

The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and Its Implications for Iran

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*The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has put the Islamic regime of Iran in a difficult position. While the government is trying to be neutral, other regime elements have openly taken sides in the conflict. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has flared up once again, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people. Although the issue revolves around the nexus where territory, identity, and authority meet, wider international rivalries could have serious ramifications for the clash. As Arvin Khoshnood and Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood wrote in an article published by **Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies** (<https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-iran/>), the Islamic regime of Iran is a relevant actor in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, as it shares borders with both countries. During the recent fighting, several rockets have hit Iranian soil.*

Keyhan, a newspaper close to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, initially refrained from taking sides in the conflict. The paper reported simply that the conflicting parties were blaming each other for the aggression and that the Minsk Group had been unsuccessful in bringing about peace. However, on October 5, Keyhan published an interview with Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's adviser on international matters, in which he took Azerbaijan's side in the conflict. Velayati described the Nagorno-Karabakh region as "occupied territory" belonging to Azerbaijan and said the Islamic regime would help Baku reclaim it. Velayati added, however, that "the occupied territories should not be liberated at the cost of shedding the blood of the people." Instead, he proposed negotiations as the definitive solution to the conflict, though previous negotiations have failed. He claimed that Israel, the US, and France are contributing to the tensions and invited Turkey to work with Iran for peace.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a Shiite-majority country that shares history and culture with Iran, especially the Iranian Azerbaijani provinces. On September 30, four of Khamenei's representatives in Iranian Azerbaijan issued a statement in support of Azerbaijan. The clerics declared that Azerbaijan's "move to recapture the [Nagorno-Karabakh] region is completely legal according to sharia and in line with four Resolutions of the United Nations Security Council." The statement aligns with Khamenei's views, though he himself has not uttered a word about the clashes. In 1993, Khamenei criticized Armenia for occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and claimed that Armenians oppressed the Muslims there. When Heydar Aliyev, the then leader of Azerbaijan, visited Iran in 1994, Khamenei claimed it was the religious duty of the Azerbaijani people to defend their country.

The Islamic regime's policy began to shift in the 1990s, however, as Azerbaijan became friendlier toward the West. While the Supreme Leader continues to believe Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan, he has allowed his government to approach Armenia. When Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan visited Iran in 2019, Khamenei encouraged closer economic cooperation between the countries. During the visit, Khamenei emphasized that Armenia and Azerbaijan must solve their conflict through negotiations.

The Iranian government has echoed Khamenei by encouraging negotiations. The day the clashes started (September 27, 2020), Iranian FM Muhammad Javad Zarif tweeted that the regime "calls for an immediate end to hostilities and urges dialogue to resolve differences." On September 28, government spokesman Ali Rabiei said the Islamic regime of Iran, together with Turkey and Russia, could join together to help the conflicting parties find a peaceful solution to the dispute. President Hassan Rouhani has likewise urged both sides to stop the hostilities. On September 30, Rouhani told Pashinyan in a phone conversation that foreign involvement in the conflict would prolong the dispute and complicate the situation. The government has rejected all claims that it is transporting military gear to Armenia from Iranian soil. This denial was a reaction to the circulation of videos on social media showing trucks carrying covered loads across the Iranian border and into Armenia.

On October 10, both Rouhani and Zarif supported the Russia-brokered ceasefire between the countries. The government expressed concern over ceasefire violations and continues to urge both parties to refrain from violence.

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