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How Armenia and Azerbaijan's conflict could still destabilize the region

Ellen Ioanes

14–18 minutes

A decades-long conflict in the Caucasus flared up last week — only to seemingly finally be decided.

Azerbaijan on September 19 launched an “anti-terror” strike aimed at Nagorno-Karabakh, the semi-autonomous, majority-Armenian region within its internationally recognized borders. One day later, the [breakaway government agreed to disarm and dissolve its military](#). It was the second time in three years that Azerbaijan's government made decisive gains in a conflict with Nagorno-Karabakh.

Now, many of those ethnic Armenians are fleeing the territory — [100,000 according to Filippo Grandi](#), the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, more than 80 percent of the population of the region. The breakaway region's leaders [told Reuters](#) that as many as 120,000 people — essentially the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh — would leave, out of fear of ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan's government after the region's de facto government capitulated to Azerbaijan last week.

A member of Nagorno-Karabakh's former government, Ruben

Vardanyan, has also been taken into custody by Azerbaijani border guards while trying to flee to Armenia, [Al Jazeera](#) reported Thursday. [Armenian outlets](#) have reported that David Babayan, an adviser to the region's former president, has also turned himself in to authorities.

While tensions obviously remain high, and much of what's happening on the ground is unclear, it does appear the "anti-terror" strike will dissolve the territory altogether. It's a result that could echo far beyond Azerbaijan's borders, as it has escalated an already difficult humanitarian crisis and is roiling Armenian politics.

This week's crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, explained

The trouble in Nagorno-Karabakh didn't just start last week. The region has been the locus of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but animosity between the two countries goes back to the turn of the 20th century.

After the region was absorbed into the USSR, the Soviet Union designated a majority-Armenian autonomous region within Azerbaijan in 1923 — today known as Nagorno-Karabakh.

Conflict between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan started in earnest in 1988, when the region began agitating for independence. Between 1988 and 1990, Azerbaijan carried out multiple pogroms against Armenians within its borders, and interethnic conflict was common. Moscow intervened in 1990, and in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, Nagorno-Karabakh claimed independence — though the international community has never recognized the breakaway republic.

This declaration inflamed tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Backed by Armenian troops, Karabakh Armenians took control not only of their historical region, but also of much of Azerbaijan's territory up to the border with Armenia.

While Armenia does not officially recognize Nagorno-Karabakh, this first conflict's result was a huge moral victory for Armenia, Benyamin Poghosyan, a senior fellow on foreign policy at the Applied Policy Research Institute of Armenia, an independent think tank in Yerevan, told Vox. That territorial gain was "one of the primary pillars of independent Armenian identity," after centuries of oppression.

But it was also an unsustainable loss for Azerbaijan — [about 20 percent of its territory](#) was now outside of the country's control. And the war took a devastating toll; around 30,000 people were killed in the conflict, and [hundreds of thousands of ethnic Azeris fled Armenia and Karabakh](#).

Azerbaijan, aligned with Turkey, recaptured significant territory in a 2020 war. During that conflict, [Russia](#), which has long been Armenia's military partner, failed to back Armenia and Karabakh Armenians. That conflict ended in a Russia-brokered ceasefire, which about 2,000 Russian peacekeepers have helped ensure.

Cut to last week: On September 19, Azerbaijan launched an "anti-terror" campaign, allegedly in response to the [deaths of six people](#) in two land mine explosions within Azerbaijan.

The operation displaced [at least 7,000 people](#) and [killed around 200](#), with thousands reportedly still missing. Wednesday, the two sides began discussing a ceasefire after the government of

Nagorno-Karabakh agreed to dissolve its military.

Authorities in [Nagorno-Karabakh accused Azerbaijan](#) of violating the ceasefire agreement the next day, though Azerbaijan vehemently denied the claim. There were reports of heavy gunfire that Thursday, but because mobile connectivity and electricity are only sporadically available in the region, verifying claims from either party is nearly impossible.

[As part of the ceasefire agreement](#), Reuters reported Nagorno-Karabakh has handed over 20,000 rounds of ammunition, six armored vehicles, 800 small arms, portable air defense systems, and anti-tank weapons.

In addition to dissolving the armed forces, Zaur Shiryev, the International Crisis Group's analyst for the South Caucasus, told Vox via email that the ceasefire agreement involves "the dismantling of all existing de facto institutions, [political] positions, and symbols, and discussions about the integration of local Armenians under Azerbaijani authority," including how to implement some autonomy at the municipal level and protect Armenian language and customs.

Though Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev has promised Karabakh Armenians a "paradise" as part of his country, the Karabakh Armenians are not taking their chances; the Lachin corridor, which connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, is already crammed with cars headed to Armenia — for those who have enough fuel to get there amid a serious humanitarian crisis in the region. By Sunday night, 1,050 people had entered Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh, [the Armenian government said](#).

What Azerbaijan decides to do about Nagorno-Karabakh

affects the whole region

Nagorno-Karabakh, [like other potential territorial conflicts](#), is an issue of great political volatility within Armenia because it is an issue of national pride and identity for many Armenians, and because it is a way to gauge Armenia's power and influence in the region.

That influence has waned somewhat as Azerbaijan's military might has grown, aided by increased oil and gas wealth and a security partnership with Turkey, and as Armenia's relationship with Russia has diminished.

Under current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian government has distanced itself both from Russia and from Nagorno-Karabakh, insisting that it has had nothing to do with the agreement between leaders in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, and the de facto government in Stepanakert, and even backing off of previous hard-line guarantees for the region like autonomous rule, Paghosyan told Vox. Armenia was reluctant to get involved in this latest outbreak of fighting; [Pashinyan](#) said he wouldn't let the country be "drag[ged] ... into military operations."

Russia, which helped broker peace in 2020, has also seen its role in the region greatly reduced. Russian peacekeepers have been present maintaining the 2020 ceasefire, but their influence has softened over the years, particularly [due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#). And their presence has, at best, only been able to keep an uneasy peace, with low-level hostilities common in the region.

"The ongoing [war in Ukraine](#) has indeed weakened Russia's role, and since 2022, coupled with [Azerbaijan's] checkpoint in Lachin, and the recent brief war that ended with the capitulation of local

Armenians, Azerbaijan has gained more control over the region's affairs than Russia had previously," Shiryev said.

Russia has also struggled with maintaining the flow of goods and people across the region's only physical connection to Armenia, the Lachin corridor. That area has been severely restricted by Azerbaijan since December 2022, Shiryev said.

"Even before last December, when Azerbaijani-backed activists started protests near the road demanding Azerbaijani control, Baku alleged that the road was being used for unchecked transfers of weapons and natural resources from the region to Armenia," he explained. In April of this year, Azerbaijan established a border checkpoint on the Lachin corridor, over time choking off transport completely. Since that time, the humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has become increasingly desperate, and only one humanitarian convoy, from the International Committee of the Red Cross, has been permitted to enter the region in months.

Despite Russia's reduced status in the region, the country is still playing an administrative role in this conflict, facilitating discussions between the Azerbaijani government and local Armenian authorities. "Nowadays, if disarmament takes place, the Russian forces will play a part in it, and over time, they will coordinate the implementation of other ceasefire terms," Shiryev told Vox. "Baku views [Russia's] role as a stabilizing factor, especially in areas where local Armenians live."

The future looks challenging for Pashinyan as his internal opposition — which is friendlier with Russia than [he is](#) — is harnessing [protests and frustration with the prime minister](#) over

Nagorno-Karabakh to try to get him to resign. “Protests erupted quite spontaneously and only afterwards political opposition wanted to take them over,” Meliqset Panosian, an independent researcher based in Gyumri, Armenia, told Vox.

Though there’s no suggestion of imminent war between the neighbors, regional experts said there is concern that continued crises like last week’s strike could inflame longstanding tensions. Many in Armenia “are feeling humiliated,” Poghosyan told Vox; to restore their dignity, “they will be more inclined to have more nationalistic views.” Armenia is [courting other security partners](#) in addition to Russia, and could aspire to build up its military over the coming years. While it’s decidedly the weaker of the two states, it’s not above military conflict. The [interests of Russia, Turkey, Western countries, and even Iran overlap and conflict in the region](#), meaning the potential for animosity and outright hostility remains.

At the very least, Poghosyan said, “I am afraid that for years to come ... the South Caucasus and Armenia and Azerbaijan will be volatile.”

What happens now? Honestly, it’s hard to say.

According to a decree given by the region’s de facto President Samvel Shahramanyan on Thursday, Nagorno-Karabakh will cease to exist as of January 1, 2024. Shahramanyan, who came into office on September 9 of this year, said he signed the decree “due to the current difficult military-political situation,” [CNN reported](#).

Despite the new agreement between Nagorno-Karabakh and

Azerbaijan, there are still a great many unknowns — primarily how Armenia will manage an influx of so many people in serious humanitarian need.

“People arrive nonstop” into the southern Armenian city of Goris, the only port of entry for the Karabakh Armenians, Panosian told Vox.

In the immediate term, the first priority is for humanitarian aid to reach the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, since many in the area are already suffering from severe hunger, Poghosyan said.

Aliyev has promised that Karabakh Armenians will [enjoy the right to their own language and culture](#) if they stay, but Armenians have expressed concerns about violence and even ethnic cleansing — hence the decision by many to leave the territory en masse.

That’s not unfounded, given the region’s history. According to [a 2022 State Department report](#), evidence was found of Armenian graves being desecrated by Azerbaijani soldiers, as well as “severe and grave human rights violations” against Armenian ethnic minorities, including “extrajudicial killings, torture and other ill-treatment and arbitrary detention, as well as the destruction of houses, schools and other civilian facilities.”

International leaders like German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock have expressed concern about the humanitarian situation in the region and the ability of Karabakh Armenians to leave the area safely. “We look to Nagorno-Karabakh with the greatest concern,” she said in a statement Wednesday. “Nobody really knows how the people there are doing and what they have to go through.” International observers other than Russian peacekeepers have thus far not been able to enter the region,

though the US State Department has said that it is assembling an [international monitoring mission](#).

Armenian leadership in Nagorno-Karabakh [told Reuters](#) that those wishing to leave would be escorted by Russian peacekeepers to Armenia.

“Almost nobody believes in peaceful coexistence with Azerbaijanis,” Stepan Adamyan, an Armenian who works with international journalists, told Vox. “Every hour [on Facebook] I read their posts saying ‘do something, take us out of here.’”

Update, September 29, 3:50 pm ET: This story was originally published September 23 and has been updated several times to include developments in the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

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