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'The potential of mutual destruction has grown massively'

Armenia and Azerbaijan are in a state of war. Felix Hett on the violent clashes over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region

Read this interview in German.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have been fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh for decades. There have also been repeated clashes with casualties on both sides. Why has fighting broken out again now?

Unfortunately, the escalation does not come unexpected. After almost three years of relative calm on the front, fighting had already begun in mid-July, with 17 dead on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Experts have been warning for years that the conflict is not frozen, but could flare up again at any time.

Three factors are currently decisive: First, Azerbaijan has apparently lost hope of being able to advance its interests through negotiations. Second, the legitimacy of the political leadership in Baku depends to a large extent on successes in Karabakh – partly because expectations are being raised again and again, even now, that the area could be freed from "Armenian occupation". And thirdly, Azerbaijan is actively supported by Turkey in a way that is unprecedented for this conflict. President Erdoğan yesterday promised Baku full support via Twitter – when the massive offensive of the Azerbaijani armed forces was already underway.

Nagorno-Karabakh as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan have declared a state of war. Are we experiencing the sharpest escalation since the ceasefire of 1994?

In April 2016, four days of fighting resulted in around 200 deaths. Little is yet known about the current number of casualties. The Armenian side has so far published the names of 59 dead [as of 28/09/20, 13:30 CEST]. Moreover, there are at least eight civilians

dead on both sides. These figures are very provisional and will unfortunately continue to rise massively. We have to fear that this time it will be worse than in 2016. On top of that, while the war that ended in 1994 was still largely a “low tech” affair, both sides have been arming heavily in recent years. The potential of mutual destruction beyond the immediate battlefield has grown massively.

Russia is traditionally Armenia's security guarantor and maintains a military base in the country, but also sells weapons to Azerbaijan on a large scale. Can Moscow mediate in the current conflict?

Moscow already intervened on Sunday; Foreign Minister Lavrov called with his counterparts in Yerevan, Ankara and Baku – in that order. President Putin also spoke with Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan. In the past – including in 2016 – Russian pressure was able to silence the weapons.

However, it has never produced a sustainable solution, partly because all parties to the conflict reject the deployment of Russian peacekeeping troops. However, Turkey’s more active role, the noticeable withdrawal of the US from the region and the EU’s weakness have made the conflict incomparably more complex – and thus more difficult to control.

The OSCE’s Minsk Group, which has been trying to find a negotiated solution under the co-chairmanship of France, Russia and the US since 1996, emerged from a very different world political order. At that time, the Soviet Union had just broken up and the US was considered the hegemon in a new world order. The role of the Minsk Group is now openly questioned by OSCE and NATO member Turkey, while the US State Department warns somewhat helplessly of the “involvement of external parties” in the conflict.



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