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).\(^1\) 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.\(^2\) 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.\(^3\) Both sides increased their military capabilities in recent years, while a growing internationalization of the conflict (particularly 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.\(^4\)

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


\(^2\) Blakemore, E., ‘How the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been shaped by past empires’, National Geographic, 16 Oct. 2020.


\(^4\) On military expenditure in Armenia and Azerbaijan see chapter 8, section II, in this volume.
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.

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. 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

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**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.


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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.\(^8\) 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.\(^9\) The co-chairs of the Minsk Group (France, Russia and the United States) condemned the violence and called for restraint.\(^10\)

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.\(^11\) A few days later, on 27 September the fighting along the border escalated with the use of major conventional weapons.\(^12\) 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.\(^13\) 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.\(^14\) However, it was

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\(^8\) ’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.


\(^10\) ’Press statement by the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group and personal representative of the OSCE chairperson-in-office’, OSCE, 24 July 2020.


reported that Turkey supplied military equipment valued at $123 million to Azerbaijan in the first nine months of 2020.\textsuperscript{15}

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.\textsuperscript{16} 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.\textsuperscript{17} 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.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, the conflict continued, with both sides accusing each other of targeting civilians.\textsuperscript{19}

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

\textbf{Table 5.1.} Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2019–20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event type</th>
<th>Armenia</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>Azerbaijan</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Battles</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6 231</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions/remote violence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>435</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protests, riots and strategic developments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against civilians</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>6 672</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.


10 October 2020. However, fighting resumed almost immediately. 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. 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.

**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. 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 Nakichevan (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.

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23 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).

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.\(^{25}\)

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.\(^{26}\) 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).\(^{27}\) Human rights organizations allege both sides committed war crimes during the conflict in 2020.\(^{28}\)

**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.\(^{29}\) 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.\(^{30}\) 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.\(^{31}\) A new stalemate—but on different terms to the previous 30-year stalemate—now seems likely.

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\(^{25}\) ‘Turkish parliament approves troop deployment to Nagorno-Karabakh’, Al Jazeera, 18 Nov. 2020.


\(^{27}\) [Caucasian Knot], [Karabakh: Chronicle of war-2020], 23 Dec. 2020 (in Russian).


