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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cheterian, V. (2016). A New Phase in the Karabakh Conflict. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 84, 13-17. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89500-9>

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hatred support official government ideology, spreading ethnic hostility. Scholars' studies, politicians' speeches, and mass media's broadcasts create an "enemy nation" image, constantly manipulating public opinion. The question of whether history should tell the truth or lie concerning the historical past or what part/piece of history should be publicly open is crucial for societies with unsteady democratic principles. Neither narratives of hatred themselves nor their political deployment could

be causes of the ethnic conflicts. Nations' right to self-determination and disputed territories' issues themselves also do not always lead to a bloody confrontation and genocide. However, when national memory, filled with hateful mythologies and directed by the state ideology, meets the political ambitions of internal and external actors, as happened in the Armenian–Azerbaijani confrontation, cultural differences become more visible and offences degenerate into violence.

About the Author

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A New Phase in the Karabakh Conflict

By Vicken Cheterian, Geneva

Abstract

The "four-day war" in Karabakh in April 2016 was the result of a surprise attack by the Azerbaijani army. The fighting revealed that the military equilibrium has largely been maintained in spite of the massive military expenditure by Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev. The eruption of violence signals the end of the 1994 cease-fire and raises the question of whether it will lead to a new cycle of violence or stimulate diplomatic initiatives.

Introduction

On the night of April 2, 2016, a full-scale war erupted in the Caucasus: Azerbaijani armed forces crossed the line of demarcation in a massive attack on three fronts of the Mountainous Karabakh front line using artillery, tanks, and air force. On the same day, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense announced that its forces "liberated" five strategic heights along the front line. The next day, Armenian military sources addressed the loss of eight areas along the conflict zone, although none more than 200–300 meters deep. In the first day of fighting, 30 soldiers were killed by both sides, while the final death count might be at a few hundred. Additionally, Karabakh defense sources spread images of a downed Azerbaijani helicopter, claiming a second one crashed on the Azeri side of the frontline and adding that its forces shot down two Israeli-made drones as well. Both sides have also lost dozens of tanks, revealing the intensity of the

fighting. On April 3rd, 48 hours after the start of the hostilities, Azerbaijani military sources announced a "unilateral ceasefire"¹, yet on the ground, violent clashes continued for two more days, causing scores of casualties on both sides. Nationalist enthusiasm has gripped both the Azerbaijani and Armenian public, who display public support of their armies and their fight.

This was the worst military escalation since the cease-fire of 1994. The fact that the attack took place in several locations with combined arms, including ground troops, artillery and air force, reveals planning rather than a localized event that got out of hand. Why do we have this flare-up now of the Karabakh conflict? Who

1 "Azerbaijan takes unilateral decision to suspend military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh", *Report News Agency*, April 3, 2016, <<http://report.az/en/nagorno-karabakh/azerbaijan-takes-unilateral-decision-to-suspend-military-operations-in-nagorno-karabakh/>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

needs a new war in the Caucasus? What are the local mechanisms and what is the impact of external factors? Finally, how could this “four days-war” alter the Karabakh problem and enter this conflict into a new phase?

Soviet Legacy

The Karabakh conflict dates from the early 20th century when a multi-ethnic Russian Empire entered a period of turbulence. In fact, the first major Armenian–Azeri violence dates back to the 1905 revolutionary period, when initial class solidarity quickly turned into ethno-national antagonism. In the aftermath of the collapse of Tsarism in 1917, independent Armenian and Azerbaijani republics emerged for the first time and, after a brief period of peace under the common umbrella of the Transcaucasian Federation, entered into a war over the control of towns and areas of mixed population: Nakhchivan, Zanzezour, and Karabakh. This war facilitated the Bolshevik take-over: when the Red Army invaded Azerbaijan in April 1920, it did not face any resistance as the entire Azeri army was deployed on the Karabakh front. The Bolshevik leaders imposed a compromise, which clearly served their interests of domination: They gave Zanzezour to Soviet Armenia, made Nakhchivan an “autonomous republic” but a part of Azerbaijan, and Karabakh an “autonomous region” that was still part of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan obtained the bigger share because it was bigger, it had strategic Baku oil, and also because of the Soviet alliance with the Turkish nationalists of Mustafa Kemal.²

However, the Soviet system failed to overcome the national divisions. Moreover, Soviet authoritarian rule and its hyper-centralized political system did not allow the development of local mechanisms of conflict resolution. Armenians complained that they were discriminated against under Azerbaijani rule: Nakhchivan had a 40 percent ethnic Armenian population in the early Soviet period but only 2 percent by the year the Karabakh conflict erupted in 1988. On February 20, 1988, encouraged by the new reform policies of the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Karabakh Soviet voted in favor of a resolution to transfer their region from Soviet Azerbaijan to neighboring Soviet Armenia. A week later, anti-Armenian massacres erupted hundreds of kilometers away in the industrial town of Sumgait, near Baku. What started as localized grievances would soon develop into a vio-

lent conflict, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it would become a war between two sovereign states.

There are different interpretations of the causes of this conflict. One early interpretation is that Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalism clashed in the first two decades of the 20th century, only to be stopped by the imposition of the heavy-handed Soviet order. However, once this Soviet totalitarian system collapsed, the old nationalist conflicts re-emerged.³ “The nationalism of larger nations found a counterpart in the nationalism of national minorities,” writes Alexei Zverev.⁴ The problem with this interpretation was that it neglected the impact of seven decades of Soviet rule in transforming the conflicts that had emerged following the collapse of the Tsarist Empire.

Another set of interpretations looks at the Karabakh conflict within the strict Soviet legacy arguing that Soviet policy choices and their failures shaped the emergence of Karabakh conflict as one among a series of ethno-territorial problems. In this sense, Karabakh was considered part of a broader tectonic change whereby Soviet institutional arrangements, with territorial divisions linked to ethnic particularism, had led to the strengthening of ethno-national identification, a force that surfaced at during the weakening and collapse of the USSR.⁵ This school of thought sees the Karabakh conflict as part of a series of similar wars of Soviet succession that also plagued Georgia, Chechnya, Moldova and Tajikistan.

I have argued that while cultural nationalism was widespread in the Caucasus during the last two decades of Soviet rule, the emergence of social movements with a nationalist ideology was largely conditioned by the rapid disintegration of the Soviet totalitarian state and the security vacuum that it left behind, which was to be filled by various nationalist projects (those of the Union Republics as well as ethnic minorities within them). Yet the existence of nationalism is not a sufficient condition

2 For a historic background, see: Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat. Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations. The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3 Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations. The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 7–8. See also: Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule* (London: Routledge, 2010).

4 See Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988–1994”, in: Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 14.

5 For example, Svante Cornell has argued that autonomy was at the source of these conflicts, although the opposite argument could be made even more convincingly: it was the lack of real political autonomy that caused dissatisfaction, and violent conflicts erupted when the republican centres tried to repress the political identity of the autonomous entities by force, thus clashing with ethnic minorities. See: Svante Cornell, “Autonomy as a Source of Conflict. Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective”, *World Politics* 54, 2 (2002): 245–76.

for the emergence of violent wars. First, we have to consider that the newly emerging independent states chose to use excessive force to put down the social mobilization of ethnic minorities, transforming a political conflict into a military one. Second, all major conflicts in the Caucasus are the continuity of past, traumatic legacies that were never addressed. With sudden instability, the fear of the past re-emerged and the victim-perpetrator relationship cast its long shadow with thinly veiled threats of genocidal annihilation. Such examples can be drawn from the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict with the unresolved legacy of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, as well as Abkhaz fear of annihilation and Chechen memories of Stalinist deportations of 1944.⁶

War and Diplomacy

A full-scale war erupted as the Soviet Union disintegrated by end of 1991 and Red Army battalions were withdrawn from Karabakh. The Armenians of Karabakh were encircled and under constant attack. Their only chance to survive was to go on the offensive, which is what they did. By the time of the cease-fire, they had taken over much of the Karabakh territories, linked Karabakh within Armenia, and also occupied seven Azerbaijani provinces, forcing the entire ethnic Azerbaijani population out of these areas.

The Armenian military victories can be largely explained by Azerbaijan's internal struggle. Each military defeat was conditioned by a power struggle within the Azerbaijani elite: the Brezhnevite ruler, Yaqub Mammedov, was replaced in 1991 by Ayaz Mutalibov, who lost power in March 1992 after a series of defeats to the nationalist opposition leader Abulfaz Elchibey. He was later overthrown following defeats in 1993 when the Soviet-era boss, Heydar Aliyev, came to power. On the opposite side, the Armenians showed an incredible national unity: even the transfer of power from Soviet party rule to the National Movement in 1989 happened without violence through parliamentary elections.

Aliyev also organized a military campaign but after its failure signed a cease-fire agreement in May 1994. The old but experienced Heydar Aliyev tried to achieve three objectives. First, he wanted to sign oil contracts with the West, which were completed in September 1994. Second, he wanted to sign a peace agreement with the Armenians and to resolve the Karabakh problem. He came very close to signing a peace agreement in 2001 on

the basis of recognizing Karabakh–Armenian self-determination in return for occupied territories with special status for Lachin and Kelbajar provinces, which divide Karabakh from Armenia proper. However, he faced strong internal opposition and backed out. Lastly, he wanted to pass the presidency to his inexperienced son, Ilham, which occurred after his death in 2003.⁷

Ilham Aliyev Goes to War

Ilham Aliyev had no other source of legitimacy to rule Azerbaijan than being the son of Heydar Aliyev. For his first ten years in power, he was lucky: a major oil pipeline with the capacity of 1 million barrels per day was constructed in 2005, oil money started pouring in 2006, and world oil prices were high. Ilham Aliyev bought internal stability by distributing petrodollars among the Azerbaijani elite with lion's share going to his family, as has been revealed in the latest Panama Papers.⁸

Simultaneously, Ilham Aliyev also took a hard-line position on Karabakh; he made the military budget of Azerbaijan equivalent to the entire state budget of Armenia. When he arrived to power in 2003, Azerbaijan spent \$175 million on defense; in 2015 the Azerbaijani military budget was \$4.8 billion. He also threatened that if the Armenians did not surrender Karabakh through negotiations, he would conquer that territory by war. Such threats have brought the diplomatic initiatives in search of a peaceful resolution to a complete stop. The Azerbaijani elite also gave lavish parties, spending millions on a Eurovision contest in 2011 or the European Games in 2015.

Yet Azerbaijan's party seems to be over. Oil output started declining prematurely. In 2012, Ilham Aliyev accused British Petroleum of having “made mistakes” leading to fall of Caspian oil production urged the company to restore production capacity. Even worse, global oil process collapsed in 2014, dropping from over \$110 per barrel in June of that year to below \$40 in March 2016. The fall in price created a severe economic crisis in oil-dependent Azerbaijan. The Azeri national currency lost a third of its value by December 2015, igniting mass protests throughout the country. Many analysts have drawn a parallel between the increasing internal problems of Azerbaijan and the escalation of violence on the Karabakh front, implying that the military offensive could be considered an attempt to divert Azerbai-

6 See: Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus. Russia's Troubled Frontier* (London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2009). See also by the author: Vicken Cheterian, *Open Wounds. Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2015), 279–88.

7 See Vicken Cheterian, “Karabakh Conflict after Kosovo. No Way Out?”, *Nationalities Papers* 40, 5 (2012): 703–20.

8 Will Fitzgibbon, Miranda Patrucic and Marcos Garcia Rey, “How Family that Runs Azerbaijan Built an Empire of Hidden Wealth”, *The Panama Papers*, April 4, 2016, <<https://panamapapers.icij.org/20160404-azerbaijan-hidden-wealth.html>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

jani public opinion away from internal socio-economic problems. Yet the April war could also reveal a different tension in Baku: with decline of Caspian oil, Azerbaijan's strategic importance will equally decrease in time, hence the sense of urgency.

Turkey and Russia

The "four-days-war" erupted at a time of heightened crisis between Ankara and Moscow, following the downing of a Sukhoi bomber by Turkey in northern Syria in November 2015. Although some attributed the recent Karabakh war to external, specifically Turkish–Russian tension, one should exclude external roles in triggering the fighting. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe the role and influence of the two powers over Karabakh.

Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan made a sensational and one-sided declaration saying that his country was with Azerbaijan "to the end", adding: "We pray our Azerbaijani brothers will prevail in these clashes."⁹ Such an inflammatory position comes from the head of a state responsible for genocidal massacres against Armenians during World War I. Yet one need not exaggerate Ankara's impact on the Karabakh conflict as Turkey is a minor player; the large majority of Azerbaijan's arms come from Russia.¹⁰

The Russian position is equally puzzling. It has a defense alliance with Armenia, but it sells large quantities of arms to Azerbaijan. Anti-Russian sentiments developed in Armenia after Putin pressed Yerevan to abandon seeking rapprochement with the EU and join Moscow's Eurasian customs union. A week after the recent fighting in Karabakh, demonstrators marched towards the Russian embassy chanting, "Shame!" or "Free, independent Armenia!" Such developments are new in a country traditionally known to be Russophile. There is a new generation in Armenia that links local corrupt authorities with Russian political institutions. Russia's prime minister defended arms sales to Azerbaijan as well as Russian military support to Armenia by saying that it aimed to preserve "the military balance" in the South Caucasus. Yet Russia's cynical policies could undermine its institutions and raise questions about the value of its military alliances.

Conclusion

The recent fighting has revealed that the cease-fire agreement of May 1994, which preserved relative peace on

the Karabakh warfront, is gone. Azerbaijan is dissatisfied with the outcome of the first Karabakh war. Instead of diplomacy and negotiations, in the last ten years it has chosen military escalation as a way to change the status quo. The April war revealed the new military balance around the Karabakh conflict after a decade of the Azerbaijani oil boom and arms purchases. It showed that the Azerbaijani side does have technological advantages and more advanced weapons systems, such as the Israeli drones it has used, yet this advantage failed to change the balance of power. The Armenian side revealed weaknesses in its intelligence (its defense leadership was taken off-guard by the Azerbaijani attack) and were surprised by Azerbaijani high-tech warfare; yet in spite of these weaknesses, the Armenians showed comparative coordination between the various sections of its armed forces and managed to hold the line. Karabakh defense planners are certainly evaluating failures of the April war, and in the next round, the element of Azerbaijani surprise will certainly be reduced.

What comes next? After the failure of its blitzkrieg, Baku could choose diplomacy. Moscow is already pushing for a new initiative aiming to bring Russian peacekeepers to the Karabakh conflict zone and profiting from the divisions among its Trans-Caucasian neighbors to project its influence over them. Yet both Armenia and Azerbaijan are skeptical towards the former colonial overlords' plans and thus far have resisted Russian plans for stationing peacekeepers in the Karabakh theatre.

Another consequence of the April 2016 war is the radicalization of Armenian public opinion and their rejection of territorial concessions, namely, the return of the Azerbaijani-occupied territories in return for Karabakh's self-determination. The argument heard even among civil society groups favorable for a peaceful solution is against the return of the Azerbaijani occupied provinces, which are considered the only possible security guarantee against future military attacks. Any peace deal needs concessions from both sides built on trust. Currently, this trust is broken and will need both time and effort to be bridged once again.

The other possible medium-term development is that Azerbaijan will change strategy and opt for a long-term war of attrition¹¹. Azerbaijan has a larger population and resources compared to Karabakh and Armenia together. Yet such a strategy risks provoking an Armenian military response, including counter-attacks on Azerbaijan proper. The previous Karabakh war (1991–94) was the

9 "Nagorno-Karabakh Clash. Turkey Backs Azeris 'to the End' against Armenia", *BBC News*, April 3, 2016, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35953358>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

10 Joshua Kucera, "Report. Azerbaijan Gets 85 Percent of its Weapons from Russia", *Eurasianet*, March 17, 2015, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72581>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

11 Zaur Shiriyev, "Azerbaijan's War of Attrition: A New Strategy to Resolve the Karabakh Conflict?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13, 67 (2016), <http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5btnews%5d=45281&no_cache=1#VytbEvWGw1> (accessed May 20, 2016).

result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. New state institutions were emerging and struggling to determine their power and control over territory and population. Today, the nature of the conflict is different. Those new states have been formed, and military units follow strict command structures: it is the decision of presidents that leads to the start of a new war or the moment of cease-fire. War is their political choice and their failure to

make peace. It is the result of long-term policies of militarization, hate-speech, and military escalation that is creating an environment where war is favored over genuine negotiations.

In case current trends are not reversed, we are getting closer to a second war in Karabakh. The previous war (1991–94) caused the deaths of 35,000 people. The next one could be much worse.

About the Author

Vicken Cheterian, PhD, is a faculty member at Webster University Geneva and adjunct professor at the University of Geneva, teaching history and international relations. He has worked on the Middle East and Post-Soviet contemporary conflicts and is the author of *War and Peace in the Caucasus. Russia's Troubled Frontier* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2009), and *Open Wounds. Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2015).

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