

Nagorno-Karabakh

Principal protagonists



Government of Azerbaijan.



Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). Regular Armenia forces.

Nature of conflict

Historical territorial issue. Regional war, 1991-4.

☪ Muslim/Christian conflict an issue.

☠ Up to 30,000.

👤 238,000 Armenian IDPs. 700,000 Azeri IDPs.

Population/ethnic composition

145,000. Armenian 95%.

Territorial extent

Nagorno-Karabakh: c17,000 km². (4,400 km² under 1991 borders.)

Timeline

- 1818-28: Transcaucasian region annexed by Russia.
- 1918-23: Territorial clashes between Armenians and Azeris. Soviet control established in 1923.
- 1923: Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast created.
- 1936: Separate Armenian, Azeri and Georgian SSRs created.
- 20 Feb 1988: Nagorno-Karabakh parliament votes for union with Armenia.
- 24 Feb 1988: Outbreak of first fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- 23 Aug 1991: Armenia declares independence from USSR.
- 30 Aug 1991: Azerbaijan declares independence from USSR.
- 10 Dec 1991: Nagorno-Karabakh declares independence.
- 1994-present: Ceasefire leaves Nagorno-Karabakh (and surrounding tracts of Azeri land) in Armenian hands.
- 10 Oct 2009: Turkey and Armenia establish diplomatic relations.

Current status

Unresolved. Nagorno-Karabakh remains *de facto* independent.



At its height under Tigranes the Great in the 1st century BC, Armenia occupied an extensive area covering most of modern Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nakhichevan, and parts of eastern Turkey. In 301 AD Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its official state religion. In more recent times, Armenia has suffered through being on the natural invasion route between competing neighbours, most recently the Ottoman Turks and the Russians. Historical territorial claims, coupled with a tragic modern history – culminating in the Armenian Genocide of 1915 at the hands of the Turks – have made the modern Armenians highly vulnerable to fears of foreign domination and persecution.

Most of modern Armenia and Azerbaijan were annexed to Tsarist Russia between 1818-28. With the fall of the Tsar in 1917, both Armenians and Azeris attempted to establish independent states. Following the collapse of the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic that united Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Armenian and Azeri forces clashed over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and of the Nakhichevan region that lies between modern Armenia and Iran. By 1920 Armenia was also involved in a disastrous war with Turkey. The intervention of the Red Army was therefore regarded as a liberation (or at least a preferable outcome to Turkish occupation) in many Armenian quarters. Full Soviet control over the region was established by 1923, initially under the auspices of a Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Republic (TSFR) that, like its predecessor, combined Armenia with Az-

erbaian and Georgia. Despite local sentiment (including some initial support from Azeri Soviet leaders) for the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh and/or Nakhichevan into Soviet Armenia, both districts were assigned to Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh, with its Armenian majority, became an Autonomous Oblast in 1923. In 1936 the TSFR was dissolved and separate Armenian, Azeri and Georgian Soviet Socialist Republics were created.

As the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late 1980s, Armenians were in the forefront of demanding independence from the USSR becoming in August 1991, the first Soviet republic after the Baltic states to declare independence. Unfortunately, latent ethnic issues resurfaced at the same time, particularly over Nagorno-Karabakh where the Armenian majority agitated for separation from Azerbaijan and either independence or integration with

Armenia. Armenian deputies to the National Council of Nagorno-Karabakh voted for incorporation into Armenia in February 1998 and days later armed clashes broke out in the region. Violence therefore started even before the formal dismemberment of the USSR. In 1989 the Azerbaijan SSR initiated an air and land blockade, which crippled the Armenian economy. Separately, elements in Nachichevan were also agitating for self-rule and closer links with Iran, where border posts were demolished in December 1989. (Nakhichevan became, in January 1990, the first Soviet territory to declare itself independent from the USSR.)

In December 1991 Nagorno-Karabakh voted for full independence and by 1992 Armenian regular and Nagorno-Karabakh forces were in a state of full-scale war with Azeri forces. By the end of 1992, Armenian forces held most of Nagorno-Karabakh and the territory between it and Armenia proper, including the vital Lachin (Berdzor) corridor linking the two states. Fighting also spilled into Nakhichevan, which was shelled by Armenian forces in May 1992. By the time of a Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994, Armenian forces were in control of an estimated 17,000 km². The fighting resulted in a massive refugee crisis for both countries, particularly Azerbaijan, which was reluctant to assimilate refugees for fear that this would represent a tacit acceptance of Armenian territorial gains. The status of the refugees (particularly former residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, who the Karabakh authorities would wish to see excluded from any future vote on the region's future) remains highly problematic.

Despite periodic attempts at negotiation, no permanent peaceful solution to the issue has been devised. Nagorno-Karabakh – known as 'Artsakh' to Armenians – remains independent, although unrecognized internationally. Although Azerbaijan has offered 'maximum autonomy' to Nagorno-Karabakh, this remains unacceptable to the Karabakh authorities, who favour a referendum on the territory's long-term status (which presumably would favour independence). In view of the disproportionate size of the Armenian and Azeri economies, with the latter benefiting from oil and natural gas exploitation, the possibility of a future Azeri leadership attempting a purely military solution remains high. Following Kosovan independence in March 2008, which co-incided with domestic political unrest in Armenia itself, Azerbaijan announced its willingness to resolve the Karabakh situation 'by force', while Yerevan, in return, threatened to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh. The first serious clashes for many years between Armenian and Azeri forces left 18 dead. In October 2009, however, following careful diplomacy between their respective presidents, Armenia and Turkey agreed to normalize relations, including the intention to open the closed Armenian/Turkish border. This move was condemned in Baku – and by militants in both Armenia and Turkey. As in other ethnic conflicts, the greatest threat to negotiators may come from violent domestic opposition to any 'sell out' over the disputed territory.

Azeri separatists

The Lezghin, a Caucasian people, straddle the border between Dagestan (Russia) and Azerbaijan. As with the Ossetians, another people divided by the post-Communist division of the former USSR, there have been calls among the Lezghin for unity between the two communities. The Lezghin number some 189,000 in Dagestan, 158,000 in Azerbaijan, and a smaller community in Armenia. A Lezghin independence movement "Sadval" was established in Dagestan in 1990 and in 1991 it called for the establishment of an "independent Lezghistan" unifying Lezghins on both sides of the border. The organization was accused of terrorist acts, including an attack on the Baku metro, sabotage of economic installations, and participation in hostage-taking in Dagestan. In 1996 the Russian and Azeri authorities co-operated in the suppression of the Sadval movement. The remaining Lezghin activists have promoted peaceful autonomy since that date, although latent sentiments for unity and independence doubtless still exist.

In 1993, in a separate case, a short lived attempt was made to establish a Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic, in the extreme south-east of Azerbaijan, along the border with Iran. As with the Lezghins and other minorities, the Talysh claimed their culture was being undermined by integration into the Azeri state. Talysh nationalists, aided by local military elements (and with the tacit support of Russia) seized control of southern districts in June 1993. The insurgency was suppressed by August 1993, although autonomist sentiments continue.

See the main text for discussion of the Nakhichevan exclave.