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Why You Should Care About the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, October 14th, 2020

You might have thought that the protesters cramming Hollywood streets and blocking traffic on the 101 and 170 freeways in early October had something to do with the looming political election.

Instead, the demonstrations centered on the faraway land of Artsakh.

The newly heated clash between Azerbaijan and Artsakh that began September 27 might also seem a faraway concern to many Angelinos, but it shouldn't be — Southern California is home to the largest population of Armenians in the United States.

The decades-old conflict is over Nagorno-Karabakh in the Southern Caucasus — called the Republic of Artsakh by Armenians in homage to its ancient historic roots. Azerbaijan does not recognize Artsakh's independence, claiming it's part of Azeri territory. The land, in fact, is in a kind of legal limbo, its *de facto* independence unrecognized internationally.



Map showing Armenia, Azerbaijan and Artsakh / Wikimedia Commons

Parts of Stepanakert are in ruins

But ethnic Armenian forces in Artsakh, backed by Armenia, have held control of Artsakh since a 1988-1994 territorial war.

Turkey backs its ally Azerbaijan in its aggression against Artsakh and has taken an openly

declarative stance. [Rockets have bombarded Nagorno-Karabakh's capital Stepanakert](#). And Armenia has [accused Azerbaijan of bombing the historic Holy Savior Cathedral](#). Azerbaijan authorities have said the Ganja area in its territory was shelled. More than 250 people have died since the September clashes began.

The possibility of an all-out war between Azerbaijan and Armenia has been heightened — but Armenia and Azerbaijan [agreed to a ceasefire on October 10](#). Details are not yet forthcoming, but both sides have agreed to exchange prisoners and recover those killed.



Cathedral_Ghazanchecoc (Holy Savior Cathedral), which has been bombed in Artsakh / Photo: Lusine Artsakh via Wikimedia Commons

A false equivalence

“If there’s a problem here, it’s the false equivalence international media has drawn toward Armenia and Azerbaijan,” said [Alex Galitsky](#) in an October 5 [Los Angeles Times](#) article. Galitsky is communications director for the Armenian National Committee of America. “Armenia is acting out of self-defense to preserve the existence of its people, and Azerbaijan is acting out of aggression.”

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti [weighed in on the conflict at the Hollywood protests](#): “We stand with the people of Armenia. I urge our leaders in Washington to conduct the sustained and rigorous diplomacy necessary to bring peace to the Artsakh region. Turkey must disengage.”

Los Angeles city officials also [gathered at City Hall on October 5](#) to encourage the Federal government to launch a diplomatic solution.



Recent protests over Azerbaijani aggression toward Artsakh / Photo: Hera Vibes, purchased via Shutterstock

An existential threat

Armenians believe the war over Artsakh to be an existential threat — an extension, in fact, of the 1914-1923 [Armenian genocide](#), the expulsion and mass murder of ethnic Armenians from Turkey and adjacent regions by the Ottoman government. Estimates vary, but it's estimated that 1.5 million Armenians were killed by various means: torture, gas, poison, disease, starvation, drowning, hangings and mass burnings, among other methods.



The flag of Artsakh / Wikimedia Commons

History of the conflict

In the 1800s, Artsakh was annexed to the Russian empire and in the 1920s, to the USSR. Before that time, the Republic of Azerbaijan never existed — it's a newcomer in terms of Artsakh territory and its Armenian population. Azeris, unlike Artsakh Armenians, are of mixed ethnic origin — from an indigenous population to an admixture of Central Asians.

After the fall of the Russian Empire in 1918, both Armenia and Azerbaijan claimed ownership of the landlocked Nagorno-Karabakh region. In 1920, a short war ensued over the area, with the Soviet Union gaining control. It then created the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (an administrative region) tucked inside the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.

To Armenians, however, the land has always been Artsakh — an essential part of Armenia and its identity.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the mountainous region was again in the crosshairs between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the result being an Artsakh declaration of independence.



Topographical map of the Republic of Artsakh / Photo: 517Design, Wikimedia Commons

Garó Paylan speaks out against the ultraconservative Turkish government

Garó Paylan, a Turkish member of parliament of Armenian descent, recently [issued a press statement](#) stating that he and his party have been intimidated and “targeted for calling for peace.”

Paylan is a founding member of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) representing one of Turkey's largest cities, Diyarbakır.

Moreover, there's been a **sharp rise in hate speech** against Turkey's Armenian population.

Turkey's far-right ultraconservative AKP-MHP government has "taken to warmongering in the dispute between our two neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan," writes Paylan. "The government engages in war propaganda by openly supporting the military conflict and is publicly resorting to belligerent rhetoric against the Armenian State instead of persuading both parties to start negotiations and push for de-escalation."



Garro Paylan, a founding member of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) representing one of Turkey's largest cities, Diyarbakır / Photo via Garro Paylan

How you can help

Urge immediate passage of [H.Res.1165](#) denouncing the role that Azerbaijan and Turkey have played in the conflict.

Donate to the [Armenia Fund](#), the largest humanitarian organization serving the needs of the Republic of Armenia and the Artsakh Republic @ArmeniaFund

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(Top image: Coat of arms of the Republic of Artsakh / Photo via Wikimedia Commons)

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