

Fighting in the Caucasus: Implications for the Wider Region

by [Brenda Shaffer \(/experts/brenda-shaffer\)](/experts/brenda-shaffer)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Brenda Shaffer \(/experts/brenda-shaffer\)](/experts/brenda-shaffer)

Brenda Shaffer is an adjunct professor at the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies at Georgetown University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Global Energy Center.



Brief Analysis

As Moscow continues its pattern of fomenting conflict and carving up countries in its near-abroad, the United States and regional players such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey will once again feel the ripples.

This week, mediators will reportedly attempt to defuse the recent outbreak of intense conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Whether or not the fragile, uncertain ceasefire lasts, the implications of the fighting go far beyond the damage to homes and lives in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict zone lies at the epicenter of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, directly affecting both Moscow's regional ambitions and U.S. policy and standing in the greater Caspian region. If the hostilities continue to widen, they could also create threats for neighboring Turkey and Iran, and also for Israel's activity in the region and closer to home.

BACKGROUND

The conflict over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region first emerged on the eve of the Soviet breakup. Located in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the region is mainly populated by ethnic Armenians. Following the Soviet collapse, the new states of Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a war for control of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992-1994, leaving over 30,000 dead and creating close to a million refugees. The bulk of the refugees (860,000) are Azerbaijanis -- Armenia captured not only Nagorno-Karabakh, but seven additional districts of Azerbaijan, driving residents out of the once densely populated region.

Although the international community still regards Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijan's territory, Armenia refers to it as a separate legal entity. Yet no UN member recognizes the independence of this "entity" -- Armenian regular forces have long been deployed there, and no border regime separates it from Armenia proper. Moreover, they use the same currency and postal system, and the current and previous presidents of Armenia hail from Nagorno-Karabakh. In a 2015 speech, President Serzh Sargsyan called the region "an inseparable part of Armenia." That said, authorities in the self-proclaimed "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" do not always fully align with their counterparts in Yerevan, and they maintain some institutional autonomy.

Meanwhile, Moscow has been selling weapons to both sides. The several billion dollars in Russian arms delivered to Baku in recent years have significantly strengthened Azerbaijan's position, making Armenia even more dependent on implicit Russian security guarantees. The Kremlin has stronger influence in Armenia than in most of the former Soviet republics due to its significant military presence there and its control of major energy and other infrastructure.

CURRENT CLASHES

While Baku and Yerevan blame each other for the outburst of renewed fighting on April 2 -- one of the most extreme eruptions since the first war ended in 1994 -- Moscow is the major benefactor of the escalation. The fighting began immediately after the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan attended the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, where Secretary of State John Kerry met with each leader separately to discuss potential resolution of the long-simmering conflict, among other issues. Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev's visit was a milestone: this was his first trip to Washington since becoming president in 2003. In addition to Kerry, he held bilateral meetings with Vice President Joe Biden, Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, and others. The visit promised to strengthen cooperation between Washington and Baku after two years of rocky relations.

The timing of the new hostilities -- on the heels of the Washington visit and while Aliyev was out of the country -- strongly indicates that Moscow was the instigator. If so, the message is clear: Washington should stay out of Russia's backyard, and Baku should think twice about strengthening its relationship with the United States.

Moreover, despite attempting to claim the role of peacemaker, Moscow has publicly blamed Azerbaijan for the fighting. A spokesman for the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) declared that "the current Azerbaijani actions led to the escalation of the situation and the conflict." Russian government-sponsored media have echoed this message, with the official news agency TASS hinting that the fighting could lead Moscow to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state -- bringing to mind the outcome of the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, when Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries.

RUSSIA'S PATTERN OF AGGRESSION

The similarities between the previous major flare-up in July 2014 and the current clash are striking. That summer, President Vladimir Putin pressured a number of bordering states to refrain from joining the EU-sponsored Eastern Partnership Agreement and instead join Russia's Eurasian Customs Union. After Armenia complied, Putin sought a similar agreement with Azerbaijan, but President Aliyev refused his offer. Days later, while Aliyev and his defense minister were out of the country, an unprecedented escalation took place in four spots along the line of contact between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, including in areas not adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to over forty deaths on both sides.

This track record is especially troubling because each former Soviet state that attempted to strengthen ties with the West over the past decade lost major pieces of territory to Russia. Georgia lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia following its bid to join NATO in 2008. And after Ukraine and Moldova joined the Eastern Partnership Agreement, Russia took Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine from Kiev, and reinforced its deployments in the Moldavian region of Transnistria, which it now occupies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKEY, IRAN, AND ISRAEL

The current escalation could also draw in actors beyond the Caucasus, including in the Middle East. As mentioned previously, Armenia shares a close alliance with Russia, which has forces deployed in the country and runs its air defenses. Moscow recently increased its forces in the Armenian town of Gyumri on the border with Turkey, which shares a military alliance with Azerbaijan. While Ankara and Moscow will likely take steps to prevent direct clashes between their forces ([see PolicyWatch 2599, "Is Armenia the Next Turkish-Russian Flashpoint?"](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-armenia-the-next-turkish-russian-flashpoint?) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-armenia-the-next-turkish-russian-flashpoint>)),

the close proximity of these rivals at a time of active combat between their allies could lead to unintentional contact.

Iran likewise borders Armenia and Azerbaijan and is in close proximity to the lines of contact. Thus far it has expressed neutral calls for "restraint" on both sides, and Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif has offered to serve as mediator. Despite its common Shiite Muslim background with Azerbaijan, Tehran generally does not share any special solidarity with the country. Since the latest fighting began, a mortar shell has fallen into Iranian territory, underscoring how easily the conflict could widen.

The unfolding situation also poses new security challenges for Israel, which is a major supplier of arms to Azerbaijan. Given that these arms are likely being used in the current fighting, Russia could pressure Israel to abstain from sending spare parts and further supplies. Moscow successfully applied similar pressure during the 2008 war with Georgia; granted, Russian troops are not directly involved this time, but the Kremlin now has more means at its disposal to coerce the Israelis given its ongoing intervention in neighboring Syria.

MORE FIGHTING IS LIKELY

A formal ceasefire was declared on April 5 after Moscow hosted the chiefs of staff of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Mediators from various countries are now jockeying to play a role in further negotiations. Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev discussed the issue with the Armenian leadership in Yerevan today and will travel to Baku tomorrow (both visits were scheduled prior to the latest outbreak).

Yet both sides have reasons to continue the fight. Azerbaijan was able to change the status quo on the ground in its favor over the past week, so Armenia will want to restore its previous positions; Azerbaijani forces will in turn challenge any such operations. At best, mediators will probably achieve a mere timeout until the next round of fighting.

Brenda Shaffer is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Global Energy Center and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies. She has also provided energy research and analysis to various governments and companies, including in Azerbaijan and the wider Caspian region. ❖

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