



| Flash |

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

F-2023-09-21a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: High

Intelligence Requirements: Geopolitical, Military, Government

September 21, 2023

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 10:00 AM (EDT) on September 20, 2023**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

| Flash | Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**| Executive Summary**

On Tuesday, September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military operation against the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) to take “local anti-terrorist measures.”¹ The move followed weeks of increased tensions, military buildup, ceasefire violations, and mutual accusations of disinformation observed by the ZeroFox Geopolitical Working Group. The NKR reported artillery fire from Azerbaijani troops, followed by attacks along the entire line of contact. Azerbaijan called for the complete withdrawal of ethnic Armenian troops and the dissolution of the NKR government.² Armenia claimed not to have any armed forces stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh since the second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Moreover, the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, stated that Armenia would not intervene to defend NKR.³ The announcement caused protests throughout the capital of Yerevan, calling for Pashinyan’s resignation and leading to clashes with security forces.⁴

Fighting continued overnight and into the morning of Wednesday, September 20, 2023. Reports claimed Azerbaijani troops were advancing in multiple directions with significant

¹ [hXXps://www.facebook\[.\]com/wwwmodgovaz/posts/700302722125109](https://www.facebook.com/wwwmodgovaz/posts/700302722125109)

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[hXXps://report\[.\]az/daxili-siyaset/azerbaycan-respublikasi-prezidentinin-administrasiyasinin-aciqlamasi/](https://report[.]az/daxili-siyaset/azerbaycan-respublikasi-prezidentinin-administrasiyasinin-aciqlamasi/)

³

[hXXps://oc-media\[.\]org/azerbaijan-demands-complete-surrender-of-nagorno-karabakh-as-it-launches-massive-offensive/](https://oc-media[.]org/azerbaijan-demands-complete-surrender-of-nagorno-karabakh-as-it-launches-massive-offensive/)

⁴ [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/Caucasuswar/status/1704178573286817908](https://twitter[.]com/Caucasuswar/status/1704178573286817908)

gains.⁵ At approximately 1:00 PM CDT, the NKR government announced that it had accepted a ceasefire proposal by the Russian peacekeeping contingent. According to the authorities of NKR, the agreement included:

- The withdrawal of any armed forces of the Republic of Armenia;
- The disbandment and disarmament of the armed forces of Nagorno-Karabakh; and
- Discussions on September 21, 2023, in Yevlakh and during subsequent meetings of issues related to the integration of the region into Azerbaijan and the rights and security of its Armenian population within the framework of the constitution of Azerbaijan.⁶

| Historical Context

The territorial ownership of Nagorno-Karabakh has been heavily contested between Armenians and Azerbaijanis since the end of World War I. Upon the dissolution of the Russian Empire, separate Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian national republics declared their independence.⁷ With the establishment of the Soviet Union (USSR), the Caucasian republics were formed into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. The Soviet Caucasus Bureau assigned Nagorno-Karabakh to the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) initially but later, in 1923, created the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast with a 94 percent Armenian population.⁸

Throughout the years, the weakening of the USSR caused the Nagorno-Karabakh ownership question to reemerge. Its dissolution in 1991 left a power vacuum that led to the first Nagorno-Karabakh War. After signing a ceasefire in 1994, the Nagorno-Karabakh region, including the Lachin Corridor, was established as the Republic of Artsakh or

⁵ [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/Caucasuswar/status/1704174907544813768](https://twitter.com/Caucasuswar/status/1704174907544813768)

⁶

[hXXps://oc-media\[.\]org/live-updates-azerbaijani-assault-on-nagorno-karabakh-enters-second-day/](https://oc-media[.]org/live-updates-azerbaijani-assault-on-nagorno-karabakh-enters-second-day/)

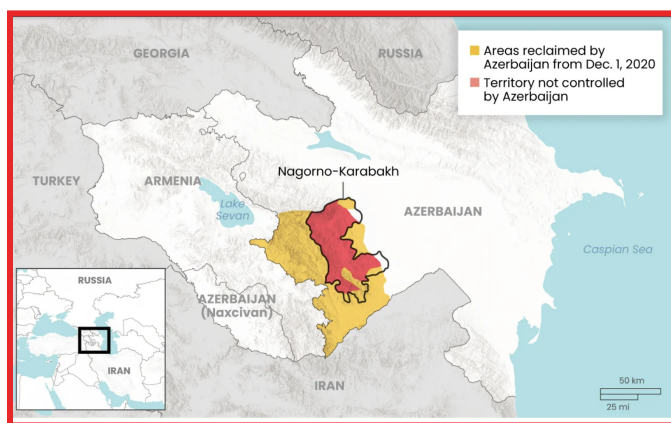
⁷ Reynolds, Michael (2011). *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918*.

⁸ Yamskov, A.N. (October 1991). "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh". *Theory and Society*.

Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) under de facto Armenian control.⁹ The NKR is not internationally recognized by any countries except Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

For three decades, multiple ceasefire violations occurred, with the most serious being the four-day 2016 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Increasing military mobilization and tensions caused by controversial political decisions led to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. The conflict ended with another ceasefire and relevant agreements that Armenia had to return Armenian-occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan.¹⁰

Since 2021, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in a border conflict, with the most significant clashes occurring in September 2022. Politically, the most relevant incident is the Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin Corridor, a humanitarian corridor that connects the NKR to Armenia. Azerbaijani alleged eco-activists blocked the border, allowing Azerbaijan to de facto control access to the ethnic-Armenian NKR from Armenia and the rest of the world.¹¹



Azerbaijan-Armenia Boundaries after 2020 War

Source:

<https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/regional-competition/irans-weak-position-in-the-south-caucasus/>

⁹ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/face-the-coming-war-between-armenia-azerbaijan-12585>

¹⁰

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/10/russian-peacekeepers-head-to-nagorno-karabakh-after-peace-deal-a71997>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-63975080>

Internationally, Azerbaijan is mainly backed by its biggest ally, Turkey. Azerbaijan is also receiving weapons from Israel. Russia has historically been Armenia's greatest ally, but the weakening of its power projection following the invasion of Ukraine has left Armenia more vulnerable. This caused Armenia to look to the West for support, which also angered Russia. The European Union (EU), the United States, and France have been trying to fill the vacuum left by Russia and siding mainly with Armenia. However, the EU has been attempting to play both sides, as it is interested in Azerbaijani gas. Iran supports Armenia due to the geopolitical tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan, mainly over the latter's relationship with Israel and other geopolitical and historical differences.

| Forward Look

In the near term, it is highly likely that Azerbaijan will once again increase its territorial control within the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It is also likely that the Republic of Artsakh could be dissolved in the near to short term. Regardless, it is highly likely that Azerbaijan will continue using hybrid warfare techniques, such as the ones used in the Lachin Corridor, in order to obtain strategic objectives with plausible deniability. In the medium to long term, it is unlikely that the underlying ethnic tensions will be resolved, causing interethnic tensions in newly incorporated Azerbaijani territories with Armenian ethnic majorities.

After another military setback, Armenia could continue maneuvering towards the West, presenting economic and political inroads for the U.S. in a country traditionally aligned with Russia. For Russia, this would be a blow because Armenia is one of its last remaining allies, and it could inspire other countries in the region to seek support from the U.S.

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%