

Influx of Foreign Fighters to Nagorno-Karabakh Could Lead to Region-wide Conflict

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The war in Artsakh, or more commonly known as Nagorno-Karabakh, is becoming increasingly internationalized as foreigners are arriving to fight on both sides of the conflict. Artsakh, despite being internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan, has had a de facto independence since 1994 when Armenian forces won a decisive victory. On September 25, it was [first revealed](#) that Syrian militants were being transferred to Azerbaijan via Turkey. This was denied by the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry on the same day. It must be noted that the war in Artsakh began only two days after it was exposed Syrians were being transferred. Yet, despite photographs, videos, documents and testimonies made by Syrian militants themselves, the Azerbaijani government maintains the position that there are no foreign mercenaries fighting alongside the Azerbaijani army and that it is Armenian propaganda. All major international outlets have reported that these Syrians are not motivated by jihad, but rather money.

In [given testimonies](#), a Syrian militant said “Jihadi, I swear by Allah don’t come, [...] we have been deceived, everything is a lie. This is not a war, this is a meat grinder, people are dying, they cannot get the corpses.” Another Syrian militant said “Two days after the start of the war, everybody wants to return but they do not let us and [...] they make us stay here.” This was in reference to Turkish military handlers lying to the transferred Syrian militants about the situation in Artsakh and forcing them to stay and fight.

At the same time though, Armenians from across the diaspora, including those in Greece, the Netherlands and the U.S., have already left or are preparing to go and fight in Artsakh, meaning that citizens of Western countries will be embroiled in this conflict. This also comes as it was revealed that ethnic Greeks are volunteering to go and fight in Artsakh, with one source telling [Greek City Times](#) that the first batch of volunteers amount to 30 men, while a former non-commissioned officer claimed to [Sputnik Hellas](#) that the number is as high as 500. Whatever the truth may be, it is being widely reported in Greek media that tens if not hundreds of volunteers from Greece are going to Artsakh, motivated by religion and solidarity with Armenians, and without receiving a salary. It has also been revealed that the Greek minority in Armenia, mostly descendants of Greek Genocide survivors, [are fighting alongside](#) the Armenian army.

This sets a dangerous precedent as this war is becoming increasingly internationalized and threatens to embroil the entire region in conflict if it cannot be contained. The First Artsakh War (1988-1994) saw Greek and Russian volunteers fight alongside the Armenians. Chechens, Afghan Mujahedeen’s, Turkey’s Gladio Gray Wolves, Ukrainian Far Right militants fought on the side of Azerbaijan in the First War. Foreign fighters in Artsakh is not a new

phenomenon. With Armenian-Greeks and ethnic Greeks fighting in Artsakh against Turkish-sponsored Syrian militants and the Azerbaijani military, Athens could potentially be dragged into the conflict unwillingly.

Hikmet Hajiyev, aide to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, [told reporters](#) on Friday that Greeks were fighting in Artsakh, describing the volunteers as “mercenaries.” The Greek government has not responded to the statement made by Hajiyev and most likely will not as relations between the two countries remain tense. While accepting the credentials on September 4 from Greece’s newly appointed ambassador to Baku, Nikolaos Piperigos, Aliyev directly told the diplomat:

“I can tell you, and it is no secret, that Turkey is not only our friend and partner, but also a brotherly country for us. Without any hesitation whatsoever, we support Turkey and will support it under any circumstances. We support them [Turkey] in all issues, including the issue in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

The comments by Aliyev are unprecedented when considering the usual formalities of a head of state accepting the credentials of a new ambassador. With these diplomatic tensions already existing between Athens and Baku weeks before Azerbaijan began its offensive against Artsakh, it is unlikely that Greece will try and prevent volunteers from going to Armenia. Some Greek sources claim that many of the volunteers are ex-special forces, meaning it is likely that the Greek military will be indirectly involved to some extent. This also comes as Greek and Cypriot Members of the European Parliament are leading efforts to try and [impose sanctions on Azerbaijan](#) for launching a war.

The internationalization of the Artsakh War because of the influx of foreign fighters, especially the Syrian militants, would be a major concern for both Iran and Russia who would be feeling uncomfortable having such radical forces on or close to their borders. The internationalization of the war has the potential to spark conflict across the Caucasus as militants from North Caucasia, particular Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya, could travel to Azerbaijan to fight, and gain invaluable experience to take with them on their return to Russia. Although Russia and Iran have called for a ceasefire and an end to hostilities, they have not made strong efforts to try and end the war, which if not contained and ended soon, could potentially spill over into the North Caucasus or Iran’s northern provinces which is overwhelmingly ethnic Azeri.

The war could also potentially become a part of the wider Greek-Turkish rivalry that already exists in the East Mediterranean, Cyprus and Libya. Greece will not be directly militarily involved, but it is highly probable that there would be constant communication between the Greek military and the volunteers. This comes as Turkey is directly involved in the Artsakh War, not only by transferring Syrian fighters and arms to Azerbaijan, but also using its air force when we remember one of its F-16 fighter jets downed an Armenian Su—25 aircraft last Tuesday.

Without being contained and the front lines having an influx of foreign fighters, there is a real possibility that the internationalization of the conflict through these forces could set the entire region into conflict if a ceasefire agreement is not made quickly.

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