



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Violence over Nagorno Karabakh

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## 1. Nagorno Karabakh

Nagorno Karabakh is an autonomous region of Azerbaijan with an Armenian majority population. Since 1994 it has been controlled by Armenians as a self-proclaimed independent state, although no country recognises the entity's statehood.

After the fall of the Soviet Union (of which both Azerbaijan and Armenia were part) at the end of the 1980s, pressure from the Armenian-ethnic majority for Nagorno Karabakh to become part of Armenia increased amid sporadic conflict and a weakening of Azerbaijan's control.

Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence from the USSR in 1991. Violence escalated in 1994, with separatists backed by Armenia and Russia firming their control of most of Nagorno Karabakh and occupying further Azerbaijani territory between Karabakh and Armenia.

A ceasefire agreement set up the [OSCE Minsk Group](#), co-chaired by France, Russia and the US, to monitor the ceasefire and seek a political solution. There have been sporadic outbreaks of violence since 1994.

## 2. New outbreak of hostilities

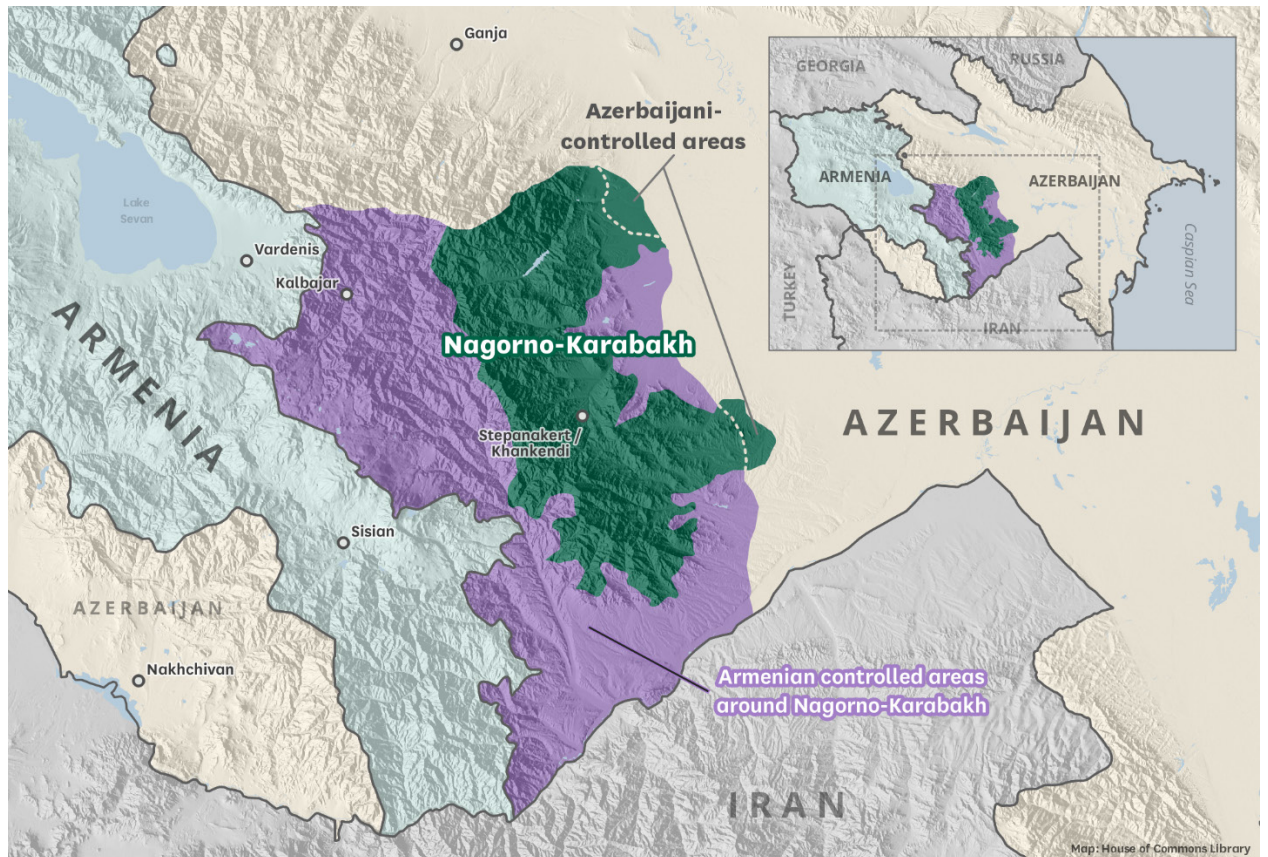
On 27 September 2020, after some alarming escalations during summer 2020, the worst violence since 1994 erupted. There had been many skirmishes since the war but usually along the Line of Contact set out in the 1994 ceasefire agreement. This time, Karabakh separatists also reported heavy shelling of the region's capital, Stepanakert. Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city, was hit by Armenian artillery, in retaliation for Stepanakert. The [Red Cross condemned](#) "indiscriminate shelling and other alleged unlawful attacks".

The scale of the violence was underlined when on 8 October the Karabakh rights ombudsman [Artak Beglaryan reported](#) that half the population of the region had fled their homes.

By 13 October, [around 1,000 people had been killed](#) and Azerbaijani forces were reported to have broken through the Line of Contact, aided by attacks on Armenian ground forces by Turkish- and Israeli-made drones. Azerbaijani advances took place over the southern

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part of the Line of Contact, into an area of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenian forces but not part of Nagorno Karabakh.



## 3. Ineffective ceasefire agreements

On 8 October the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers travelled to Geneva for a meeting with the OSCE Minsk Group.

On 10 October Russia brokered a [humanitarian ceasefire](#) to allow for prisoner swaps. There were violations of the ceasefire almost immediately, and the [OSCE Minsk Group released a statement](#) calling on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to observe the ceasefire, to avoid "catastrophic consequences for the region".

On 17 October Azerbaijan claimed that 13 civilians were killed in another attack on the Azerbaijani city of Ganja. Armenia denied the claim. On the same day Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed another ceasefire, but again accused each other of violations immediately afterwards.

## 4. The parties' positions

On 4 October Azerbaijan's President Aliyev addressed the nation: "Nagorno-Karabakh is our land. [...] This is the end. We showed them who we are. We are chasing them like dogs." Indicating that Azerbaijan was not looking for a ceasefire Aliyev said: "My condition is the following: [let them withdraw their troops](#), and the confrontation will be stopped, but this should not be in words, but in deeds."

Armenian President [Nikol Pashinyan described Azerbaijan's actions as "terrorist"](#). "What we are facing is an Azeri-Turkish international terroristic attack. To me there is no doubt that this is a policy of continuing the Armenian genocide and a policy of reinstating the Turkish empire".

Russian policy has historically been not to take sides in the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, since it views both countries as part of its "[privileged sphere of influence](#)."

President Putin said that Russia's security guarantee for Armenia (which is, unlike Azerbaijan, a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation) was not relevant: "[It is deeply regrettable that the hostilities continue](#), but they are not taking place on Armenian territory". Russia is indicating that it wants to maintain the Minsk Group's oversight of the conflict, which maintains Russian influence and excludes Turkey.

Turkey argues that the Minsk Group should not be involved in mediating the conflict. Unlike most leaders, President Erdogan of Turkey has not called for a ceasefire, but offered [strong support for Azerbaijan](#), saying that backing Azerbaijan is part of his policy of obtaining for Turkey its "deserved place in the world order". Turkish military exports to Azerbaijan are [six times higher](#) in 2020 than in 2019.

Iranian President [Rouhani warned of a regional war](#) and said Iran would work to restore peace: "Peace is the basis of our work and we hope to restore stability to the region in a peaceful way."

The Minsk Group foreign ministers, in a [joint statement](#), condemned "in the strongest terms the unprecedented and dangerous escalation of violence in and outside of the Nagorno-Karabakh zone."

## 5. UK policy

The Government set out its position on the conflict in a parliamentary [debate on 7 October 2020](#). Supporting the Minsk framework and urging a return to negotiations have been the basis of its policy since 1994. The Government implicitly acknowledged the importance of Russia and Turkey:

[...] We have also been in contact with the Turkish and Russian authorities to discuss the matter and we continue to believe that the best solution to this conflict is a peaceful negotiation under the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group.

### Arms sales

In 1992, the OSCE member states imposed an [embargo on arms sales](#) to forces engaged in conflict in the Nagorno Karabakh area. In 2014 the UK changed its definition of weapons to be embargoed:

[...] the Government will continue to apply the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) embargo to the supply of military list equipment to military, police and security forces and related governmental entities, where this equipment could be used in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, or on the land border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. For the supply of military list equipment which does not have the technical capacity to be used or modified for use in the Nagorno-Karabakh region or on the land border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Government will consider licence applications in line with the consolidated EU and national export licensing criteria.

The Campaign against the Arms Trade (CAAT) says that [£408,000 of UK military exports to Azerbaijan](#) have been approved since 1 July 2017, with £22,000 of UK military exports to Armenia and £738 million in exports to Turkey reported over the same period.

## CSSF

The [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund](#) is a UK cross-departmental fund aimed at reducing the likelihood of conflict. The [2018/19 CSSF Annual Report](#) shows that its country and regional programme operates in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Some idea of the activities supported by the Fund can be found in [CSSF programme summaries for the region](#) and the [annual review summaries for 2018 – 2019](#).

## 6. What action can be taken?

The [EU released a statement](#) on 18 October calling for the latest ceasefire to be respected. The High Representative, Josep Borell, said that the EU is ready to support the parties and the OSCE in seeking a long-term solution.

Many in the European Parliament, however, have [called for direct EU action](#), possibly including economic sanctions against Turkey. Josep Borrell indicated that the EU would not intervene independently of the Minsk Group: "...the European Council was clear that they consider that the framework within which to mediate and to act on this conflict is the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs".

President Trump has kept a low profile on the conflict so far. On 15 October Secretary of State Mike [Pompeo accused Turkey of increasing tensions](#) by supplying resources to Azerbaijan, but called for the crisis to be resolved by negotiation. Democratic presidential candidate [Joe Biden has called for a stronger US response](#):

Rather than delegating the diplomacy to Moscow, the administration must get more involved, at the highest levels, by working with our European partners to de-escalate the fighting and return the two sides to negotiations.

A growing number of Democrats in Congress are calling for the Administration to [suspend US security assistance to Azerbaijan](#) immediately.

So far there has been little call for sanctions against Turkey over Karabakh. But the US is already in [dispute with Turkey](#) over its purchase of the Russian air-defence missile system. Meanwhile, tensions between Greece and Turkey are exceptionally high over disputes in the eastern Mediterranean and Mike Pompeo is [reported to have discussed](#) increasing Greek/US security co-operation.

If sanctions or direct intervention are unlikely, that could mean a return to negotiations under the Minsk process. But that process lacks credibility at present. One commentator [suggests ways of bolstering it](#):

- international security guarantees for both communities
- a reformed ceasefire monitoring system
- the re-opening of OSCE field offices in Armenia and Azerbaijan
- and holding the international Minsk Conference, which was set out in the 1994 ceasefire agreement but never took place.

## 7. What chance of a resolution?

Pavel Baev for the Brookings Institution [describes the offensive as "long-planned"](#) and argues that Azerbaijan hoped that Russia would be distracted by the [situation in Belarus](#). Azerbaijan has been far outspending Armenia on defence and has bought Turkish-made drones that have [proved effective in Libya](#). Also building on the Libya experience, Turkey

may have deployed hundreds of Syrian rebel fighters as mercenaries in Azerbaijan, [according to reports](#). Turkish support has helped to precipitate the present crisis and may risk drawing a reluctant Russia into supporting Armenia.

Russian military intervention is unlikely, however, according to an [Armenian expert](#) based in the capital Yerevan: “We will probably see an uncharacteristically delicate foreign policy response from Moscow”.

[Laurence Broers for Chatham House](#) argues that Turkey’s overt backing of Azerbaijan is symptomatic of a shift away from US-led unipolarity:

[...] the conflict may be transformed into another theatre of contestation by regional powers Turkey and Russia, rather than one where an international coalition seeks to mediate and resolve conflict. Regionalization is a symptom of a wider global shift from a unipolar international order led by the US to a multipolar order contested by regional powers.

Azerbaijan is confident of its military strength. Both Russia and Turkey are intent on bolstering their respective regional clout. Successive US administrations have reduced US commitment to worldwide policing duties. And there several political distractions, not least the pandemic. The contest may prove difficult to end quickly.

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