

What's Really Driving the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict

Friday 9 October 2020, by [BAJALAN Djene Rhys](#), [DAVIDIAN Vazken Khatchig](#), [YILDIZ Sara Nur](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2020).

The bloody conflict that has erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia isn't the result of ancestral hatreds or deep-seated animosity between Muslims and Christians. It is the product of a long history of colonialism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.

The outbreak of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan has thrust the long-running dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh (Mountainous Karabakh, known to Armenians by its ancient name, Artsakh) into the international limelight.

The rhetoric of violence — especially coming from Azerbaijan and Turkey — is deafening, while the racist, jingoistic, and dehumanizing language employed by Azerbaijanis, Turks, and Armenians on social media is at fever pitch. Beyond the flag-draped body bags carrying Armenian and Azerbaijani boy-conscripts and innocent civilians to their graves, there are many other casualties amid all this noise: truth, information, and any serious will to resolve the conflict once and for all.

Fears that tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan might plunge the Caucasus into war are nothing new. For over a quarter century, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been locked in a stalemate over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh. While the latest escalation seems to have caught many off guard, more astute observers could see it coming. Writing in the aftermath of four days of intense fighting in April 2016, Laurence Broers, a leading authority on the conflict, warned of the dangers of failed negotiations and unchecked nationalism leading to a “[defaulting to war](#).”

It now looks like just such a default. Yet it would be an insidious mistake to view the conflict as the result of irreconcilable ancestral hatreds or the product of a civilizational clash between Muslims and Christians. Instead, we must look to the legacies of colonialism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and Great Power politics to explain the tragedy unfolding before our eyes.

Colonialism and Nationalism

The Caucasus highlands are a region of stunning natural beauty and tremendous ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. Stretching from the Black Sea to the shores of the Caspian, it is home to a vast array of communities: Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Russians, Meskhetian and Akhıska Turks, Kurds, Yezidis, Daghestanis, Abkhaz, Circassians, Chechens, Talysh, Ossetians, and Ingush, to name but a few.

The current din of nationalist posturing should not, however, obscure the enormous wealth of cultural heritage the incredibly diverse peoples of the region share, from music and dance to folklore and cuisine.

Between the early sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the region formed the northern part of a

vast and ill-defined frontier zone that separated the Sunni Ottoman Empire from its Shi'ite rivals in Iran. While frequently the site of conflict between these two Muslim imperia, the territories that today make up modern Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan generally fell within the Iranian sphere of influence.

Given the geography and the technological constraints of the era, outside powers typically exercised their sovereignty with a light touch. Across the region local potentates enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy, with the various ethnic and religious communities living side by side in relative peace. However, between 1801 and 1828, Russian military expansion forced the Iranians from the Eastern Caucasus and the region was absorbed into the Caucasus Viceroyalty, administered from the cosmopolitan city of Tbilisi (today the capital of Georgia).

Regarding Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh specifically, the Armenian connection to the region can be traced back to antiquity. The region is still dotted with medieval Armenian monasteries and other major architectural monuments. However, although a major center of Armenian culture and religion, the region has long possessed a cosmopolitan character.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the city of Shushi/Shusha emerged as a site of cultural renaissance for both Armenians and Azerbaijani Turks. At the time of Sovietization, censuses show that Christian Armenians outnumbered Azerbaijanis nine to one in the highlands (i.e. Nagorno-Karabakh), while in the surrounding lowlands the population was predominantly Muslim.

As with many colonial regimes, the policies of the Russian administration heightened tensions among the various peoples of the Caucasus, a trend exacerbated by the rise of nationalism. Increasingly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries intercommunal relations were placed under ever greater strain as populations came to regard themselves as members of distinct national communities.

This was particularly true of the Christian Armenians and Muslim Caucasian Turks, who, in the early twentieth century came to adopt the name Azerbaijani (Azerbaijan historically referring to the predominately Turkish-speaking province of north-western Iran and not the modern-day republic of Azerbaijan).

To a certain degree, ethno-national tensions were kept under control by the tsarist autocracy, but as imperial Russia began to unravel so too did the Caucasus. In 1905, with the empire in revolutionary tumult, a wave of intercommunal bloodletting, pitting Armenians against Azerbaijani Turks, swept the region, leaving hundreds dead. Then came the barbarism of the First World War.

For the Armenian community, the war was especially traumatic due to the Ottoman government's decision in 1915 to initiate a genocidal campaign of deportation, rape, and massacre against the empire's Armenian community that left possibly as many as 1.5 million dead.

While the Armenians of the Russian Empire were spared this annihilation, the genocide profoundly shaped the Armenian people. A significant proportion of modern Armenia's population are descendants of refugee-survivors of the genocide, and thus the events of 1915 have come to be a lens through which the conflict with the Azerbaijanis is viewed.

The war was of monumental significance for another reason: it precipitated, following the revolutions of 1917, the destruction of the tsarist autocracy and the collapse of Russian authority in the Caucasus. In the immediate aftermath of this breakdown of colonial administration, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and, with the defeat of the Central Powers, Great Britain all sought (unsuccessfully) to extend their influence into the region.

The aftermath of the 1917 revolutions also witnessed growing political fragmentation with the formation — following a brief experiment in federative unity in the spring of 1918 — of independent Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani republics.

The upshot: war. Nationalists sought to enforce claims over what were often ethnically mixed regions, with hostilities erupting between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This first Armenian-Azerbaijani war, which lasted two years, only came to an end when the Soviets invaded the region in 1920.

The Legacy of Stalinism

The Sovietization of Armenia and Azerbaijan did little to reconcile the two sides. Indeed, it was Josef Stalin who decided to lump the Armenian majority highlands of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh — a site of intense competition between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces during the war — into the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, despite the opposition of the overwhelming majority of its local population. As with other regions of the newly formed USSR, rather than resolving national conflicts, Soviet policies exacerbated distrust.

To a certain degree, Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh's status as an autonomous oblast within Azerbaijan protected the Armenian population from some of the worst excesses of Soviet-era demographic engineering.

In the Azerbaijani-run exclave of Naxcivan/Nakhichevan, sandwiched between Armenia, Turkey, and Iran, the Armenian population — which constituted nearly half the population in the early 1920s — was reduced to next to nothing by the time of the USSR's collapse.

Nevertheless, in Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, the authorities in Baku pursued a policy of settling Azerbaijanis in the region in an attempt to dilute the Armenian majority — and invested in these incoming communities, while leaving Armenian towns and villages without basic infrastructure. Decades of underinvestment and discrimination stoked further resentment — resentment that reached a crescendo during the dying days of the Soviet Union.

On February 22, 1988, the local authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh held a referendum calling for independence from Azerbaijan as a preliminary step to unification with Armenia. Following the vote, held in defiance of Baku, an anti-Armenian pogrom erupted in the Azerbaijani town of Sumqayit. Scores were killed, and the eruption set the stage for an escalating cycle of violence across the region, including a massacre of Azerbaijani civilians in Khojaly/Xocalı in 1992 that left hundreds dead.

After the USSR's dissolution in December 1991, this cycle of violence spiraled into a full-scale war between the newly independent states of Azerbaijan and Armenia. As many as thirty thousand people were killed and over a million displaced by ethnic cleansing, with Armenians forced out of Azerbaijan, and an even larger number of Azerbaijanis pushed out of Armenia and the regions around Karabakh.

The post-ceasefire status quo was a victory for Armenia, which through the occupation of the districts of Kalbajar and Lachin — populated mainly by Azerbaijanis and Kurds — established a zone of contiguous control linking the self-proclaimed Armenian Republic of Artsakh to Armenia proper.

Since 1994, a permanent solution to the conflict has remained elusive. Negotiations brokered by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk group, a body made up of eleven states and chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, have failed. And clashes along the heavily militarized "Line of Control," set up after the 1994 ceasefire, as well as other parts of the Armenian-Azerbaijani frontier, have been a perennial threat to peace in the region.

The Escalation to War

All sides in the conflict undoubtedly bare the blame for its non-resolution. For Armenia, the status quo is satisfactory and so it has had little incentive to give up its military and territorial advantage, frustrating Azerbaijanis. Nationalism and the ostensibly ever-present Azerbaijani threat have further served as a convenient tool of legitimacy for the corrupt post-Soviet elite that, until recently, dominated the country for much of its post-independence history.

For Russia, which seeks to maintain the Caucasus within its sphere of influence, the persistent tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan have allowed the former colonial power to maintain leverage over both sides. Indeed, for Putin, the outbreak of fighting may be seen as a useful reminder to the Armenian administration of Nikol Pashinyan, which came to power following the peaceful Velvet Revolution of 2018, of the indispensability of Russian support in its conflict with a much wealthier and more populous Turkish-backed Azerbaijan.

However, to understand the specifics of this latest escalation it is necessary to look to Baku and Ankara. It was Azerbaijani forces that went on the offensive in late September, buoyed by the active support, in the form of military hardware and Syrian mercenaries, of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration.

Lacking democratic legitimacy, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, who inherited his position in 2003 from his father Heydar Aliyev, is wielding nationalist resentment over the unfavorable status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh to distract from growing discontent with rising economic inequality, the squandering of the country's oil wealth, and the kleptocracy over which he presides. There is also little doubt he feels the need to bolster his nationalist credentials after pro-war protesters stormed the parliament following clashes on the frontline earlier this summer.

In a similar vein, pan-Turkist and anti-Armenian rhetoric also shores up Erdoğan's right-wing base at a time of severe economic crisis — while also splintering the opposition into pro-war elements, including the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), and anti-war factions, most notably the persecuted and marginalized Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

On top of that, it feeds into Ankara's pretensions to Great Power status, fitting into a larger pattern of foreign policy adventurism that has seen Turkish armed interventions into Syria and Libya, and an increasingly aggressive military stance in the Eastern Mediterranean, all of which divert attention from growing domestic problems.

In short, war is being used – as it so often is – as an instrument of authoritarian political consolidation.

What Comes Next?

So, what now? If sense were to prevail, the sides would put down their weapons immediately and agree to serious negotiations.

Azerbaijan and Turkey need to understand that without allowing the people of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh a right to determine their own future, there can be no solution. There has been too much violence for the people of the region to feel safe under a regime as anti-democratic and corrupt as Ilham Aliyev's.

Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh's Armenians only need to look to Naxcivan/Nakhichevan, where the Aliyev regime has executed a campaign many experts would describe as a cultural genocide directed at destroying Armenian historical sites in the region, to see their own oblivion. At the same time,

those insisting on a complete return to the Soviet-era boundaries need to understand that they are calling for the legitimization of Stalin's haughty colonialism, in defiance of the wishes of the local population for self-determination.

Armenians need to understand that without a final peace treaty the status quo will constantly be challenged. This is especially true if the Aliyev regime survives and needs to distract its people from domestic woes. Yet Armenians must also recognize that Azerbaijani aggrievement and exasperation at the lack of progress is justified.

The hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees ethnically cleansed in the fighting and kept hostage in squalid conditions by their own regime, to be instrumentalized for propaganda purposes, must be allowed to return to their towns and villages in the regions currently controlled by Armenian forces; meanwhile it might be impossible for the Armenian refugees to return to Azerbaijan.

Finally, there must be a genuine process of truth and reconciliation to discuss all human rights violations by both sides, from Sumqayit to Khojaly/Xocali.

Ultimately, this cycle of hate and war must end so that both peoples can heal and embrace a future as peaceful neighbors. For this, the power of corrupt and unscrupulous leaders who exploit and propagate nationalist resentment and ethnic hatred to maintain power must be broken.

Only with peace and meaningful democracy can investments be made toward bettering peoples' lives rather than procuring the instruments of death. There are no winners in war, save the authoritarians and arms merchants.

Djene Rhys Bajalan is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Missouri State University. His research focuses on Middle Eastern affairs and he has previously taught and studied in the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Sara Nur Yildiz is a historian of the Turco-Iranian world and the Ottoman empire.

Vazken Khatchig Davidian is a postdoctoral fellow at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford.

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