

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Karabakh) > **Azerbaijan's Ethnic Cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh Is Fueled by Regional (...)**

# Azerbaijan's Ethnic Cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh Is Fueled by Regional Power Struggles

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**The Soviet Union's collapse created opportunities for nationalist elites. Azerbaijan's current campaign of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh has been enabled by both this instability and regional jostling for influence by Russia, Turkey, and others.**

Following at least a month of very public military buildup — including numerous weapons transfers from Israel — Azerbaijan launched a massive offensive on September 19 against Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave located within its internationally recognized borders. The assault, and the brutal nine-month blockade of the territory that preceded it, were both gross violations of a Russian-brokered cease-fire agreed to by Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2020 that concluded forty-four days of hostilities. Those [hostilities](#), or the Second Karabakh War, reversed most of the gains that Armenia won during the First Karabakh War that took place between 1988 and 1994, culminating in the de facto independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Today the Armenian population, which has had a continual presence in the region for more than two millennia, is in the midst of fleeing to Armenia proper, seeking refuge from both the humanitarian crisis engineered by Azerbaijan over the last several months and the near certainty of collective violence that awaited them at the hands of Azeri forces. This most recent round of fighting followed a familiar script: Azerbaijan targeted civilian infrastructure, attacked soldiers with drone strikes, and left evidence of atrocities against civilians and military personnel alike, gleefully posted on social media platforms that have, much like they did in 2016 and 2020, allowed these images and videos to circulate freely. The result of this barrage has been the disbandment of Nagorno-Karabakh's political structures and the disarmament of its defense army, effectively ending Armenian political authority in Karabakh (or Artsakh, as Armenians refer to it), which has existed in some form or another since antiquity.

The conflict, however, is a wholly modern phenomenon, the result of processes unleashed by nation-building projects initiated during the Soviet period. These continue to operate at the foundations of the conflict and renew cycles of violence at every turn. Yet despite being embedded in similar processes and institutional settings, Armenia and Azerbaijan have followed divergent paths the last several decades. Underlying causes of that divergence, concomitants of regional geopolitical transformations, have not only heightened the risk of violence — they have called into question the very efficacy of the liberal international order and the rationality that binds it.

## From Modernization to Civil War

What millions experienced in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse tragically confirms the famous quip made by the American sociologist Charles Tilly that “war made the state and the state made

war.” This was particularly true in the Caucasus, where civil war served as the midwife of statehood. Ethnic conflict in the region emerged from an environment where Soviet nationalities policy — which promoted national identity formation to expedite the march of “traditional” peoples through the stages of development toward communism — converged with the peculiarities of Soviet power as constituted in the formerly tsarist periphery.

The Sovietization of Armenia and Azerbaijan that began in 1920 presented the Bolsheviks with difficult political decisions about national autonomy and borders in one of the most ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse regions of the world. Despite Nagorno-Karabakh being approximately 95 percent Armenian, the Bolsheviks’ decision to append the region to Azerbaijan instead of Armenia can be explained by a number of ideological and practical considerations. By administratively linking the heavily agricultural and semifeudal region to the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, the industrial economic powerhouse of the Transcaucasus (itself approximately 20 percent Armenian, including the upper echelons of industry and finance), the Bolsheviks hoped to spur the process of development and modernization that would proletarianize the region. In turn, cohabitation in a republic that was “national in form, socialist in content” was expected to gradually erode nationalist attachments, which had been exacerbated by the interethnic violence of 1905–7 and 1918–1920. Such ethnic fragmentation, the Bolsheviks hoped, would break up traditional familial and clan ties, leaving these territories more governable under the banner of proletarian internationalism.

Although this nationalities policy was largely displaced by Stalinist consolidation, Soviet modernization left an indelible stamp on the region. But while in the West the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was filtered through the tropes of Christian-Muslim animus and the resurgence of primordial, pre-Soviet ethnic hatreds, this interethnic violence was actually a process of national remaking on the foundation of the identities and institutions forged during the Soviet period.

As Georgi Derluguian, a sociologist of post-Soviet society, [has explained](#), by the 1980s, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were all distinguished by mobilized publics, constituted by highly nationalist intelligentsias and a “subproletariat” composed of workers in seasonal agriculture and the informal economy. Amid comparatively weak political institutions, such a setting enabled entrepreneurial elites to mobilize nationalist tropes during the relative openings of [perestroika](#) initiated by Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev in an unsuccessful effort to reform the communist system. Nationalist rhetoric was a convenient shared language for forming and articulating socioeconomic and political grievances.

As the subproletariat and intelligentsia turned against Soviet authorities, taking to the streets to right historical wrongs — in this case, the independence and self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh — the *nomenklatura* (the Soviet bureaucratic elite) were faced with a decision: either ally with the nationalists or let themselves be swept off the political stage. As the economy atrophied in the late 1980s, brittle patronage-based state structures crumbled, and a race to fill political vacuums and marshal resources ensued.

In Karabakh, as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia, civil conflict erupted before quickly giving way to civil war. Anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait (1988) and Baku (1990) bookended the mass emigration of Azerbaijan’s Armenians; of the nearly 250,000 Armenians that lived in Baku before 1988, few stayed behind. Nearly the same number of Azerbaijanis left Armenia during that time. This mutual ethnic cleansing closed the spaces for interethnic interaction that existed in cosmopolitan Baku and, to a lesser degree, in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic — a development that would unfortunately resonate for later generations.

In a desperate bid to maintain its grip on power, Moscow wavered between indecision and backing

Azerbaijan's crackdown on Karabakhi Armenians' demand for unification with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. In Armenia, the alliance between the proletariat and the intelligentsia proved more resilient than it was in neighboring regions. Yerevan would later translate this institutional advantage to the battlefield. Shortly after independence, which Armenia and Azerbaijan both declared in fall 1991, and the formal retreat of Soviet authority, Armenia launched a wildly successful counteroffensive that, by 1994, had secured not only the vast majority of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast but also seven adjacent Azerbaijani districts. Following a cease-fire brokered that year, the conflict would remain largely frozen for another twenty-two years.

### **The Rise of "Imitation Democracy"**

The course of war had terrible consequences for both societies. Each country experienced rapid economic decline and crumbling social conditions exacerbated by an influx of refugees. Pain, suffering, meditations on victimhood, and subsequent calls for revenge reinforced the tendency in both Armenia and Azerbaijan to couch political and social discontent in nationalist language. The nomenklatura, which found itself on the defensive during the heady days of rallies and marches that marked perestroika, having now effectively converted from communism to nationalism, wielded nationalist sentiment to hack away at the alliance between the intelligentsia and proletariat.

Across the region, the former nomenklatura used the cover of war to deepen its control of the economy and reinvigorate both old and new patronage networks. Coalitions that cobbled together the nomenklatura, nomenklatura-aligned oligarchs and warlords, and other men of action eventually seized power in each country. In Azerbaijan, former KGB officer and Azerbaijani SSR leader Heydar Aliyev, now backed by Turkey, outlasted the Russia-backed military officer Surat Huseynov in 1994. In Armenia, Prime Minister Robert Kocharyan — himself an old Communist Party functionary from Karabakh — ousted President Levon Ter-Petrossian in a 1998 palace coup that mobilized much of the nascent oligarchy, most of it still rooted in provincial Communist Party structures, and its supporters in the military.

As in much of the former Soviet Union, with the exception of the Baltic states, both Armenia and Azerbaijan elaborated their own versions of what the Russian political scientist Dmitrii Furman has called "imitation democracies." Massive discrepancies between a constitutional ideal and an authoritarian reality characterized these new state formations. In Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev and his son Ilham — who came to power in 2003 following his father's death in the first act of dynastic succession in the post-Soviet context — have established a durable authoritarian regime propped up by oil and gas revenues. A constitutional referendum in 2009 abolished presidential term limits, with the regime increasingly cracking down on free and fair elections, press freedoms, and civil rights.

Meanwhile in Armenia, the successive presidencies of Kocharyan (1998-2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), both from Karabakh, presented their own version of imitation democratic politics. Armenia, already dependent on Russia for its security since its 1991 independence, was drawn more closely into Moscow's orbit, even as the latter found itself dramatically weakened after the fall of the USSR. Having one of the most highly mobilized and unruly civil societies in the region prevented postindependence Armenia from taking the autocratic path.

However, here too there were troubling signs. In October 1999, a terrorist attack on parliament killed eight people, among them prime minister and war hero Vazgen Sargsyan and speaker of parliament and former first secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia Karen Demirchyan. Both men posed credible threats to Kocharyan's rule. Accusations of electoral fraud pervaded the presidential elections of 1996, 2003, and especially 2008; following the latter, the Kocharyan administration killed at least ten protesters after it called special forces from the front lines to disperse a protest movement that had paralyzed Yerevan.

Azerbaijan's and Armenia's political frameworks thus diverged, respectively, into a durable authoritarian regime and what, per [Furman](#), was a "relatively weak and mild imitation democratic regime." However, their divergence in terms of political economy was much starker. Coming out of their 1994 war, the economies of the two countries were roughly of equal size; currently, Azerbaijan's economy is [roughly ten times larger](#) than its neighbor's. While Azerbaijan's natural resource wealth has attracted Western capital, Armenia has remained economically and diplomatically subjected to Russia.

Perhaps more than in any other former republic, international security considerations — made all the more urgent by the Karabakh question — have determined the calculus of Armenian domestic politics. The presidencies of Kocharyan and Sargsyan, both deeply embedded in the security state, tethered political legitimacy to a hard line on Karabakh. Such a position necessarily deepened Armenia's dependency on Russia as its security guarantor, which came at the cost of economic independence.

According to a [recent report](#), over the past twenty years, Russia's share of Armenian foreign trade has climbed from 11 to 35 percent; Russia currently supplies approximately 89 percent of the country's natural gas and 74 percent of its petroleum; and Russian companies hold sizable shares of Armenia's transportation and extractive industry infrastructure. Despite a desire to the contrary, Sargsyan's government was obligated to join the Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015.

Any discussion of Armenia's 2018 "Velvet Revolution," precipitated by Sargsyan's attempt to circumvent term limits by transitioning the country from a presidential to a parliamentary system, must therefore be understood in this context. The disproportionately high level of education in the Armenian SSR, coupled with a high degree of intraethnic solidarity, have for decades fostered an active civil society that has been a hallmark of Armenian politics since at least the mid-twentieth century. In the post-Soviet period, it has served as a bulwark against authoritarian consolidation while also preserving the possibility for a renewal of the alliance between the working class and the intelligentsia that, after proving so critical during the independence movement, had fallen into disrepair by the middle of the 1990s. The turning point of the protest movement in 2018 in fact came at the beginning of May, when the rallies — led by intelligentsia and the urban middle class — were joined by wildcat strikes in Yerevan's working-class neighborhoods.

A few days later, the oligarch-dominated parliament acquiesced and elected Nikol Pashinyan as prime minister. The "revolution," however, changed very little. The constraints that had developed over the preceding decades remained, and, though partially dislodged, so too did the regimes of capital that dominated the country's economy. Most oligarchs agreed to begin making regular tax payments in exchange for the right to retain their holdings. The terms of nomenklatura restoration — security dependence on and economic subjugation to Russia — remained firmly entrenched features of Armenian political reality. And when the reactionaries tried to paint him as a foreign agent, much as they had Ter-Petrossian in the 1990s, Pashinyan had one arrow in his quiver: outflank them on Karabakh.

### **Imperialist Ambition, Authoritarianism, and Aspirational Hegemony**

Since 2020, intricate proxy conflicts that involve both regional and global powers have defined the political landscape in the Caucasus semiperiphery. Much as the case in other parts of the former Soviet Union, Russian hegemony in the region since the end of the Cold War has been marked by a discrepancy between its aspirations and its capacity. As a result of the weakening of Russian hegemony, the region is now embedded in layers of contradictory arrangements. While the imperialist rivalry between Russia and the West constitutes the primary bisection, other rivalries (Russia-Turkey, Iran-Israel, and even India-Pakistan) factor into the region's politics more generally,

and the Karabakh conflict in particular.

The waning of Russian hegemony has unfolded under conditions that have promoted imperialist ambition, including, strangely enough, that of Russia itself. The appearance of failed states in the broader region, due primarily to American interventions, has created opportunity for others to try their own hand at adventurism; Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran collaborate and compete with one another, directly or through local proxies, in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. This has been especially true after the Arab Spring and accounts for a number of particularly violent interventions in Crimea, the Donbas, and Afrin, to say nothing of the current invasion of Ukraine. For [Turkey](#) and [Russia in particular](#), imperial adventurism abroad has served the cause of authoritarian consolidation at home by creating new patronage networks tied to the charismatic leader, limiting if not outright abolishing the autonomy of security forces and the bureaucracy, and justifying crackdowns on dissent.

The intertwined rise of authoritarianism and imperialist adventurism has proven particularly beneficial to Azerbaijan, with its wealth of natural resources stabilizing the Aliyev regime domestically and factoring into the emerging geopolitical calculus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country's oil reserves have made it attractive to foreign investors, particularly British and American capital. Opened in 2006, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline both intentionally bypass Armenia; even more importantly for American and European geopolitical interests, they bypass both Russia and Iran. This transnational integration has enabled Azerbaijan to present itself as a reliable energy partner to Europe, particularly as the latter seeks to lessen its dependence on Russian energy (last summer the European Commission signed a deal for Azerbaijan to double its supply of natural gas to the EU over the next five years.) Yet at the same time, Azerbaijan supplements its own exports with Russian gas, thereby helping Putin circumvent sanctions.

Azerbaijan's contentious relationship with Iran, with which it shares a southern border and which is home to a sizable Azeri minority, has endeared it to Israel and large swathes of the foreign policy establishment in Washington. Baku has therefore been well positioned to negotiate its place in the Turkish imperial project in the Caucasus — a project Russia not only tolerates but encourages in its efforts to drive European and American influence from the region. This convergence of factors — the waning of Russian hegemony, the growing aggressiveness of Turkish imperialism, and its concomitant, a discernible move away from American interests — has encouraged Azerbaijan to take an increasingly violent posture against Armenia: an aborted attempt at renewing hostilities in 2016, the second war in 2020, an endless stream of provocations since, including the occupation of border areas inside Armenia and now the ethnic cleansing of Karabakh.

In other words, Azerbaijan has realized what policymakers in Washington and Brussels refuse to acknowledge: actual alliances do not necessarily cohere to those delineated by treaty organizations. Though the United States and Iran have shared interests in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, Joe Biden's administration insists on the anti-Tehran common sense that pervades policy circles. Contrary to US design, NATO ally Turkey actively helps Russia minimize the damage caused by sanctions. And the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, despite its clear obligation to intervene in the conflict, has completely abandoned treaty member Armenia. Across the Middle East and Caucasus, the liberal international order that emerged during the Cold War and has been maintained by American global hegemony is fraying.

### **Nation-Making and State-Breaking in a World-Systemic Crisis**

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Aliyev's recent meeting in the exclave of Nakhchivan — separated from Azerbaijan by Armenia's southernmost province of Syunik — now threatens to

escalate this regional conflict even further. Armenia now faces the possibility of a jointly coordinated Azerbaijani-Turkish-Russian operation under the auspices of securing Aliyev's long-demanded Zangezur corridor to Nakhchivan. Such a corridor would effectively cut off Armenia from its small border with Iran — a prospect that the Iranian government considers a nonstarter.

Domestically, the Pashinyan government, having surprisingly weathered the catastrophic defeat of the last war, is under increasing strain as it tries to resolve its security dilemma by making overtures to the Western powers and seeks the normalization of relations with Turkey and an end to the country's regional isolation. Sensing the issue of the Zangezur corridor as the next step in the conflict, American diplomatic channels have begun to reiterate their support for Armenian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. At the same time, revanchist voices are calling for new leadership that could mend Armenia's now strained ties with Russia and halt the accelerating erosion of Armenian statehood since 2020, threatening a democratic backsliding after the so-called revolution of five years ago.

For now, the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians is the result of the specific form of Azerbaijani nation-making that has developed in an authoritarian context. Like other post-Soviet personalistic authoritarian governments, the neo-patrimonial Aliyev regime lacks an organic ideology that justifies its nation-building project and rule. It has therefore spent the last thirty years deflecting discontent onto an imagined Other by cultivating [anti-Armenian hatred](#). The Khojaly massacre of 1992, for example, an instance of interethnic victimization amid the unmaking of Soviet society, is characterized as a genocide in official Azerbaijani discourse. That same discourse, meanwhile, presents Armenians not as natives to the region for over two millennia but as newly arrived colonists who have displaced ancient Azerbaijani communities. Armenian expulsion from Karabakh is therefore wholly justified. The dehumanization of Armenians has led to a litany of war crimes, including the execution of civilians and POWs and the desecration of cultural sites in areas that have come under Azerbaijani control.

For years, Azerbaijan justified its refusal to recognize Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination by insisting that its own territorial integrity took precedence. The liberal order largely agreed. Since Azerbaijan's victory in 2020, however, irredentist claims on Armenia have become a matter of state policy. In a country where civil society has largely been either incorporated or repressed, the only permissible expression of dissent has been to accuse Aliyev of being soft on Armenia. Azerbaijani society has now been primed for the "resolution" of the Karabakh question by the victory of 2020 and by the persecution and silencing of dissenting [anti-regime activists](#). It remains to be seen whether the Aliyev regime can afford to walk back the aggressive initiative in creating "facts on the ground" that it has adopted since 2016. The alternative is that its propaganda of reclaiming "[Western Azerbaijan](#)," that is, the Republic of Armenia itself, and the pan-Turanist ideology it has deployed to forge ties with Erdoğan's Turkey, suggest that it is enmeshed in a cycle of radicalization that it cannot afford to dial down.

The last decade of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been a microcosm of the broader world-systemic shifts set in motion by American and Russian maneuvering on the regional and global stage. A weakened Russia nevertheless continues in its efforts to maintain its regional influence by more openly pivoting to Azerbaijan and Turkey. Meanwhile, the Western powers, distracted by the invasion of Ukraine and invested in maintaining the Turkey-Israel-Saudi Arabia axis, have done little thus far to help prevent the outbreak of another war and stem the ethnic cleansing that has been set in motion. After thirty years of both frozen and hot conflict, regional peace seems farther away than ever.

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