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[Home](#) > Dispatch from Armenia: The Not So Frozen War

Dispatch from Armenia: The Not So Frozen War

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I was in Armenia to report on a program as innocuous as they come—the prevention of blindness in premature babies. But during a meeting in the city of Yerevan with one of the humanitarian organizations involved in this project, the conversation turned to war. The leader of the organization introduced several members of the group as “war heroes,” then offered a half-hearted apology for bringing politics into the conversation about infant disabilities. Another member corrected her. There was nothing to apologize for, he said. It wasn’t politics. It was the reality of life in Armenia. Anyone who fought in the war was a hero.

There was no need to mention the name of the war. In Armenia there is only one war that matters—the Nagorno-Karabakh war against neighboring Azerbaijan that began in 1988 and ended in a truce in 1994. One must look hard to find coverage of the conflict in international publications. Thomas de Waal, a senior associate specializing in the region at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and author of *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, told me, “It’s one of those issues which I think the diplomats pay more attention to than the media does.” But in Armenia the war is still being fought.

The modern roots of the conflict can be traced, as so often in the former Soviet Union, to the USSR policy of “gifting” territories within one country to another population. In this case, Soviet rulers established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, populated mainly by Armenians, inside Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1920s. A similar but reverse arrangement was made in what is

now the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, a sliver of land tied to Azerbaijan but separated from it by Armenia. When the Soviet Union began to crumble in the late 1980s, the territories it had “gifted” all over the union began to break apart, causing a number of little wars in a number of little countries. The international community paid them little heed, with the exception of those in which Russia was actively involved, like the 2008 South Ossetia conflict in the Republic of Georgia.

When the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which cost around thirty thousand lives and displaced close to a million people, concluded in the truce of 1994, Armenians remained in control of the mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh region, which considers itself autonomous. They also control the surrounding region within Azerbaijan that links Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other side of the country, they have occupied a city within their borders that once belonged to the neighboring Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

The details may convey a confusing, Borat-like complexity to American readers, but each year more than two dozen people are killed by snipers on either side of the border in a conflict that remains “frozen,” with no permanent peace agreement in sight. And, despite Armenia’s somewhat romantic connotations, this might be regarded as a rather small problem in a faraway land except that this tiny landlocked country in the South Caucasus borders Iran, which has been called Armenia’s “lifeline,” the easiest way for its goods to reach international markets. And as long as the conflict with Azerbaijan continues to simmer, relations between Armenia and one of America’s “greatest enemies” will continue to flourish. Could this relationship impact US relations with Iran? Some think Armenia is too small to play a role in the bigger international picture. But history is filled with the mishaps that result from underestimating little countries.

On Armenia’s eastern border with Azerbaijan, an area now occupied by Armenians as a buffer zone to Nagorno-Karabakh, some houses have yet to be rebuilt from the shelling of the war. In a cave where his wife now cooks the Armenian flatbread known as lavash, an old man told me about how bombs and rockets from Azerbaijan fell down on their house like hail in the early 1990s. During the worst of the fighting, he moved his family into the cave. They stayed there for weeks at a time, only venturing out to go to the bathroom or for supplies. Outside of the cave, the man pointed to the spot on the rocks across from his home where his grandmother and two of her children were killed by “Turks” (as they call Azerbaijanis) long before he was born. Armenians’ relationship with Turkey is also strained. Turkey refuses to acknowledge the genocide of around two million Armenians under Ottoman rule in the early twentieth century. In 1993, Turkey closed its border with Armenia, making resolution of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh a prerequisite for normalization of relations. Diplomatic relations have been strained ever since.

In a nearby village, I was told about the area’s sole tank driver who was now permanently disabled from his years of service during the war. At another stop, I learned about two teenage boys kidnapped during the conflict who remained missing. In every little mountain hamlet along what used to be the eastern border with Azerbaijan, the war was vividly present in memory and reminiscence. I saw it in the pictures of the war’s young martyrs displayed prominently in living rooms. I heard it in the stories of the now middle-aged men who had fought in their youth. I learned about it in the tales of those who had been crippled by land mines years after the war

had officially ended.

The fighting was even closer alongside Armenia's western border with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. A stretch of the main road running alongside that border is marked by sandbags meant to deter snipers. You can see it from the little village of Tigranashen, which before the conflict, was occupied by Azerbaijani soldiers. During the war they stationed themselves in the village school, with the result that whole sections of the school's roof were blasted away. After the war, Armenians moved in. The town is within Armenia's borders, but as a "liberated territory" that formerly belonged to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, it has no legal status. I am told that recognizing the territory as an official Armenian village could be enough to renew fighting.

Thus, officially, Tigranashen does not exist. No mail is delivered here. The Armenian government does not fix broken streetlights, pay for road repairs, or arrange garbage removal. Leadership is unofficial, with schoolmaster Geghan Andreasyan performing some of the functions of a mayor. He told me that about thirty percent of the one hundred and seventy people who live in Tigranashen are Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan. Many of the stone homes still bear the signs of war. People don't fix them, says the schoolmaster, because they know at any moment they could be taken from them.

In the school, the children perform a song for visitors about "the many territories we lost to Azerbaijan and Turkey." Mount Ararat always tops the list. No Armenian city is complete without a Mount Ararat hotel or restaurant, and no Armenian home is considered fully furnished without a picture or painting of the famed peak. Yet Mount Ararat was lost to the Armenians nearly a hundred years ago during the genocide, and it now lies in Turkey, visible from Tigranashen on a clear night. Each time it came into view during my month-long trip, it was pointed out to me. The last person to show it to me told me that one day it would be part of Armenia again, although he knew that would require more war.

During the worst years of the fight against Azerbaijan, the southern border with Iran was Armenia's savior. According to a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies report titled "US and Iranian Strategic Competition: Turkey and the South Caucasus," the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict strengthened ties between the two countries. At one point, with its two borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey closed, and unrest in Georgia limiting trade from Russia over its third, the border with Iran became Armenia's sole route for petroleum and consumer goods. The relationship was further strengthened by Iran's own disputes with Azerbaijan. It is a surprising alliance between an Islamic (Iran) and Christian (Armenia) country against another Islamic (Azerbaijan) country in an area of the world where lines are frequently drawn on the basis of religion. Armenia, summarizes the CSIS report, "has the deepest ties to Iran of any [of] the South Caucasus states, and Armenia has reportedly occasionally facilitated Iran's entry into global markets."

The global markets that seem to interest the US most, according to the authors of this report, are the monetary ones. There is concern that Iran has been able to access international banking markets and obtain hard currency through Armenia. There are other worries as well. The report cites the 2008 discovery that Armenia had transshipped weapons from Bulgaria to Iran that were later used against US soldiers in Iraq. That same year, a natural gas pipeline linking Iran and Armenia was completed; there are talks of an oil pipeline and possibly rail lines to follow. Last

year, Iran and Armenia announced a joint hydroelectric power station. Trade is booming and so is cultural exchange. In the south of Armenia, trucks with Iranian license plates populate the road. It is Iranian money that paid for the renovation of the Blue Mosque in the Armenian capital. Those who want to learn Persian outside of Iran come to Armenia to study.

But America also has interests here. The US Embassy in Yerevan is one of the world's largest, and members of the Armenian diaspora in America funnel large amounts of money into their native land. (There are an estimated one million Armenians living in America, one third as many as in Armenia itself.) Armenia has been balancing diplomatic relations between the US, Russia, and Iran for years. But what it sees as the West's lack of interest in helping it reestablish relations with Turkey, almost as much as the benefits of an open border with Iran, is pushing it closer to Tehran every year. Stephen Riegg, scholar at the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center and a student of Armenian affairs, recently wrote that "Yerevan views its solidifying ties with Iran as a rebuke of Turkish intransigence." Harout Harry Semerdjian, writing for the *Hill's* "Congress Blog," went a step further. After chronicling the recent construction of the hydroelectric plant on the border between Armenia and Iran and plans for a railway and oil pipeline as signs of the strengthening ties, Semerdjian notes: "In order to keep Iranian-Armenian relations in check and to assist Armenia in expanding its options in the region, the Obama administration must put pressure on Turkey to open its border with Armenia immediately and without preconditions."

The West's focus on Georgia following the 2008 conflict with Russia is also a contentious issue for many Armenians. Many I spoke with who consider themselves humanitarians complained openly about how America pours money into charitable programs in Georgia while ignoring similar ones in equal need of funding across the border in Armenia. Although Georgia is one of only two of its border countries with which Armenia is on speaking terms, there does not seem to be any great love lost between the two peoples. What Armenia views as the West's favoritism of Georgia doesn't help matters, further pitting the two against each other like siblings competing for a parent's attention.

Stephen Riegg agrees that the US focus on relations between Moscow and Tbilisi has shunted the feud between Armenia and Azerbaijan into the background, although it may potentially be equally serious, having the ability "to plunge the region once again into violence." The strictures of the Center for Strategic and International Studies report are even more blunt: "As reducing Iran's role becomes more important to the US, there should be a corresponding US effort to resolve the Turkish Armenian and Armenian Azerbaijani disputes."

Last year, Hungary had a cameo in the conflict when it allowed an Azerbaijani soldier who murdered an Armenian in Budapest (both were taking part in English-language classes organized by NATO) to return to Azerbaijan to complete his sentence. When Azerbaijan subsequently set the soldier free, something Hungary claims violated the arrangement, Armenia suspended diplomatic relations with Hungary.

That's all it takes to draw another country into this seemingly intractable conflict. And yet on the more than hundred-mile-long cease-fire line that separates Armenian-held territory in Azerbaijan from Azeri, there is almost no international presence, as the Carnegie Endowment's Thomas de

Waal notes. There are no peacekeepers among the twenty thousand troops stationed in trenches on either side, just six international monitors who visit twice a month. De Waal doesn't consider the conflict between the two countries "frozen" at all, but instead having the same potential to heat up as those in Kashmir and between North and South Korea.

And the conflict shows no signs of diminishing. Since the 1994 truce, Azerbaijan's GDP has risen more than twenty times from oil and gas revenues. It is much wealthier than Armenia and is spending vast sums on weapons. "So there is a kind of unhealthy trend here where the losing side in war is rearming, peace process is stuck," says de Waal. "And while we shouldn't overdramatize it, there's a history, or longer-term trend, where war becomes more likely."

In the Yerevan home of Lilit Matinyan and her husband, Mkolich, the war is a silent presence. Mkolich was seriously wounded in the war and has undergone a number of operations, several of them requiring international travel, to repair internal injuries. Medical expenses forced the family to sell their house and rent a smaller apartment in the city's outskirts. Lilit works as a history professor, maintains the household, and looks after their two teenage children. At thirty-three, she is still youthful with long blond hair and gentle features, but weighted down with worry. Still, she sees her life as one to be envied.

"You know, here in the Caucasus, to be the wife of a marshal"—which she calls her husband instead of by name—"a lot of women would dream of this," she said. She bragged about the millions of dollars her husband's head was worth in Turkey. Mkolich had another occupation besides war hero, but I never learned it. Hero was all he needed to be. In the couple's living room was a picture of him as a young man with a bushy black beard, dressed in camouflage and boots with a rifle across his lap, as frozen in time as this conflict between two distant lands seems to be.

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