

Turkish Claims that the PKK Is Operating in Nagorno-Karabakh Set Dangerous Precedent

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Conflict sparked up again yesterday in Artsakh, or more commonly known as Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijan launched an offensive against Armenian forces. Although the Republic of Artsakh is not recognized by any state, including Armenia, and it is still internationally recognized as occupied Azerbaijani territory, it achieved a de facto independence in 1994.

As acting Commissar of Nationalities for the Soviet Union in the early 1920's, future Soviet leader Joseph Stalin granted the Armenian-majority region of Artsakh to the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. The Azeris, the dominant ethnic group of Azerbaijan, are cultural and linguistic kin with the Turks. It is said that the Turks and Azeris constitute "one nation in two states." The defining difference is that Azeris are Shia Muslims unlike Turks who are mostly Sunni. The Soviets had hoped that by granting Artsakh to Azerbaijan instead of Armenia, they could court the newly founded Republic of Turkey to closely align with Moscow, or perhaps even become a Soviet Republic, by appeasing their ethnic Azeri kin.

In 1921, it was estimated that Artsakh was 94% Armenian. However, according to the 1989 census, Artsakh's population was approximately 75% Armenian and 25% Azeri. Former Soviet Azerbaijani leader Heydar Aliyev, father of current President Ilham Aliyev, [said in 2002](#): "I tried to change demographics there [...] I tried to increase the number of Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh and the number of Armenians decreased." The collapse of the Soviet Union unsurprisingly led to the Artsakh War, which only ended after a ceasefire in 1994 when Armenian forces achieved a decisive victory.

Despite Azerbaijan's defense budget (\$2.267 billion) being about five times larger than Armenia's, they have failed to capture Artsakh on numerous attempts, particularly during the 2016 April War and another major attempt in July of this year. Azerbaijan's resumption of hostilities yesterday could be passed off as just another skirmish that will subside in a few days. However, the current conditions are far different and much more dangerous than in previous situations.

Although it is well established that the Turkish economy is struggling, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is maintaining a policy of constant crises in the vain attempt to distract the public from the Turkish lira as it continues breaking new record lows to the US dollar and Euro, even as recently as this morning. As the military provocations and rhetoric of war against Greece and Cyprus in the East Mediterranean begins to subside in Ankara, it only took a few days for a new crisis to emerge.

Reports began emerging last week that Turkey was transferring terrorists from northern Syria to Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani leadership in Baku flatly denied the allegations [last](#)

[week](#) and [today](#). However, despite the denials from Baku, it must be remembered that Ankara openly announced its transfer of Syrian fighters to Libya earlier this year and the Azerbaijani's have undoubtedly used international terrorists from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Turkey during the first Artsakh war in the 1990's. Photos, videos and voice recordings [have emerged](#) that show Syrian terrorists on their way to or already in Azerbaijan. Vardan Toghanya, the Armenian Ambassador to Moscow, said in a statement today that 4,000 militants from Syria already arrived in Azerbaijan, while according to the Armenian intelligence agency, 80 fighters from Syria have already been killed or wounded.

Turkey's transfer of militants in support of Azerbaijan, which was also done in the 1990's, is not what makes the current conflict more dangerous compared to previous battles and skirmishes. Starting from last week, Turkey and Azerbaijan have increased their campaign in claiming that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), considered a terrorist organization by both Ankara and Baku, was operating in Artsakh. Neither Ankara and Baku provided any evidence for their claims. This sets a dangerous narrative as it could be used as a way for Turkey to "legitimize" a direct intervention against Armenia and in support of Azerbaijan.

Erdoğan justified his invasion and occupation of large areas of northern Syria and northern Iraq in 2018, 2019 and this year on the pretence that they were fighting against the PKK. Although [Armenia denies](#) PKK are operating in Artsakh, this will be ignored by Ankara and Baku.

However, unlike Syria and Iraq, Armenia is a member state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), alongside Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. A direct Turkish attack on Armenia could activate the CSTO. This would be a dangerous scenario as in turn this could activate NATO in defense of Turkey. It is highly unlikely that the situation in Artsakh will dissolve into a CSTO-NATO faceoff. But the risk still remains, especially if Erdoğan decides to directly intervene under the guise of expelling the PKK from Artsakh.

Just as Erdoğan unleashed a migrant crisis in February and March of this year against Greece, sent Syrian terrorists to Libya in May, conducted a military operation in northern Iraq against the PKK in June, and created a new crisis with Greece by sending warships into its territorial waters in August and for most of September, it appears the new crisis to dominate headlines for the next few weeks will revolve around Artsakh.

Although it is unlikely that Turkey will directly militarily intervene, a dangerous precedent has already been established by pushing the narrative, without publicly available evidence, that the PKK are operating in Artsakh alongside Armenian forces. With the Turkish economy and lira collapsing, Erdoğan in the future may very well use the narrative that the PKK are in Artsakh to ferment public furore and distract them from the declining economic situation.

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