

## II. The interstate armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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The interstate conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan centres on the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (see figure 5.1).<sup>1</sup> It was the first secessionist conflict to erupt in the former Soviet Union in 1988 and then became a confrontation between the two sovereign states of Armenia and Azerbaijan when they declared independence in 1991. An estimated 1 million people were displaced by the 1988–94 Nagorno-Karabakh War, and about 30 000 were killed.<sup>2</sup> Following the Russian-brokered 1994 ceasefire, Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other districts (occupied by Armenia after the fighting as a security buffer) remained formally part of Azerbaijan but were de facto controlled by separatist ethnic Armenians whose economy, society and polity were deeply tied to Armenia. The self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (referred to as the Republic of Artsakh by Armenia) is not recognized by any United Nations member state, including Armenia.

In 2016–17 the conflict escalated into periodic violence along the 200-kilometre line of contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, but returned to relative calm in 2018–19.<sup>3</sup> Both sides increased their military capabilities in recent years, while a growing internationalization of the conflict (principally due to the greater involvement of Russia and Turkey, as well as Iran) raised concerns that any escalation in fighting could lead to a regional war.<sup>4</sup>

The conflict does not fit neatly into the frame of geopolitical competition between Europe and Russia (discussed in section I). Some Western states provide political support to Azerbaijan (because of its oil wealth and potential as a strategic buffer against Iran and Russia), while others back Armenia (because of the legacy of the Armenian genocide and an active Armenian diaspora). Russia has been similarly conflicted—recognizing the value of Azerbaijan as an ally, but traditionally supportive of Armenia where it has a military base and both are members of the Collective Security Treaty

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Kazantsev et al., ‘Russia’s policy in the “frozen conflicts” of the post-Soviet space: From ethnopolitics to geopolitics’, *Caucasus Survey*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2020), pp. 142–62; and Azimov, A., ‘Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Caucasus: What documents say?’, *Modern Diplomacy*, 26 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Blakemore, E., ‘How the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been shaped by past empires’, *National Geographic*, 16 Oct. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> On developments during 2016–19 see International Crisis Group, *Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border*, Europe Report no. 259 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 24 July 2020).

<sup>4</sup> On military expenditure in Armenia and Azerbaijan see chapter 8, section II, in this volume.



**Figure 5.1.** The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, July 2020

*Note:* The boundaries, names and designations used here do not imply any endorsement or acceptance by SIPRI of claims or stances in disputes over specific territories.

*Source:* 'Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Caucasus: What documents say?', *Modern Diplomacy*, 26 July 2020.

Organization.<sup>5</sup> Armenia has a historical antipathy towards Turkey, which has close ethnic, religious and cultural ties with Azerbaijan. Iran shares similar ties with Armenia and with Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup>

Regular peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group and others, have failed to resolve this long-standing conflict.<sup>7</sup> The situation between the 1994 ceasefire and 2019 was characterized by regular low-level incidents and occasional flare-ups (e.g. Russia helped to de-escalate a crisis in 2016), but there was no major escalation until 2020. The six weeks of

<sup>5</sup> Kazantsev et al. (note 1); Popescu, N., 'A captive ally: Why Russia isn't rushing to Armenia's aid', *European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary*, 8 Oct. 2020; and Sukiasyan, N., 'Appeasement and autonomy: Armenian-Russian relations from revolution to war', *European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief no. 2*, Jan. 2021. On membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization see annex B, section II, in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Coffey, L., 'Iran the big loser in Nagorno-Karabakh war', *Arab News*, 13 Nov. 2020; and Motamedi, M., 'Iran's delicate balancing act in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', *Al Jazeera*, 5 Oct. 2020.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief description and list of members of the OSCE Minsk Group see annex B, section II, in this volume. On the history of the Minsk Group process see Remler, P. et al., 'OSCE Minsk Group: Lessons from the past and tasks for the future', *OSCE Insights 6, Nomos*, 2020. On media framing of the conflict and the role of peace journalism see Atanesyan, A., 'Media framing on armed conflicts: Limits of peace journalism on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2020), pp. 534–50.

fighting that broke out in 2020 was the most serious period of fighting since the Nagorno-Karabakh War. It resulted in Azerbaijan regaining control of about one third of Nagorno-Karabakh and most of the adjacent territories.

### **The armed conflict in 2020**

In March and April 2020 the OSCE Minsk Group called on the two sides to recommit to the 1994 ceasefire for the duration of the Covid-19 health crisis.<sup>8</sup> However, low-level fighting broke out in mid July between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in the northern section of their border, leaving at least 16 people dead. Reliable detailed information on what occurred on the ground is limited, but officials in both countries blamed each other for starting the fighting.<sup>9</sup> The co-chairs of the Minsk Group (France, Russia and the United States) condemned the violence and called for restraint.<sup>10</sup>

Following heightened tensions in the middle of the year, the speeches of the Armenian and Azerbaijan leaders at the annual general debate of the UN General Assembly in September reflected their hardening positions.<sup>11</sup> A few days later, on 27 September the fighting along the border escalated with the use of major conventional weapons.<sup>12</sup> Azerbaijan is widely believed to have planned and initiated the offensive: having built up its military capacity over some years, it was in a position to try to retake Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>13</sup> Both countries declared martial law and mobilized for what risked becoming an all-out war. Armenia, France and Russia accused Turkey of sending foreign fighters from Syria to bolster the Azerbaijani armed forces, as well as other military support. Turkey denied these claims.<sup>14</sup> However, it was

<sup>8</sup> 'Press statement by the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group', OSCE, 19 Mar. 2020; and 'Joint statement by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group', OSCE, 21 Apr. 2020.

<sup>9</sup> AP News, 'At least 16 killed in Armenia-Azerbaijan border clashes', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2020; and International Crisis Group (note 3).

<sup>10</sup> 'Press statement by the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group and personal representative of the OSCE chairperson-in-office', OSCE, 24 July 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Ghazanchyan, S., 'People of Nagorno-Karabakh should be able to determine their status without limitation—Armenian PM tells UN General Assembly', Public Radio of Armenia, 25 Sep. 2020; and 'Ilham Aliyev delivered a speech at general debates of 75th session of United Nations General Assembly in a video format', President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 24 Sep. 2020.

<sup>12</sup> 'Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict: Death toll rises in Nagorno-Karabakh', Deutsche Welle, 28 Sep. 2020; and Kramer, A. E., 'In Nagorno-Karabakh, signs of escalating and widening conflict', *New York Times*, 29 Sep. 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Kucera, J., 'New Armenia-Azerbaijan fighting a long time in the making', Eurasianet, 28 Sep. 2020; and 'De-escalating the new Nagorno-Karabakh war', International Crisis Group, 2 Oct. 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Sanders IV, L. and Salameh, K., 'Syrian mercenaries sustain Turkey's foreign policy', Deutsche Welle, 30 Sep. 2020; and McKernan, B., 'Syrian recruit describes role of foreign fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh', *The Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2020.

**Table 5.1.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2019–20

| Event type                                 | Armenia  |           | Azerbaijan |              |
|--|----------|-----------|------------|--------------|
|  | 2019     | 2020      | 2019       | 2020         |
| Battles                                    | 2        | 18        | 12         | 6 231        |
| Explosions/remote violence                 | 0        | 8         | 1          | 435          |
| Protests, riots and strategic developments | 0        | 0         | 0          | 0            |
| Violence against civilians                 | 0        | 0         | 1          | 6            |
| <b>Total</b>                               | <b>2</b> | <b>26</b> | <b>14</b>  | <b>6 672</b> |

*Notes:* Figures for Azerbaijan include Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other districts previously occupied by Armenia.

For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Projection (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

*Source:* ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, accessed 28 Jan. 2021.

reported that Turkey supplied military equipment valued at \$123 million to Azerbaijan in the first nine months of 2020.<sup>15</sup>

Despite renewed international calls for restraint—including by the European Union, the OSCE and the UN Security Council (which, in a closed session, addressed the issue for the first time since 1993)—both sides rejected pressure to commence peace talks.<sup>16</sup> The presidents of France, Russia and the USA called for a ceasefire in a joint statement on 1 October 2020, while Turkey vowed to ‘do what is necessary’ to support Azerbaijan.<sup>17</sup> On 2 October Armenia indicated it would welcome a ceasefire and would be prepared to work with the OSCE to establish peace in the region.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the conflict continued, with both sides accusing each other of targeting civilians.<sup>19</sup>

With about 70 000 people (half of the Nagorno-Karabakh population) displaced by the fighting, a Russian-brokered ceasefire was agreed on

<sup>15</sup> Toksabayan, E., ‘Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan surged before Nagorno-Karabakh fighting’, Reuters, 14 Oct. 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Bagirova, N. and Hovhannisyan, N., ‘Azerbaijan and Armenia reject talks as Karabakh conflict zone spreads’, Reuters, 29 Sep. 2020; ‘Special meeting of OSCE Permanent Council held on situation in Nagorno-Karabakh context’, OSCE, 29 Sep. 2020; ‘Nagorno Karabakh: Statement by the high representative/vice president Josep Borrell’, European Union External Action Service, 27 Sep. 2020; and ‘UN Security Council calls for immediate end to fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh’, France 24, 30 Sep. 2020.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Statement of the presidents of the Russian Federation, the United States of America and the French Republic on Nagorno-Karabakh’, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 Oct. 2020; ‘US, Russia, France condemn fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh’, Deutsche Welle, 1 Oct. 2020; and ‘Turkey will provide support if Azerbaijan requests it—foreign minister’, Reuters, 30 Sep. 2020.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia says ready to work towards ceasefire’, Al Jazeera, 2 Oct. 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Melikyan, A. et al., ‘Missiles, rockets and accusations fly as Nagorno Karabakh flare-up burns into second week’, CNN, 5 Oct. 2020.

10 October 2020. However, fighting resumed almost immediately.<sup>20</sup> Reported use of artillery salvos and ballistic missiles by both sides and cluster munitions by Azerbaijani forces added to civilian and military casualties. Hostilities widened to include attacks on Armenian positions, on Nagorno-Karabakh and on Armenian and Azerbaijani cities near the line of conflict.<sup>21</sup> Two further negotiated humanitarian ceasefires—one brokered by Russia on 17 October 2020 and the other by the USA on 25 October 2020—were again broken almost immediately.<sup>22</sup>

### *Permanent ceasefire agreed*

Azerbaijani forces made major gains in the fighting. By early November they were threatening to capture the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh. On 9 November 2020 Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a peace agreement to end the six-week war, which entered into effect on 10 November.<sup>23</sup> In addition to a full ceasefire the agreement stipulates: (a) the phased withdrawal of the Armenian military from territory outside of its internationally recognized borders (Nagorno-Karabakh and three adjacent areas still controlled by Armenia); (b) the deployment of 1960 Russian armed peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh, except in those areas now under Azerbaijani control, and to patrol the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia to Stepanakert; (c) the deployment of Russian border police to secure a new transit route (running through Armenian territory) between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhichevan (which is surrounded by Armenia, Iran and Turkey); and (d) a series of self-renewing five-year time limits for the Russian peacekeeping forces, which can be ended by any party six months prior to a scheduled extension. The agreement also calls for the return of internally displaced persons and refugees to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, and for Azerbaijan and Turkey to lift their decades-long blockade of Armenia.<sup>24</sup> Turkey

<sup>20</sup> 'Statement by the foreign ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia', Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 Oct. 2020; 'Armenia Azerbaijan: Reports of fresh shelling dent ceasefire hopes', BBC News, 12 Oct. 2020; and Hovhannisyan, N. and Bagirova, N., 'Humanitarian crisis feared as Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire buckles', Reuters, 13 Oct. 2020.

<sup>21</sup> 'Armenia/Azerbaijan: Civilians must be protected from use of banned cluster bombs', Amnesty International, 5 Oct. 2020; and Troianovski, A., 'At front lines of a brutal war: Death and despair in Nagorno-Karabakh', *New York Times*, 18 Oct. 2020. On international efforts to ban the use of cluster munitions see chapter 13, section I, in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> 'Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia and Azerbaijan accuse each other of breaking fresh truce', *The Guardian*, 18 Oct. 2020; 'US-Armenia-Azerbaijan joint statement', Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 Oct. 2020; and AP News, 'Azerbaijan and Armenia trade accusations of breaking US-brokered truce', *The Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2020.

<sup>23</sup> President of Russia, [Statement by the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the prime minister of the Republic of Armenia and president of the Russian Federation], 10 Nov. 2020 (in Russian).

<sup>24</sup> 'Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia sign Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal', BBC News, 10 Nov. 2020; and 'Getting from ceasefire to peace in Nagorno-Karabakh', International Crisis Group, 10 Nov. 2020.

and Russia signed a separate accord to establish a joint monitoring centre in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Turkish Parliament approved the deployment of Turkish peacekeepers to the centre.<sup>25</sup>

With significantly higher estimated losses of military equipment and territory, Armenian leaders said a ceasefire had been unavoidable. Turkey's military and political support, and armed drones purchased from Israel and Turkey, appeared to be central to Azerbaijan's military success.<sup>26</sup> Total military and civilian fatalities were estimated to be about 6700 people (see table 5.1). Other sources suggest there were over 7100 fatalities (including 2400 Armenian troops, 1779 Republic of Artsakh soldiers and 50 civilians, and 2783 Azerbaijani troops and 98 civilians).<sup>27</sup> Human rights organizations allege both sides committed war crimes during the conflict in 2020.<sup>28</sup>

### Future outlook

Russian peacekeepers were helping the two sides to maintain an uneasy ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh at the end of 2020, despite some minor violations in December.<sup>29</sup> The agreement brokered by Russia on 9 November 2020 is not a comprehensive peace treaty. Several key issues have still to be clarified, including the future status and governance of Nagorno-Karabakh, how to reconcile potentially competing claims by returning Armenians displaced by the fighting in recent months and Azerbaijanis displaced in the early 1990s, Turkey's role in the implementation of the agreement (beyond the deployment of peacekeepers) and the future of the OSCE Minsk Process.<sup>30</sup> Azerbaijan sees itself as the victor, having recaptured most of the territory it lost in the previous war over 30 years ago. Hence, the agreement was celebrated in Azerbaijan, but met with protests in Armenia where it was seen as an imposed peace.<sup>31</sup> A new stalemate—but on different terms to the previous 30-year stalemate—now seems likely.

<sup>25</sup> 'Turkish parliament approves troop deployment to Nagorno-Karabakh', Al Jazeera, 18 Nov. 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Dixon, R., 'Azerbaijan's drones owned the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh—and showed future of warfare', *Washington Post*, 13 Nov. 2020; and Watling, J. and Kaushal, S., 'The democratisation of precision strike in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', Royal United Services Institute Commentary, 22 Oct. 2020.

<sup>27</sup> [Caucasian Knot], [Karabakh: Chronicle of war-2020], 23 Dec. 2020 (in Russian).

<sup>28</sup> 'Armenia: Unlawful rocket, missile strikes on Azerbaijan', Human Rights Watch, 11 Dec. 2020; 'Azerbaijan: Unlawful strikes in Nagorno-Karabakh', Human Rights Watch, 11 Dec. 2020; and 'In the line of fire: Civilian casualties from unlawful strikes in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh', Amnesty International, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Troianovski, A. and Gall, C., 'In Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal, Putin applied a deft new touch', *New York Times*, 1 Dec. 2020; and AP News, 'Nagorno-Karabakh: Both sides blame each other over ceasefire violations', *The Guardian*, 12 Dec. 2020.

<sup>30</sup> 'Improving prospects for peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh war', International Crisis Group, Europe Briefing no. 91, 22 Dec. 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Losh, J. and Roth, A., 'Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal brokered by Moscow prompts anger in Armenia', *The Guardian*, 10 Nov. 2020.