



Erdogan Seeks to Upend Kremlin-Backed Status Quo in Nagorno-Karabakh

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Turkey and Azerbaijan may have jointly planned the Azerbaijani offensive to contest Armenia’s control of Nagorno-Karabakh that reignited that simmering conflict. Tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed, Armenian-held region of Nagorno-Karabakh escalated into conventional combat on September 27. International media coverage has largely portrayed the ongoing conflict as the result of a spontaneous escalation. But Turkish-Azerbaijani military cooperation, drone sales, and force mobilization indicate Azerbaijan prepared – with Turkish support – to dispute Armenia’s presence in Nagorno-Karabakh prior to September 27. Azerbaijan reportedly purchased Turkish-made drones in June 2020 and is deploying them to great effect.¹ Turkish and Azerbaijani forces conducted large-scale joint military exercises between July 29 and August 10 and conducted high-level bilateral meetings on July 16 and August 13.² Following the exercises, Turkey left behind F-16 fighter jets in Azerbaijan as a “deterrent” against Armenia. The extent of Turkish military personnel involvement in current active combat operations, if any, is unclear.

Turkey additionally likely began deploying Syrian National Army forces to Azerbaijan before the Azerbaijani announcement of its offensive into Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara mobilized at least 1,500 Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) members to reinforce Azerbaijani forces.³ Reports of the Syrian National Army reinforcements date back to September 22, five days before Azerbaijan’s announcement of its offensive.⁴ SNA forces are present in locations near the frontline, including Horadiz on the Azerbaijani-Iranian border.⁵ Turkey denies any SNA presence in Azerbaijan and claims that Armenia is deploying PKK-affiliate groups to Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶ Turkey may not have explicitly preplanned an Azerbaijani offensive on September 27, but at minimum prepared the assets that would be necessary to do so and has fully supported Baku even if the offensive was either an independent Azerbaijani decision or an actual spontaneous escalation.

Turkish President Erdogan likely seeks to shape the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh to expand Turkish influence in its near abroad, among other objectives. Turkey and Russia have emerged as the primary international actors in the conflict – with Erdogan militarily supporting Azerbaijan and Putin seeking to negotiate an end to the fighting in support of his ally Armenia. Erdogan likely views Azerbaijan’s advance into Nagorno-Karabakh as an opportunity to upend the status quo and increase Turkish military and political influence in the Caucasus. Erdogan likely assesses he has a low cost means to expand Turkish influence through support and encouragement to Azerbaijan as long as Russian President Vladimir Putin remains unwilling fully to back Armenia and determined to find a diplomatic means of de-escalating the conflict.

A Kremlin-brokered ceasefire has so far failed to halt hostilities, but the Kremlin is positioned to control a potential political process. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov met with Azerbaijan FM Jeyhun Bayramov and Armenian FM Zohrab Mnatsakanyan in Moscow for over 10 hours on October 9 and negotiated a “humanitarian ceasefire” to exchange prisoners of war and recover bodies, beginning at midnight local time on October 10.⁷ As

of October 12, neither Azerbaijan or Armenia have formally ended the ceasefire despite major violations with civilian casualties on both sides.⁸ Armenia reported Azerbaijani shelling of multiple positions in Nagorno-Karabakh, including its capital Stepanakert.⁹ Azerbaijan reported Armenian violations at multiple positions inside Azerbaijan including a missile attack on Azerbaijan's second largest city, Ganja, later on October 10.¹⁰

Putin seeks to control a negotiation process to frame Russia as the key actor and broker in the former Soviet Union. The October 10 ceasefire states the OSCE Minsk Group – co-chaired by Russia, France and the United States but dominated by Russia – will have the exclusive auspices to negotiate the further parameters of the ceasefire.¹¹ The ceasefire document additionally states this negotiation format is “invariable,” explicitly rejecting Turkish participation, as Turkey is not a member of the Minsk Group. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov held a call with the Armenian and Azerbaijani Foreign Ministers on October 10, and Armenian Foreign Minister Mnatsakanyan is scheduled to travel to Moscow from October 11-13.¹² Kremlin and Russian Foreign Ministry representatives have repeatedly framed Russia as a natural mediator in the conflict.¹³ The Kremlin took a similar mediating role during the most recent prior escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in April 2016.¹⁴

Putin will likely support his ally Armenia in the end, potentially setting back his outreach to Azerbaijan and pushing Baku closer to Turkey. Putin has called for a ceasefire since the beginning of fighting on September 27 and is currently unwilling to intervene militarily to support Armenia. Armenia is one of the Kremlin's main allies in the Caucasus and a key balance against Turkish interests, including hosting a permanent Russian military base and supporting the Kremlin's campaign in Syria. Putin likely does not want to compel Armenia to grant Azerbaijan some measure of control over Nagorno-Karabakh, which would cede influence to Turkey and damage the Kremlin's efforts to leverage control over the rest of the former Soviet Union.

The Kremlin sees ties with Azerbaijan as important and seeks to integrate Azerbaijan into Kremlin-dominated security and economic structures that Armenia is already a member of.¹⁵ Azerbaijan and Armenia were scheduled to jointly participate in Russia's Kavkaz 2020 military exercises in mid-September prior to Azerbaijan's withdrawal due to escalating tensions.¹⁶ Putin likely desires to pressure Azerbaijan – and Turkey – to back down and retain the status quo ante of Armenian control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Kremlin pressure on Azerbaijan to back down would likely set back the Kremlin's priority effort to centralize control of the former Soviet Union, however. The Kremlin may pressure Armenia to accept some form of concession to defuse the crisis and frame the Kremlin as a mediator but is more likely to support Armenia and set back its outreach to Azerbaijan – pushing Azerbaijan further into Erdogan's sphere of influence.

The Azerbaijani-Turkish relationship is more balanced and developed than Turkey's relations with its proxy partners in the Middle East and North Africa such as in Libya or Syria. The dynamic between Azerbaijan and Turkey involves close ethnic and historical ties, growing Turkish dependency on Azerbaijani energy, long-term diplomatic relations, and bilateral military cooperation.¹⁷ While Ankara's stance and military support are critical to Baku's international position in the conflict, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev likely has greater decision-making autonomy than many actors Ankara has partnered with in the recent past.

Azerbaijan and Turkey are setting conditions to break the ceasefire, citing unaddressed Azerbaijani claims in negotiations. Azerbaijan has captured only small enclaves in the southern and northern most corners of Nagorno-Karabakh to date.¹⁸ Azerbaijan's minor territorial gains are not enough to improve Azerbaijan's hand in future negotiations to dictate its primary demand: complete withdrawal of Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh and its adjacent territories in Azerbaijan. Similarly, Turkey has framed the ceasefire as a “last chance” for Armenia to withdraw from the disputed territories and not as a lasting solution.¹⁹

Despite Turkish and Azerbaijani maximalist framing, Azerbaijan's real strategic objective is likely to improve its position on the ground ahead of future diplomatic negotiations. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan are aware that an Armenian withdrawal from Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh is extremely unlikely. While Azerbaijan's economy can outmatch that of Armenia's in affording a longer conflict in theory, three factors likely limit Azerbaijan:

- (1) Armenian forces defend the higher ground in mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh region. An Azerbaijani offensive during winter would likely lead to high casualties among its forces.
- (2) An offensive would likely cause high civilian casualties and destruction in a region which Baku claims to be part of Azerbaijan, potentially pushing Nagorno-Karabakh's population closer to Armenia.
- (3) A prolonged conflict could bring increased international attention into the conflict, increasing the diplomatic cost for Azerbaijan and harming its international energy trade.

Azerbaijan therefore likely seeks to use the current conflict to deepen Turkish support outside the Minsk Group framework, introduce Azerbaijan's capability to launch offensive operations into Armenia's calculus in negotiations, and initiate a new diplomatic process - even if it is dominated by the Kremlin - that challenges Armenia's control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan likely believes Armenia will blink first in a standoff due to Azerbaijan's stronger economy and overt Turkish military support, such as the deployment of F-16s and SNA fighters, in the absence of similar Russian support to Armenia.

Azerbaijan will likely continue posturing in line with its maximalist claim of capturing Nagorno-Karabakh with ground forces but avoid a protracted, costly conflict. Erdogan has also demonstrated his willingness to support Azerbaijani operations at low-cost and would likely support a protracted conflict that boosts his domestic support until Azerbaijan returns to negotiations with a stronger position. The Kremlin will likely contrarily seek to end the fighting to retain its dominant influence in Armenia and mitigate the need to support an additional low-level conflict in its near abroad.

¹ <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2020/06/25/azerbaijan-to-buy-armed-drones-from-turkey/>.

² <https://www.dotaa.com.tr/tr/dunya/turkiye-ile-ortak-askeri-tatbikat-azerbaycan-icin-hayati-onem-tasiyor/1927123>.

³ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-armenia-azerbaijan-f16-deterrent-against-attacks>;

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<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/05/nagorno-karabakh-syrians-turkey-armenia-azerbaijan/>.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/LindseySnell/status/1308489785493852160?s=20>;

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⁵ <https://twitter.com/JulianRoepcke/status/1312347751359959040?s=20>;

<https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1312345769555496961?s=20>.

⁶ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/azerbaijani-intel-intercepts-dialogue-of-pkk-terrorists-fighting-for-armenia/news>.

⁷ <https://tass dot ru/politika/9681035>.

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/azerbaijan-and-armenia-accuse-each-other-of-violating-cease-fire/a-55227721>.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/ArmeniaMODTeam/status/1315014678930743297?s=20>.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/wwwmodgovaz/status/1315123074631708673?s=20>.

¹¹ <https://tass dot ru/politika/9681035>.

¹² https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4377235; <https://tass dot ru/politika/9688231>.

¹³ https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4377255; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/64180>.

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nagorno-karabakh/russia-styles-itself-lead-mediator-in-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-idUSKCN0X41Y6>.

¹⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/putins-offset-kremlin%E2%80%99s-geopolitical-adaptations-2014>.

¹⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/warning-russia%E2%80%99s-kavkaz-2020-military-exercise>.

¹⁷ <https://www.dotaa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/dogal-gaz-ithalati-nisanda-yuzde-25-8-azaldi-/1889296>.

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/azpresident/status/1313155235561512962>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1QsKztRgt8>.

¹⁹ http://www dot mfa dot gov.tr/no_-239_-azerbaycan-ile-ermenistan-arasinda-ilan-edilen-ateskes-hk.tr.mfa.