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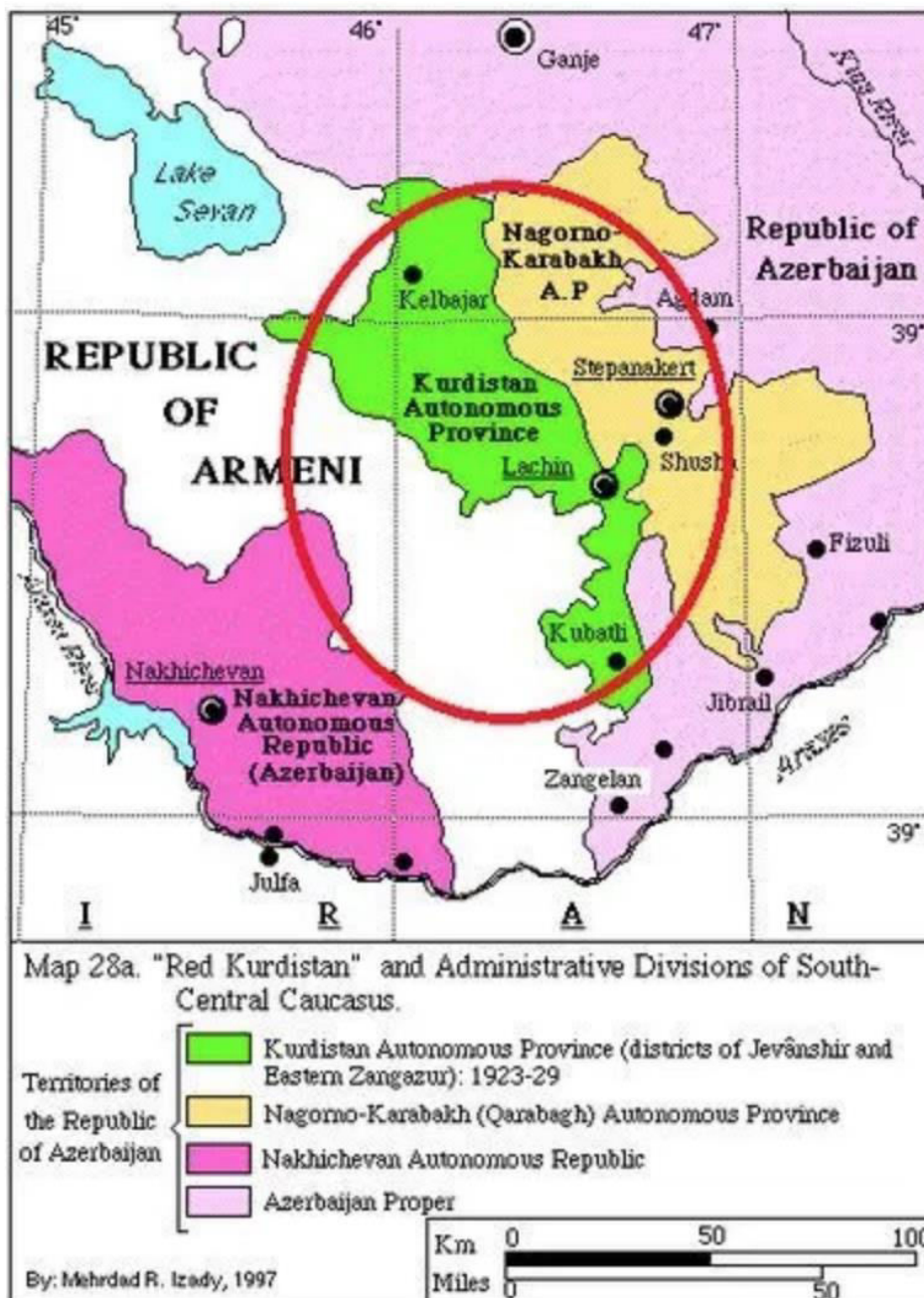
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Background to the current Azerbaijan - Armenia War

(A short history of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor (Red Kurdistan))

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Map of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nakhichevan, Red Kurdistan and Nagorno-Karabakh. [Mehrdad Izady, 1997](#)

On 22 October 2020 Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed at least [5,000 people](#) had been killed since 27 September 2020, when the most recent conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the future of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor began. Both these territories lie within Azerbaijan but since 1994 have been overseen by Armenia.

Tensions are centuries old in this multi-ethnic region, but were inflamed in 1988 when the Soviet Union re-confirmed Nagorno-Karabakh as a politically autonomous Armenian *oblast* inside Azerbaijan, the majority of its [150,000 people](#) being Armenian. In the same year, the Nagorno-Karabakh Council voted to join Armenia. In response, a Moscow committee assumed direct rule. An Azeri massacre of Armenians in the Azeri town of [Sumgait](#) began a mutual ethnic cleansing (Muller, 2000). The conflict escalated in 1992, after the Soviet Union gave Armenia and Azerbaijan independence, prompting Nagorno-Karabakh to declare [independence](#). Armenia maintained that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh had the right to decide their future. Azerbaijan was determined to reclaim all territory within its internationally recognised borders, including the seven districts in the Lachin corridor. Azerbaijan had lost the 141-kilometre wide Lachin corridor, which joins Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, in the 1991 – 1994 war with Armenia.

That war was bloody. Both parties accused each other of war crimes. By 1994, [30,000 people](#) had been killed and more than a million [displaced](#), the majority being Azeri. Back in 1993, four UN Security Council resolutions acknowledged the displacement of people and called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of all Armenian troops from recently acquired territory, and for all parties to negotiate based on the principles developed by the Minsk group, set up by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and co-chaired by the USA, France and [Russia](#). The Minsk principles were that the districts outside Nagorno-Karabakh be returned to Azerbaijan except for a narrow corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; that Nagorno-Karabakh's population be given a legally binding way to determine their own future; and that all displaced people be allowed to return to their former homes. During negotiations, all parties accused each other of not complying with any agreement.

Intermittent clashes have occurred since the early 1990s but nothing like the outbreak of war on 27 September 2020. The timing of this war is no chance event. In recent years there has been a rise in nationalism in [Armenia](#), Azerbaijan and Turkey. The 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Sevres was in August 2020. This treaty proposed a homeland for Armenians and Kurds, located in northeast and southeast Anatolia respectively, and not satisfying either nation because their ancestral lands overlap. The Treaty of Sevres was never implemented and Anatolia was incorporated into the modern state of Turkey in 1923, but in 2020, on the Treaty of Sevres' 100th anniversary, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan referred to northeast Anatolia as rightfully belonging to Armenia. It is therefore no surprise that Turkey announced it would help its oil-rich Azeri 'brothers' to right the wrongs of the past, and retake Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor. At first denying it was providing any support, evidence soon mounted that Turkey was helping Azerbaijan by supplying hundreds of battle hardened trainers and commanders, at least 2,000 Syrian mercenaries (many being Islamist extremists, some possibly from Chechnya and Dagestan), artillery, F-16s and armed [drones](#).

Although the conflict was in Russia's 'backyard', Russia was silent for the first ten days. When it became apparent Armenia was losing ground, Russia tried to mediate. Russia proposed to deploy Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh, thus serving to maintain the status quo but [Azerbaijan rejected this](#), insisting that all territory within its borders must be handed over or they would militarily take it back. Within minutes, the ceasefire of October 10 was broken. After Russia's second failure to broker a ceasefire, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tried his hand. His attempt, and afterwards, that of the Minsk group, similarly failed. Each party accused the other of non-compliance.

Having another player in the mix does not help. Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is determined to have a military and political win in the Caucasus, in contrast to the Syrian and Libyan quagmires and East Mediterranean tensions in which Turkey finds itself. In all these conflicts, Russia is not on the same side as Turkey, but Russia does not want open conflict with Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh, as this would enlarge the number of parties involved and the stakes, and would jeopardise Russia's efforts to prize Turkey away from NATO and the USA. The problem for Russia and everyone else is that Erdogan seems to enjoy interlinking multiple conflicts from the Caucasus to North Africa with cynical, transactional horse-trading. Turkey is further aggravating tensions by claiming, without any publicly available evidence, that '[PKK terrorists](#)' (i.e. militants in the Kurdistan Workers Party) and [Armenian 'terrorists'](#) (i.e. Armenian fighters in the Kurd-led and US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces) have gone to fight on the side of Nagorno-Karabakh. Claims of a PKK presence in Syria were used by Turkey to invade and occupy Kurd majority areas of northern Syria in 2016, 2018 and 2019, and to justify Turkey's air and ground offensives in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Apart from Turkey's spurious allegations regarding the PKK, what has not been mentioned in most current and historical reports, the four 1993 UN resolutions, and Minsk negotiations, is that Kurds have had a presence in the Caucasus since before the ninth century, established a confederation of tribes in the sixteenth century, and formed a majority of the population in the Lachin corridor from at least 1855 (Muller, 2000). Kurds in the region include Yezidi, Sunni and Shia [Muslims](#), the Shia being in the majority, with most of them speaking Azeri. Despite these Azeri-speaking Shia Kurds being somewhat assimilated (Muller, 2000) Kurds were subject to attack and dispersal by Sunni Ottomans in 1918, Azeris in 1918 (Muller, 2000) and Armenians in 1919 (Yilmaz, 2014). In 1920, Russia drove out the Turks and in 1921, the Soviets proposed the establishment of a Soviet Kurdistan or Red [Kurdistan](#). On 7 July 1923, the [Soviets](#) established Kurdistan *Uezd*. Kurmanji was its official language, the town of Lachin its administrative [centre](#), but the region had no real political autonomy, there were no Kurdish schools, books or newspapers because the language had yet to be assigned an alphabet, and its people suffered from famine and poor infrastructure. Also on 7 July 1923, the Soviets established Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast* on Red Kurdistan's eastern boundary. Both administrative units were inside the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Muller, 2000).

These administrative units were established because of the Soviets' initial ideal of recognising the political and cultural rights of ethnic minorities, especially in territories

with a long history of inter-ethnic tensions (Yilmaz, 2014). Additional assumptions likely included that the administrative units would form a buffer between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and that ethnic frictions would dissipate over time as people became ‘good’ [socialists](#).

In 1926, a census found that the population of Red Kurdistan was 51,000, of which 73 percent were Kurds, 26 percent were Azeris and 0.5 percent were [Armenians](#). Eighty three percent of all Kurds spoke [Azeri](#) indicating a fair degree of assimilation as well as an absence of Kurdish language schools, books and newspapers (Muller, 2000). Despite all the political and cultural shortcomings of Red Kurdistan, Turkey and Iran strongly objected to its [existence](#), given their own repressive policies towards Kurds and the multiple Kurdish uprisings in Turkey, Iran and Iraq. (In the 1920s alone, these uprisings included three in eastern Turkey led by Sheikh Said Piran, his brother, Sheikh Abhurrahman and General Ihsan Nuri Pasha; two in northern Iraq led by Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji and Ahmed Barzani, and one extended conflict in the Azeri – Kurdish region of Urmia in [Iran](#) led by Simko Agha Shikak.)

The Soviet Union often altered administrative units and in April 1929, Stalin prioritised centralisation over minority rights and dissolved all *uezdy* (i.e. smaller administrative units). Red Kurdistan was incorporated into Nagorno-Karabakh. Kurds were reclassified as Azeri or expelled to Armenia and Georgia, where they gained the right to be educated in their mother tongue (Yilmaz, 2014). Other Kurds fled to Iran or Turkey, where they had no [rights](#). Some ended up in the autonomous region of Nakhichevan, an exclave in Azerbaijan bordering Armenia, and the Kurdistan areas of Turkey and Iran, and completely cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan. Here, Kurds spoke Kurdish, and relied on Armenian resources for school and publications in the Kurdish language (Muller, 2000).

For reasons not explored in the literature, in May 1930, the Azerbaijani Central Executive Committee established a separate and enlarged Red Kurdistan called [Kurdistan Okrug](#). Two months later, the Soviet Union’s Central Executive Committee abolished many *Okrugs*, including *Kurdistan Okrug* (Muller, 2000), a Kurdish source suspecting that the Soviet Foreign Ministry succumbed to pressure from [Turkey](#). Ironically, it was after 1931 (by which time a Kurdish alphabet had been developed) that Kurdish language schools and publications were introduced to Nagorno-Karabakh. Possibly because Kurdish uprisings continued in Turkey, Iraq and Iran into the 1930s and 1940s, Stalin deported some thousands of Sunni Kurds from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to [Kazakhstan](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), and Uzbekistan in 1930-33, 1937 and 1944. Whereas Kurdish literature, theatre and education continued in [Armenia](#), by 1937 all Kurdish institutions in Azerbaijan were closed and the existence of Kurds was unmentionable (Muller, 2000).

Despite the demographic changes, Muller (2000) concludes that in 1990 there were between 12,226 and 100,000 *or more* Kurds in Azerbaijan, depending on the criteria used to define a Kurd.¹ Whatever the number, in the 1990s war, multiple sources claim that Armenian forces killed and displaced some 15,000 Kurds from the town of Lachin in

¹ The UNHCR’s Refworld claims there were up to [200,000 Kurds in Azerbaijan](#) in 1990.

1991, and an estimated [30,000 Muslim Kurds and 30,000 Azeris \(many possibly of Kurdish descent\)](#) from the town of Kelbajar in 1993. The offensive on Kelbajar razed the city and provoked international criticism, even from Armenians. In total, up to 800,000 Azeris and Kurds and [235,000 Armenians](#) were displaced by the 1991 – 1994 war.

Whereas Armenians were the victors in acquiring the Lachin corridor in the early 1990s, 30 years later, an oil-rich and militarised Azerbaijan, aided by Turkey, has been the instigator, and the party that has achieved territorial gains in the Lachin corridor and between Armenia and [Iran](#). In the latest conflict, each side has [mobilised men](#) under the age of 50, used illegal [cluster bombs](#) and [bombed](#) civilian areas, targeting [hospitals](#), schools and [churches](#). By the end of October 2020, the war had displaced 90,000 people from Nagorno-Karabakh and 40,000 people from inside Azerbaijan. The fighting had killed an estimated [150 civilians](#), [1,119 Armenian Karabakh soldiers](#), and [231 Syrian mercenaries](#) supplied by Turkey. Azerbaijan did not release their casualties but on 8 November, the Armenian Unified Infocenter claimed that Azerbaijan had suffered [7,405 casualties](#). How Putin arrived at 5,000 deaths is unknown.

Since 2017, Karabakh Armenians have called their autonomous region the Republic of [Artsakh](#). Armenia continues to argue that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh should decide their future, and that a corridor between Armenia and Karabakh be internationally recognised. On 9 November, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev announced the capture of the key strategic town of Shushi, but said that fighting would not cease until all Armenian forces left [Azerbaijan](#). The same day, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a ‘painful’ ceasefire agreement that stipulated a halt to fighting, the freezing of front lines, the implementation of UN resolutions including handing over the Lachin corridor, and for Russian Federation peacekeepers to maintain security in the Lachin corridor for the next five [years](#). Although Azeri leaders propose Nagorno-Karabakh be given [special status](#), by claiming the region is illegally occupied, pre-emptively renaming its towns and villages, and not devising a formula for Karabakh’s ‘special status’, they signal the importance they place on territory over people.

One of the most critical matters is what happens to more than one million people displaced from their ancestral lands: Armenians, Azeris and Kurds. While the UN resolutions of 1993 call for displaced people to be given the right of return, this is difficult without a compensation scheme, given the prevalence of others occupying displaced peoples’ land, villages and towns. Kurds are especially disadvantaged. They have no national government to represent them, and have been ignored in UN resolutions and Minsk solutions. In the 1990s, Kurdish organisations advocated the reinstatement of Red Kurdistan and a group of Kurds declared a Kurdish Republic, but these efforts failed to gain any [support](#) (Muller, 2000).

A Biden administration in the USA may reinvigorate NATO, stand up for human rights and challenge Putin and [Erdogan](#), but lateral thinking is required for solving minority rights everywhere, and in resolving conflicting territorial claims in the ethnic patchwork of Azerbaijan. One cannot help but wonder if the Syrian Kurds’ system of democratic confederalism is a potential way forward. This social structure relies on grass roots

democracy as practiced by multi-ethnic organisations at the village, town and regional levels, and across all walks of life. It may sound far fetched, but if Syrian Kurds can convince traditional Arab tribes to join their administrative system, and accept women being on committees and in positions of authority, it may be possible to convince Armenians and Azeri to bury their antagonisms in favour of a new deal for all ethnic groups in the region.

Non-hyperlinked References

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