.

The current fighting is the poisoned product of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, as well as the eruption of NATO wars in the region over the last three decades. Fighting broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988 over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave which was inside Azerbaijan, but had a majority Armenian population. The fighting escalated into a full-scale war after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as both Armenia and Azerbaijan became independent and Armenia seized Nagorno-Karabakh.

This fratricidal war between forces who had until then all been Soviet citizens lasted from 1992 until an uneasy ceasefire in 1994, claiming 30,000 lives.

NATO’s wars in the Middle East, and especially its war for regime change in Syria that began in 2011, blew apart the precarious balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As ethnically Turkic Azerbaijan built ties to Turkey, Armenia relied on close ties with Iran and support from Russia which has a military base in the Armenian city of Gyumri. Tensions erupted amid the NATO war in Syria, as Turkish troops faced off against Iranian and Russian troops fighting to prevent the toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a new war erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as Azeri forces reconquered most of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. It cost nearly 7,000 lives, with Azerbaijan reporting 3,006 fatalities including 100 civilians, and Armenia 3,910 fatalities including 85 civilians. Azerbaijan’s fielding of Turkish Bayraktar drones, which are now playing an important role in Ukrainian fighting against Russia, helped tip the balance in favor of Azerbaijan.

After the 2020 war, Russia deployed a contingent of several thousand peacekeepers along the front lines between Armenian and Azeri troops. These forces have failed to halt repeated Azeri incursions into Armenian-held territory, which have escalated since the outbreak of the NATO-Russia war over Russia's "special military operations" in Ukraine.

Several officials in Europe linked the new outbreak of fighting in the Caucasus to the war in Ukraine. The French daily *Le Figaro* wrote: "Two factors seemed to have motivated Azerbaijan. First, the Russian defeat in Kharkov. 'Russia is less able to dissuade Azerbaijan,' said Florence Parmentier, secretary-general of the Center for Political Research at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris. Second, there is Europe's dependency on natural gas imports."

In July, European Union (EU) Commission President Ursula von der Leyen traveled to the Azeri capital of Baku to negotiate a deal to obtain Azeri gas as a partial replacement for Russian gas that EU countries are refusing to pay for amid the war in Ukraine. The Azeri-Armenian conflict is now intertwined with conflicts inside the EU over how to handle massive energy shortages and a likely economic collapse in Europe this winter.

"I think there is a feeling in Azerbaijan that now is the time to deploy its power, its military advantage and to extract the maximum that it can get," said Laurence Broers of the Chatham House think-tank in London. "I think the risk is of the establishment of sort of new buffer zones, security zones, a kind of a fragmentation of at least the southern part of Armenia and a powerlessness among outside actors to stop that from happening," he added.

The very real danger that the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine could escalate across the Eurasian landmass must be taken as a warning by workers not only in the Caucasus but around the world. The only way forward to prevent such an escalation is the revolutionary mobilization of the working class internationally against capitalism's drive to war. This in turn requires a return to the Marxist-internationalist traditions of the October 1917 Revolution, defended by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism, that led to the foundation of the Soviet Union a century ago.

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