

Danger in the Caucasus Region

by Michael Curtis



On September 27, 2020 fighting began in the Caucasus region, the strategically important mountainous region in south-east Europe, an area that was a bloody locale during the years of the Soviet Union and that has long been the site for hostilities between Muslim and Christian powers. However, though the present ongoing conflict is between Azerbaijan, capital Baku, mainly Muslim, and Armenia, capital Yerevan, mainly Christian, it is mainly a dispute not over religion but over competing nationalisms and disputed territory. The self-declared Armenian republic created in 1991 as Nagorno-Karabakh, N-K, with a mostly ethnic Armenian population is within the territory recognized internationally as Azerbaijan. The ethnic Armenians in N-K want to unite with the state of Armenia.

It is true that to some extent the conflict between the two parties may be seen as the continuation of religious tension between Christians and Muslims, but geo-political factors are more pertinent. To take two factors. One is that there are considerable economic and military ties between Muslim Azerbaijan and Israel. On one hand, Israel has supplied Azerbaijan, the third largest consumer of Israeli arms, with weapons including SkyStriker drones, the latest unmanned aerial vehicle capable of long range precise and reliable tactical strikes. In return, Azerbaijan is a major supplier of crude oil to Israel.

The second factor is that Armenia receives help not only from Russia but also from Iran for two reasons; Iran competes with Azerbaijan for influence in the region; and there is an Armenian minority community, with varying estimates, some ranging up to 200,000, in Iran.

In the present case, Azerbaijan has launched a military operation inside the region called Nagorno-Karabakh, N-K, which is recognized internationally as territory of Azerbaijan but has a mostly Armenian population who have long resisted rule by Azerbaijan. In 1991 N-K declared independence and in 2017, after a referendum, called itself the Republic of Artsakh.

The conflict over N-K continues as both sides have accused the other of violence, and have rejected peace talks , even though the UN Security Council on September 29, 2020, expressed "concern," its usual language, condemned the use of force, and called for de-escalation of tensions and talks without preconditions. Other efforts at peace-making have been unsuccessful. In 1992 a meeting of the conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe decided to help encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict over N-K. This resulted in establishing the so-called Minsk Process, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the U.S. to attempt to mediate the conflict, but its efforts have not been successful.

Tensions between the two sides were limited when both countries were republics of the Soviet Union, but emerged with its dissolution. Ethnic clashes and then war between the two countries that began in 1988 caused one million people to be displaced and 30, 000 killed. The war ended in a cease fire, but without a peace treaty, in 1994 with Armenians in control of N-K and surrounding areas. Since 1994, ceasefire, a stalemate has largely prevailed, but fighting broke out in April 2016 for an inconclusive four day war, a carefully planned military operation, not a spontaneous outburst, and again in July 2020 in which cross border shelling caused the death of at least 17 people. N-K remained within the territory of Azerbaijan, but is mostly governed by a de facto independent republic of ethnic Armenians, now known as the republic of Artsakh, a presidential democracy with a unicameral legislature.

Both sides are small. Armenia has a population of 3.1 million in a land of 11,484 square miles, while Azerbaijan has 9.7 million in a land of 33,400 square miles. The latter has 82,000 armed forces, 570 tanks, and 29 combat aircraft. It is located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, with Russia to the north, Armenia to the west, and Iran to the south. It became a Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920, and an independent republic in August 1991. Armenia has an army of 49,000 forces, 110 tanks, and 13 aircraft.

N-K has a population of 146,000 in a land of 1,700 square miles, about the size of Delaware, and is 30 miles from the Armenian border. Nagorno is a Russian word meaning mountainous,, and Karabakh is another meaning black garden. It is a landlocked mountainous region. Under the Soviet Union the area was an autonomous region within the republic of Azerbaijan. When the Soviet Union ended, the regional parliament of N-K voted to become part of Armenia , but the international community recognized it as part of Azerbaijan though the majority of its population is of Armenian ethnic

background.

The fighting in September 2020 began with an aerial and missile attack by Azerbaijan, though both sides have blamed each other for beginning the attacks. Involved are aircraft and armor, tanks, artillery, rocket launchers, drone strikes, UAVs, unmanned serial vehicles. Armenia and N-K declared martial law and military mobilization; Azerbaijan imposed military rule, and a curfew in large cities.

There are two particularly interesting factors about the present conflict. One is that it can be viewed as an example of present-day unsolved international relations. The other is the role of Turkey as well as others in the region.

The N-K conflict is yet another example of consequences of the continuing tensions, animosities stemming from the disappearance of multi-national and colonial empires, and from the changes in the nature, amalgamations and dissolutions, of large states leading to the creation of smaller states, that became independent. Some disputed cases can be seen as parallel to that over N-K. The self-declared state, in 1991, of Somaliland is considered by some in the international community as part of Somalia. Donbass, the region in eastern Ukraine and southwest Russia is disputed by pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government. The de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are viewed either as autonomous republics or part of Georgia.

These cases like N-K are examples of what has sometimes been called "frozen conflicts," conflicts that are based on ethnic, national, cultural, or linguistic ties, where armed conflict rarely concurs or is ended, but is not resolved to the satisfaction of the parties, and the positions of both sides are "frozen."

The N-K conflict is important geo-politically. Essentially a local ethnic conflict, it involves both neighboring and other

states that may be drawn into the conflict. At the core is historic rivalry between Russia, regarded as protector of Christian subjects in the Ottoman Empire, and Turkey. Russia has a defense pact with Armenia and a military base in Gyumri, Armenia, near the Turkish and Georgian borders and is a fellow member of both the military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union. But Russia performs a political balancing act, selling arms to Azerbaijan, and being one of the three chairs of the Minsk Process.

What is relevant, and important for U.S. foreign policy, is the emergence of Turkey as a pivotal power in the region, challenging Russia which appears to be neutral, for hegemony in the region. Russia is unlikely to be actively involved in hostilities over N-K in view of its balancing act. However, in recent years Turkey has been active in foreign conflicts, sending its military to Syria, Iraq, and Libya, and increasingly eager to play a role in the region. Unlike Russia, Turkey has chosen sides. Turkey has made clear its support of Azerbaijan, country with which it has cultural, linguistic, and ethnic links, and mutual interest in energy, as Azerbaijan hosts the gas pipeline that carries fuel to Turkey and Europe. Turkey provides Azerbaijan with economic and military aid. Yet though Turkey has become more assertive, it wants to avoid any open conflict with Russia.

Outside interference in the N-K conflict may have already begun. Armenia claims one of its Soviet era SU-25 jets was downed by a Turkish F-16 which took off from a base in Azerbaijan. With memories of the systematic mass murder and expulsion of 1.5 million ethnic Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915-23, Armenia is conscious that Turkish support of Azerbaijan may lead to a similar genocide.

By contrast, Turkish President Erdogan has accused Armenia of being the biggest obstacle to lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus. To achieve that stability, Turkey's

ambition may extend to creating a nation of Turkic peoples, and to challenge the existing status quo. The international community, with the U.S. taking the lead, should help restrain Turkey from that challenge and follow the example of France in blaming Azerbaijani forces for igniting the present conflict and in accusing Turkey of using harmful, bellicose language in its support of the country.