

One nation, Two States: Turkey's Stance on the Recent Escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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Introduction

In July 2020, the South Caucasus hosted one of the largest military drills in its history. The Turkish Armed Forces along with the Azerbaijani Army conducted joint military exercises using land and air forces of both countries. The joint exercises started after the clashes in Armenian-Azerbaijani border in July 2020 for which Turkey stated its full support for Azerbaijan. The drills have been analysed as the peak of Turkish-Azerbaijani military cooperation and as a reflection of Ankara's support of Baku against Armenian separatism and aggression.

This info pack explains Turkey's military support to Azerbaijan in light of recent tensions in the region. Ankara has consistently held a pro-Azerbaijani position and expressed its hope for a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the recent military drills showed that Turkey is also ready to back Azerbaijan in any military operation conducted within the confines of self-defence and international law. This info pack examines Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan as well as Ankara's stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Furthermore, it will discuss the recent Armenian military aggression toward the Tovuz region in order to contextualise the joint military drills conducted by the Turkish and Azerbaijani armies.



Military helicopters of Turkey and Azerbaijan carry flags of both countries behind F-16 Fighter jets during an event marking the 102nd anniversary of the liberation of Baku, the country's capital, under the leadership of the Caucasian Islamic Army in Ganja, Azerbaijan on September 15, 2020. (Azerbaijani Defence Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

Background: Turkey-Azerbaijan Relations

The relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan is a unique example in global politics and continues to develop based on the common motto: "One nation, two states". Both countries share common social values, language and religion, besides history. In the last century, the Turkish Army played a significant role in the foundation of the first Turkic and Muslim republic in the East, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918) and directly participated in the liberation of Baku from the joint British-Armenian forces. The 'brother's help' has lived in the memories of the Azerbaijani people for a long time despite communist rule and assimilation attempts by Moscow. It is also important to mention that Azerbaijan contributed to the Turkish War of Independence, sending men and financial support during the 1920s. In 2001, the Turkish Air Force's special team, 'the Stars', [flew over Baku](#) to honour the recent graduates of the military academy and to make a show of support to Azerbaijan in their then conflict with Iran over Caspian Sea bor-

der delimitation. In 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev celebrated 100 years of military cooperation where both country's forces staged a military parade in Baku, demonstrating that the history of military cooperation between the two countries is still remembered today and contributes to future common endeavours.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey became the first country to recognise the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence. Turkey also started to play the role of a bridge between newly independent Turkic countries and Western institutions. During the 1990s, Azerbaijan became the member of the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) as well as founding new international organisations with Turkey such as the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TUKSOY) and other investment-based business initia-



President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (7th R), Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (4th L), Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay (3rd R), Turkish Parliament Speaker Mustafa Sentop (3rd L), Energy and Natural Sources Minister of Turkey Fatih Donmez (2nd R) and AK Party's Izmir Deputy, Binali Yıldırım (4th R) attend the opening ceremony of the TANAP-Europe connection in Ipsala district of Edirne, Turkey on November 30, 2019. (Gökhan Balcı - Anadolu Agency)

¹ A joint Ottoman and Azerbaijani military forces fought together in 1918 which led to the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Azerbaijani political elite requested aid from Istanbul as they saw Ottoman Turks as ethnic brothers and allies. For more information: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/azerbaijan-marks-102nd-anniversary-of-baku-s-liberation/1974033>

tives. In the last decade, both countries have worked on common projects through the Turkic Council, which was specifically founded by Turkic speaking states to develop the region's potential and influence. Furthermore, Turkey has significantly increased its investments in education, health services, the banking system and the construction sector in Azerbaijan since 2000.

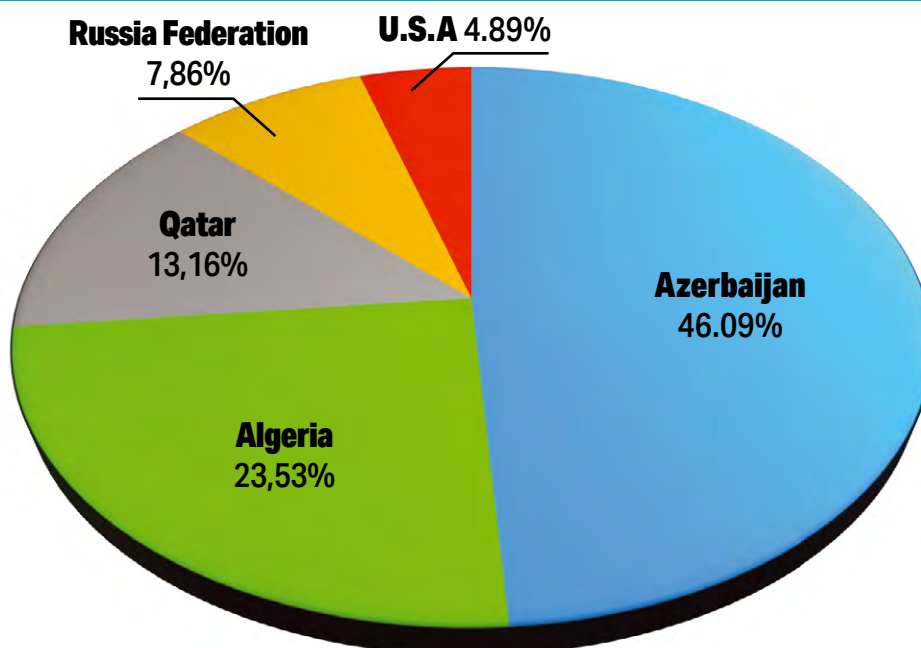
The most significant cooperation between the two countries during the 1990s was focused on energy and student exchanges. Both fields of cooperation were crucial to building post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The exchange of military staff, in particular, helped young Azerbaijani cadets to access advanced military studies in Turkey where also Turkish officers helped to build and modernise the Azerbaijani Army. Additionally, thousands of Azerbaijani students studied in Turkey since independence and are currently contributing to the development of Azerbaijan.

Secondly, Azerbaijan signed an energy deal with foreign investors in 1994 to exploit the oil resources in the Caspian Sea. This was the first project in post-Soviet Azerbaijan that brought billions of dollars in investments to the country

and helped Baku to increase its international influence. As one of the major investors, Turkey played a significant role in the deal and opened itself as a transit country for Azerbaijani oil and natural gas. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline became one of the main transit projects of the region which still contributes to continuing cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia. The Turkish port of Ceyhan also increased its capacity and became one of the main global hubs for oil distribution. Besides BTC, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) has increased its operational capacity in Turkey over the last two decades. The STAR refinery made Azerbaijan the greatest single investor in modern Turkish history with an initial value of \$6.3 billion.

Azerbaijani natural gas resources are also transported to Europe via Turkey. Turkey became the transit country for the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP), making Azerbaijan one of the biggest shareholders in the Turkish domestic energy market. In March 2020, Azerbaijan became the biggest natural gas exporter to Turkey, surpassing Russia and Iran for the first time in history.

Foreign shares of natural gas exports to Turkey - June 2020



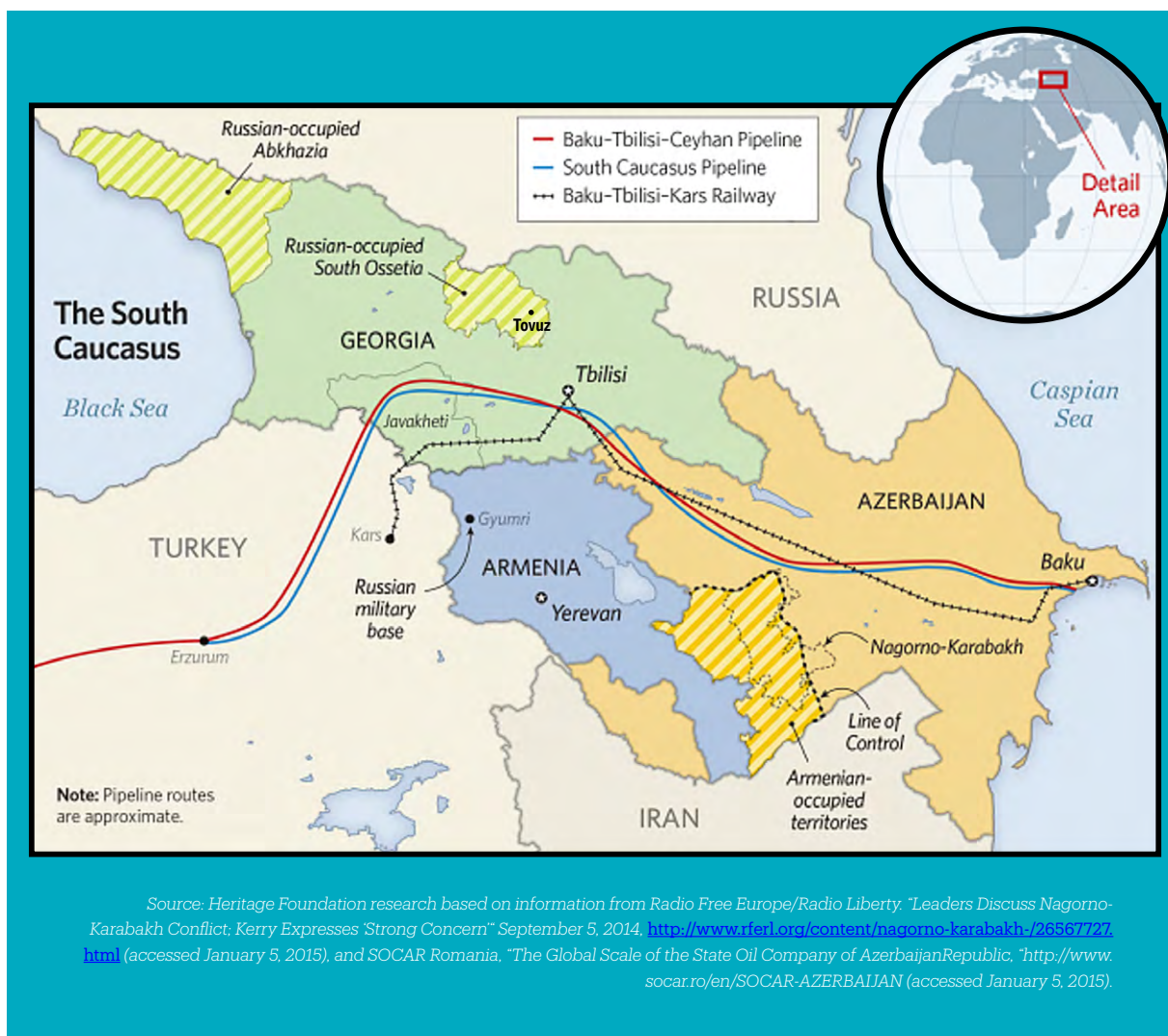
(Source: EPDK)

Turkey's stance towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts, internationally recognised as sovereign territories of Azerbaijan, have been occupied by Armenian separatists since 1991. While tens of thousands of lives have been lost in the conflict, Azerbaijan still hosts almost a million internally displaced people who fled the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire that was agreed upon in 1994 is regularly violated by Armenian forces. Therefore, despite international mediation attempts, a comprehensive peace has still not been achieved.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey has sided with Azerbaijan and has advocated on behalf of Baku in

the international arena. Ankara cut all the diplomatic ties and closed its border with Armenia in 1993 to protest the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and put the country under de-facto blockade. Since Armenia is effectively blocked from participating in regional projects such as TANAP or BTC because of the continuing conflict with Azerbaijan and Turkey's support to Baku, the economic weight of the occupation is heavily felt in Yerevan. Thus, Turkey continues to put withdrawal from the occupied zone as a precondition for normalisation between Armenia and Turkey.



The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is not limited to Armenia and Azerbaijan. Besides Turkey, Russia and Iran also have an interest in the matter. The conflict thus represents another centre of competition between regional powers. The escalation of tensions in the region creates the possibility of a new zone of confrontation for Russia and Turkey. On the other hand, British and American economic interests in Azerbaijan, mainly concentrated on oil, forces the Western powers to support stability and the status quo in the region. The OSCE's Minsk Group, an international mechanism to encourage parties towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict, consists of three co-chairs: the US, France and Russia. Besides having good relations with Armenia, all three co-chairs have strong Armenian lobbies that play significant roles in their respective domestic affairs. Russia is an official military ally of Armenia based on the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The remaining two countries are not directly supporting Ar-

menia while officially recognising Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan. However, both the US and France are using the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the so-called 'Armenian Genocide' as a means of exercising political leverage against Azerbaijan and Turkey. For example, the resolution on the so-called 'Armenian Genocide' passed in the US Congress in late 2019 was, according to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, directly related to Turkish military operations in northern Syria. In this environment, Turkey supports Azerbaijan politically and militarily, which helps to sustain the great power balance in the conflict. In a region where the Western powers are either neutral or oriented by economic interests, Turkey plays a significant role in representing the claims of Azerbaijan in the international arena. Russian interest in the conflict and support for Yerevan is another vital point that has pushed Azerbaijan to request Turkish assistance.

Recent clashes in Tovuz

Despite the 1994 ceasefire agreement, the region has witnessed thousands of breaches, mainly in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2016, the region witnessed the most significant clashes since the 1990s, known as the Four Day War or the April War. Russian mediation prevented the conflict from escalating into a full-scale war. Although the Azerbaijani Army retook some of the occupied strategic heights, such as Lalatapa. Both sides suffered serious losses² and once again, peace talks resumed.

On 12 July 2020, the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan witnessed a rapid escalation in military tension for the first since 2016. Armenian shelling of the border town of Tovuz diminished hopes for long-lasting peace in the region and calls for military action from both sides increased. The Azerbaijani Army responded to the Armenian provocation by deploying battle tanks to the border and targeting Armenian positions with heavy artillery. Both sides suffered significant losses during the clashes, which lasted for several days. Azerbaijan declared the loss of high-ranking officers, including an Azerbaijani major general Polad Hashimov, soldiers and civilians, while Armenia did not release the exact number of dead.

Experts [claimed](#) that the Armenian attack on Tovuz was planned to force Azerbaijan into a military response that could trigger CSTO's collective defence clause and threaten the energy corridor between Turkey and Azerbaijan,

which passes through the region. Tovuz is a key asset in the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey route, which hosts not only BTC and TANAP but also the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. The path is a vital trade route coming from Central Asia and China. It also opens the region to the world while keeping the Azerbaijani economy on its feet. Experts also claim that the isolation of Armenia from regional economic developments could have triggered its aggressive action against a region considered as the economic life-blood of Azerbaijan.



An interior view of a damaged house after attacks carried out by Armenian forces left a civilian dead in Dondar Kuscu village in the Tovuz region, Azerbaijan on July 15, 2020. (Resul Rehimov - Anadolu Agency)

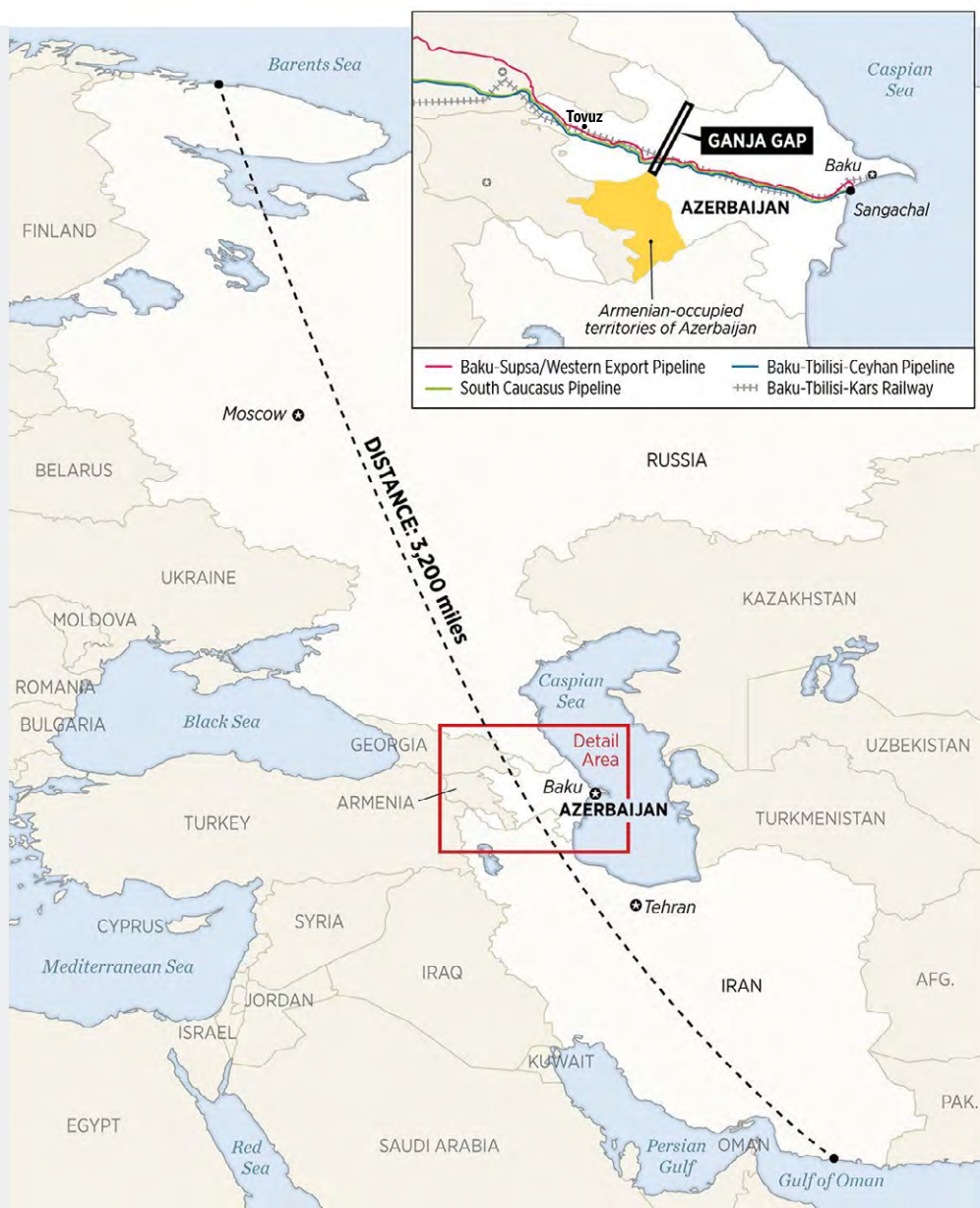
² 12 servicemen and 1 civilian killed along 4 wounded soldiers on Azerbaijani side where Armenia lost 5 soldiers and its 35 servicemen injured.

The Ganja Gap

To bypass Russia or Iran for overland trade between Asia and Europe there is only one option: Azerbaijan's territory means that there is only a narrow 60-mile chokepoint for trade. This is the Ganja Gap.

Note

Pipeline locations are approximate



Source: Heritage Foundation Research

The clashes resulted in important social and political changes in both countries. For the first time in a long time, thousands of Azerbaijani citizens gathered in central Baku demanding the government take by the occupied territories by force. Azerbaijanis also created an effective campaign for civilian mobilisation and volunteering for the Army. The social unrest after the clashes and the widespread criticism of the conciliatory statements made by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs led to the dismissal of Elmar Mammadyarov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the last 16 years. In Armenia, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan found himself in a difficult position since the Army's unsuccessful attempt to provoke Azerbaijan triggered an increase in domestic political pressure.

The Armenian explanation for the situation was built on the premise of an initial Azerbaijani attack on the Armenian side of the border. According to this narrative, Yerevan merely responded accordingly. As mentioned before, the Armenian argument was mainly based on the possibility of triggering of military assistance from CSTO as the treaty promises the collective response if there is an act of aggression against an allied state. However, the PM Pashinyan was ultimately unsuccessful in attempting to gain the support he was seeking at the CSTO Summit and three member countries, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan refused even to favour Armenia over Azerbaijan regarding the clashes in Tovuz.

Tensions escalate on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border

Tensions continue to escalate on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border as Armenian troops attacked Azerbaijan's northwestern Tovuz border region with artillery fire.

July 12

The Armenian army attempted to attack Azerbaijani positions with artillery fire in the direction of Tovuz border district, and withdrew after suffering losses following retaliation from the Azerbaijani military.

3 Azerbaijani soldiers were martyred, and 4 others injured in a border clash

Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry said the entire responsibility of such provocative actions belonged to Armenia

July 13

"Turkey, with all its facilities, will continue to stand with Azerbaijan in its fight to protect its territorial integrity," Turkey's Foreign Ministry said

An Azerbaijani army officer was martyred in a border clash with Armenian troops.

Armenian side is hiding its losses, said Azerbaijan defense ministry

Despite international calls for restraint, Armenian troops opened fire on civilian settlements on the villages of Agdam and Dondar Kusu in Tovuz. Azerbaijani forces launched counterattacks with cannon shots targeting numerous positions of the Armenian army

"Whatever solution Baku prefers for the occupied lands and Karabakh, we will stand by Azerbaijan," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said

Moscow said further escalation is "unacceptable" as it threatens regional security, and expressed readiness to provide any assistance in easing the tensions

"Armenian troops could not cross even a single centimeter into Azerbaijani territory," Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said.

July 14

The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs urged both sides to immediately resume talks and return OSCE monitors to the region.

7 Azerbaijani soldiers, including a major general and a colonel, have been martyred in border clashes. Thus, number of martyrs increased to 11.

Nearly 100 Armenian soldiers have been killed over two days of clashes, according to Azerbaijani military officials.

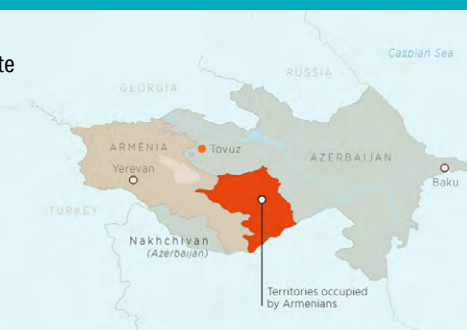
A 76-year-old Azerbaijani citizen lost his life when Armenian troops opened fire into the border village of Agdam in Tovuz district.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

condemned the attack, noting that "this attack goes beyond the diameter of Armenia." Turkey will not hesitate to stand against any kind of attacks against Azerbaijan, Erdogan said.

July 15

Thousands of Azerbaijanis marched in the streets of Baku to protest against the occupation of Upper Karabakh by Armenia and attacks by its forces since Sunday



The two former Soviet republics have long been locked in a conflict over Upper Karabakh

Upper Karabakh, or Nagorno-Karabakh, an internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan, has been illegally occupied since 1991 through Armenian military aggression

4 UN Security Council and 2 UN General Assembly resolutions, as well as decisions by many international organizations, refer to this fact and demand the withdrawal of the occupational Armenian forces from Upper Karabakh and 7 other occupied regions of Azerbaijan

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group -- co-chaired by France, Russia and the US -- was formed to find a peaceful solution to the conflict, but has yet to get any results

The governments of Serbia and Russia were indirectly implicated in the conflict primarily by way of alleged arms deliveries to Armenia. Firstly, Azerbaijan has accused Serbia of exporting weapons to Armenia. The Serbian government denied the accusations and claimed that the state cannot be responsible for private companies' business. However, later Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Rasim Ljajic [confirmed two contracts](#) for arms sale which arrived at Armenia in May and June, just before the clashes. In response to the Serbian sale, Azerbaijan summoned Serbian head of diplomatic mission to Baku and later dismissed Azerbaijani Ambassador to Belgrade.

Secondly, once again Russia was criticised by Baku for its involvement in the clashes in favour of Armenia. [Azerbaijani media claimed](#) that Russia delivered 280 tons of military equipment, including electronic warfare units, to Armenia before and during the clashes. An Il-76 military heavy cargo transport aircraft, carrying weapons from Rostov to Armenia, despite being refused to use Georgian airspace, took a long route through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran to arrive at its final destination. President Aliyev [phoned](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin and discussed the motives behind the military cargo deliveries made between July 17 and August 4. As Russia and Armenia share membership in CSTO, Moscow often supplies Yerevan with armaments for a cheaper than market price. However, the deliveries made during the dates mentioned raises questions about Russian neutrality vis-a-vis the clashes. President Aliyev also expressed his concerns regarding the possible intervention of third parties in the conflict.

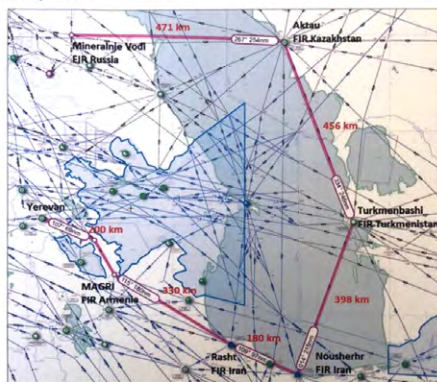
Source: Anadolu Agency

Flight track of Il-76 Russian military cargo aircraft

Flight information of RA78816
Il-76 (Russian Aerospace Forces)
'Mineralnye Vody - Yerevan -
Mineralnye Vody' carrying military
cargo through the airspace of Russia,
Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran and
Armenia, July-August 2020

Справка по полету борта RA78816 Ил-76 (RFF - BBC России).
Дата: 29.07.20

Полет по маршруту: Минеральные Воды – Ереван – Минеральные Воды
Траектория полета: воздушное пространство России, Казахстана, Туркменистана,
Ирана и Армении.



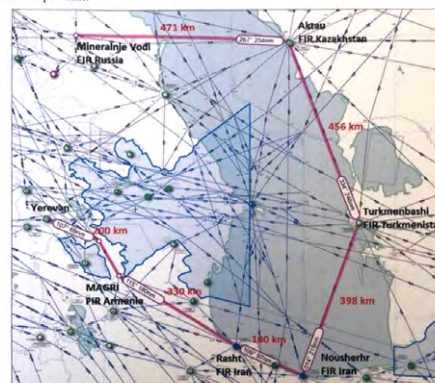
Общее расстояние: 2035 км
Время полета: 3 ч 30 мин

Расписание полета:

Дата	Номер рейса	Тип ВС	Reg	А/д вылета	Время	А/д посадки	Время
29.07.20	RFF8617	Ил-76	RA78816	Ростов	11:00	Минеральные Воды	12:00
29.07.20	RFF8617	Ил-76	RA78816	Минеральные Воды	15:00	Ереван	18:30
30.07.20	RFF8642	Ил-76	RA78816	Ереван	00:00	Минеральные Воды	03:30

Справка по полету борта RA78816 Ил-76 (RFF - BBC России).
Дата: 04.08.20

Полет по маршруту: Минеральные Воды – Ереван – Минеральные Воды
Траектория полета: воздушное пространство России, Казахстана, Туркменистана,
Ирана и Армении.



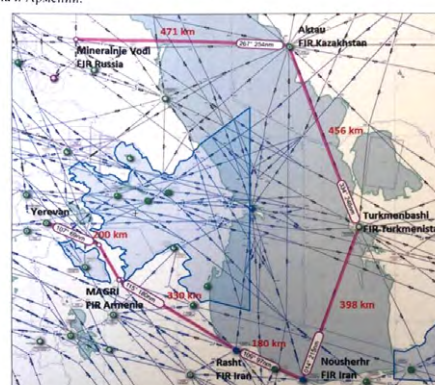
Общее расстояние: 2035 км
Время полета: 3 ч 30 мин

Расписание полета:

Дата	Номер рейса	Тип ВС	Reg	А/д вылета	Время	А/д посадки	Время
04.08.20	RFF8641	Ил-76	RA78816	Минеральные Воды	21:00	Ереван	00:30 / 05.08.20
05.08.20	RFF8642	Ил-76	RA78816	Ереван	05:15	Минеральные Воды	08:45

Справка по полету борта RA78816 Ил-76 (RFF - BBC России).
Дата: 06.08.20

Полет по маршруту: Минеральные Воды – Ереван – Минеральные Воды
Траектория полета: воздушное пространство России, Казахстана, Туркменистана,
Ирана и Армении.



Общее расстояние: 2035 км
Время полета: 3 ч 30 мин

Расписание полета:

Дата	Номер рейса	Тип ВС	Reg	А/д вылета	Время	А/д посадки	Время
06.08.20	RFF8641	Ил-76	RA78816	Минеральные Воды	19:15	Ереван	22:45
07.08.20	RFF8642	Ил-76	RA78816	Ереван	03:00	Минеральные Воды	06:30

Join military drills

Turkey expressed its support for Azerbaijan with regards to the clashes near Tovuz. On July 13, 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey [condemned what it referred to as the irresponsible provocation and aggression](#) of the Armenian side. The Ministry stated that the provocation showed the real intention of Armenia, which is drawing the attention from the occupied Karabakh away by creating new escalation zones. On the same day, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called Armenian actions unacceptable and stated that ["whatever solution Baku prefers for the occupied lands and Karabakh, Turkey will stand by Azerbaijan"](#). This statement was a clear manifestation for possible Turkish military support in case of an Azerbaijani plan to seek a military solution to the conflict. The next day, Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay [restated](#) the FM's remarks and slammed the Armenian attacks.

Furthermore, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar stated that [Armenia would pay for its aggressive actions against Azerbaijan](#) and that Ankara would continue to firmly stand beside Baku in its case in Nagorno-Karabakh. This statement was followed by a discussion of possibilities in defence industry cooperation between two countries. İsmail Demir, the head of the Turkish Defence Industries Presidency (SSB) stated that [the Turkish defence industry is at Baku's disposal](#) with its full technological capacity and experience including UAVs, electronic systems and missiles. The National Security Council headed by President Erdoğan also [reiterated full support](#) to Azerbaijan against Armenian aggression on July 22.

On July 27, the statement of the National Security Council, Azerbaijani Defence Ministry [declared](#) that both countries would conduct large-scale joint military drills in various locations throughout Azerbaijan. Joint land forces exercises were held from August 1 to 5, 2020, in Baku and Nakhchivan whereas air force exercises were conducted from July 29 to August 10 in Baku, Ganja, Kurdamir, Nakhchivan and Yevlakh regions. The first detachments were [military helicopters](#) brought by the Turkish Air Force to Nakhchivan on July 28.

The following day, [the first stage](#) of the "Azerbaijani-Turkish Live-Fire Joint Large-Scale Tactical Exercises" started with the use of real ammunition against specified targets. Life-like combat conditions were created for both Azerbaijani and Turkish forces by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence. The joint drills involving special forces were marked as especially important since they played a significant role

in recent clashes due to the region's mountainous geography and harsh conditions. The last day of July witnessed the arrival of Turkish F-16 fighter jets to Azerbaijan to join the joint air force drills, 'TurAz Qartali-2020'. The fighters participated in several exercises that included helicopters, armoured vehicles and land troops. The successful elimination of the simulated targets by joint fighter squadrons and tank divisions showed that coordination between the two armies is on a high level and can be tested in real combat conditions.

The joint military exercises showed the capacity of both Turkey and Azerbaijan to conduct and host large-scale military drills. Sevil Mikayilova, an Azerbaijani MP, [stated](#) that military cooperation is an important part of the strategic partnership between two countries. Turkey's firm position in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its participation in the military drills indicates that a military resolution of the conflict has not been taken off the table. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey continue to state their preference for peace and stability in the region on the condition of the withdrawal of Armenian military forces from the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region. The joint military exercises once again showed that Turkey takes the matter seriously and regards it as its own national security issue. Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly of Azerbaijan Adil Aliyev [stated](#) that the drills disturbed Yerevan since they demonstrated that one of the most powerful NATO armies stands ready to assist Azerbaijan. Another MP, Sabir Rustamkhani compared the 2020 drills to the Turkish aid in 1918 which liberated Azerbaijan from Bolsheviks and radical Armenians. Some Azerbaijani politicians, such as Faraj Guliyev and Tural Abbasli even stated the necessity of creating the common army of Turkey and Azerbaijan in response to common threats immediately and stand against common enemies. Even though the proposal cannot be regarded as realistic in the short term, it is clear that the Turkish Army is ready to help its ally in the situation of necessity.

Conclusion

Turkey's role in the region is largely based on common values and shared economic, military and political interests with Azerbaijan. Turkey prioritises its relationship with Azerbaijan as both countries have large investments in each other's territories. Energy routes starting from Azerbaijan and passing through Turkey contribute to regional security and stability. Therefore, any threat against Azerbaijan's stability and future is taken seriously by Ankara. Turkey considers the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh as a national security issue as well and continues to distance itself from Armenia in favour of Azerbaijan.

Turkey also took swift actions after the latest Armenian provocation against Azerbaijan and stated its full support to Baku. The 13-day long large-scale land and air force joint military exercises of 2020 was a reflection of Ankara's immediate response to the Tovuz clashes on the highest level, which gave confidence to Baku in its struggle to regain its territories occupied by Armenia. As the military exercises concluded with a success amidst a global pandemic crisis, both countries demonstrated the common military vision which balances Russian overwhelming military support to Armenia and creates leverage in the hands of Azerbaijan to plan a possible military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in future.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev (R) hold a joint press conference within the 8th High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan on February 25, 2020. (TUR Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

