



The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

Armenia and Azerbaijan Engage in Heavy Clashes Over the Disputed Nagorno-Karabakh Region

Heavy clashes broke out earlier this week between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict is rooted in a decades-long dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave that is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but which has been controlled by ethnic Armenians since it declared independence back in 1991. Although a ceasefire was agreed upon in 1994 following several years of armed conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan frequently accuse each other of provocations around Nagorno-Karabakh and have been unable to formally resolve the dispute. Tensions had been escalating for months after border clashes in July, and have now boiled over into the heaviest fighting in years. The fear is that these clashes may not only devolve into a larger-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also that they could spiral out of control and draw in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Russia, and Iran. Additionally, diffusing the situation and maintaining stability in the region is critical because it provides important transit routes for connecting oil and gas supplies to the world market.

The dispute regarding Nagorno-Karabakh became a major issue in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the Soviet Union began to collapse. At that time, there was uncertainty and disagreement about whether or not the region would come under the control of Azerbaijan. In a referendum boycotted by the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabakh, ethnic Armenians in the enclave chose to officially declare independence, sparking a war between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. The conflict ended in an uneasy ceasefire in 1994, but left the region's official status unresolved. The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh has therefore remained de facto independent but internationally unrecognized, as the global community views the region as a part of Azerbaijan. The absence of Armenian consensus on this and their government's continued support of the rogue republic has stoked tensions over the past several decades in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

On top of its contested status, one of the other problematic elements of the area's status quo that has left the door open for potential conflict is the fact that Armenian forces have maintained control over a significant amount of Azerbaijani territory around the enclave. This has led to both sides occasionally accusing each other of provocations, which can quickly deteriorate into armed skirmishes, as has happened with the most recent clashes this week. The continuous presence of Armenian forces in Azerbaijani territory is indeed a huge obstacle to any hope for a lasting resolution to the ongoing territorial dispute. As such, multiple U.N. resolutions have advocated for the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions of Azerbaijan as a necessary step to deescalate tensions. However, the refusal to do so has certainly contributed to repeated confrontations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and has left the two countries subject to the type of situation which has manifested itself in recent days. While previous clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces since the 1994 ceasefire have been contained from further dangerous escalations, there is a legitimate fear that may not be the case this time. Both countries have mobilized more of their military forces and brushed off the suggestion of peace talks, citing their belief that the other has obstructed the negotiation process regarding the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

There is also a significant degree of external involvement in the conflict, which risks prolonging it and escalating tensions even further. Turkey's efforts on behalf of Azerbaijan have included the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to Nagorno-Karabakh, with Armenia also accusing Turkish military experts of fighting alongside Azerbaijan in the disputed region and providing drones and warplanes. Multiple Syrian fighter fatalities during the week appear to lend credence to the reports of foreign involvement in the skirmishes, and the use of outside fighters is a worrisome development which has increased fears that the clashes may devolve into a wider regional conflict. Additionally, Azerbaijani forces have been relying on Israeli weaponry in their strikes against Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Around 60% of Azerbaijan's arms procurement comes from Israel, as the two nations cooperate closely on security and energy. Russia, for their part, has been accused of involving itself in the conflict as well, by sending fighters to help aid Armenian forces.

Ultimately, experts contend that the longer the fighting drags on, the more likely that these and other regional actors become involved in the conflict on an even wider-scale. This could have devastating effects on the civilian population in the region, militarily and economically. For that reason, international actors have been doing their best to mitigate the situation and urge Armenian and Azerbaijani officials to cease their hostilities.