

# RSC STAFF ANALYSIS

No. 10 | April 2016

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## Understanding the “Four-Day War”

*Mikayel Zolyan*

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### What happened?

Some commentators in the media and on social networks have already begun to use the term “four-day war” to describe the recent escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. As a ceasefire seems to have brought an end to the fighting we are trying to make sense of these events.

Of course, the first question on everybody’s mind today is: what (or who?) caused this outbreak of violence? Of course there are also numerous conspiracy theories explaining who “in reality” was behind the escalation. There are three explanations that seem to be the most popular: one blames the West, the other one puts the blame on Russia, and the third one sees Turkey as the instigator of the escalation.

Of course we cannot rule out anything, but so far we have seen little evidence to support the first theory: the idea that the West (or the US in particular) has somehow manipulated the sides into a new round of fighting, in order to create a new source of instability on Russia’s border is hardly supported by any evidence.

This explanation seems to be based on the fact that the fighting started when both Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents were in US, as well as a general belief that somehow Western, particularly American leadership is the root of all evil in contemporary world.

Assuming that the West, which is currently agonizing over how to deal with issues related to terrorism and migration, would deliberately provoke

a new security crisis in the immediate vicinity of Europe, which could also lead to a potential clash between NATO and Russia, seems somewhat far-fetched, to say the least.

Similarly, the theory that Russia is the mastermind behind the recent flare-up of the violence is supported by few facts, and contradicts any rational understanding of Russia’s interests in the region. A full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh would force Russia to take sides in the conflict, which it has so far avoided for the fear of losing Azerbaijan to Turkish influence.

Besides, Russian support for Armenia would hardly be shared by its partners in the CSTO and EEU, thus exposing the internal weakness of these constructions, which are considered vital for maintaining Russia’s influence in the former Soviet Union.

Of course, it may be argued that Russia has contributed to the escalation through its multi-billion arms sales to Azerbaijan, which have altered the military balance, at least in the eyes of the Azerbaijani leadership.

However, this seems to be a miscalculation, produced at least partly by the excessive political influence of the Russian military-industrial complex, rather than a deliberate plan to destabilize the situation.

That leaves the factor of Turkey. Indeed, Turkey was the only country in the region that took an unequivocal stance in the recent escalation, fully supporting the Azerbaijani side. Besides, it has never made a secret of its military co-operation with Azerbaijan. Yerevan and Stepanakert claim that they have evidence of participation of Turkish military in the recent campaign. Even if that claim is not substantiated in the future, it is obvious that many of the Azerbaijani fighters who took part in the recent campaign, had been trained by Turkish military instructors.

However, given the multitude of Turkey's problems today, both internal and external, it seems highly unlikely that Turkey would have embarked on such an adventure as enflaming the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: this could have led to serious risks, while the gains would be quite limited. Besides, the extent of Turkey's influence on Azerbaijan should not be exaggerated. Even if Ankara has encouraged Baku to take more decisive steps in Nagorno-Karabakh, the final decision must have been taken by the Azerbaijani leadership.

To sum up, while the global and regional powers, like US, EU, Russia or Turkey certainly have a high degree of influence in the region, ultimately we should be looking at the causes of the recent crisis within the region.

It seems highly unlikely that the Armenian side, or rather the Armenian sides, i.e. Republic of Armenia and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, might have been the initiator of the recent escalation. The whole strategy of Yerevan and Stepanakert has been based on protecting the status quo: they had nothing to gain from a new escalation, but risked losing everything in such a situation.

The only case in which they could have initiated major military operations would be in a situation when they deemed war inevitable and would have calculated that a pre-emptive strike would be their best chance in military terms. However, as there were virtually no major signs of a military build-up on any of the sides in the run-up to the current escalation, it seems that this has not been the case in the recent escalation.

As for the Azerbaijani side, initiating a limited military operation would be completely compatible with the political strategy that it has employed during the recent months. While Azerbaijan has claimed that its actions were a response to an attack initiated by Armenian forces, Azerbaijani officials have also claimed that the military operations are

taking place on an internationally recognized Azerbaijani territory, therefore in their view Azerbaijan has both the legal and the moral right to use force against Armenian "occupying force."

The message that in the absence of a peaceful solution that would satisfy Azerbaijan, Baku reserves the right to solve the conflict militarily has been repeated dozens of times by Azerbaijani government in the past. The recent escalation may well be designed to strengthen that message and to show that Azerbaijani authorities are ready to substantiate their statements with actions.

### **Why now?**

While the recent round of escalation may have caught both the societies of the region and the international community off guard, it was hardly unpredictable. The number of incidents on the 'line of contact' and on the internationally recognized Armenian-Azerbaijani border has been increasing exponentially in recent years.

Similarly, the nature of incidents had been changing: from sniper fire to use of artillery and incursions by 'special forces' units. Of course, the recent escalation has exceeded in scale all these incidents, representing the most large-scale instance of hostilities since 1994.

In a way, the region found itself in the center of a perfect storm, a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, it may have to do with the changing calculations within Azerbaijan, which is suffering the socio-economic consequences of the global slump in oil prices.

The Azerbaijani society, which had become accustomed to large government spending and relatively high quality of life, has been affected by the economic difficulties. This may lead to the unraveling of the social contract between the Aliyev government and the population.

In this situation, the government, which spent years describing how the oil profits have been used to enhance the Azerbaijani army, is under pressure to demonstrate at least some results in Nagorno-Karabakh in order to restore its credibility. Besides, as there are signs of potential social and political unrest in the country, the elites could use "a little victorious war" to distract society from socio-economic problems and rally the population around a patriotic agenda.

There is also another way in which the falling oil prices are changing the calculations on the Azerbaijani side. For years, at least since the late 1990s, Azerbaijan's strategy has been based on the assumption that oil profits and growing economy could be used to achieve a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict issue in favor of Baku.

According to this paradigm, Armenia, lacking natural resources, and weakened by a Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade (or "sanctions," as they are often referred to in Ankara and Baku), will be unable to sustain an arms race and would eventually either bow to Azerbaijan's demands or be defeated militarily. Thus, Baku believed that the time was on its side.

However, the revolution in fossil fuels, coupled with the re-emergence of Iran as a major player in the energy market, may make these calculations obsolete. Oil prices are unlikely to return to their previous levels any time soon and the perspective of defeating Armenia and "re-taking" Nagorno-Karabakh by offering purely economic means seem highly unlikely.

Moreover, it is not even clear how long Azerbaijan will be able to maintain the military edge over Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, as it will hardly be able to spend the same amount of money on arming its forces, while Armenia can still count on Russian assistance.

Therefore, from Azerbaijan's point of view, the end of windfall profits means that the advantages that Azerbaijan has gained over Armenia may be lost in the coming years. Therefore, there is an urgent need to convert that economic advantage into specific military and political gains, before it is too late for Azerbaijan.

As for Armenia, the Armenian government is somewhat more secure at this stage. Even though the Armenian economy has been affected by the recession in Russia, the deterioration of socio-economic conditions had not been as steep as it has been in Azerbaijan.

While the last year has been quite turbulent in terms of domestic politics, today the Sargsyan government has secured its position within the country, having claimed a victory in a referendum on constitutional changes (albeit marred with allegation of fraud).

However, for security in general, and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in particular, it is a "make or break" issue for Armenian leadership. Ever since former

President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's "dovish" stance on Nagorno-Karabakh allegedly cost him his post in 1998, no Armenian leader can afford looking weak on Nagorno-Karabakh.

Therefore, instead of forcing concessions from Yerevan, the increasingly militant stance of the Azerbaijani leadership has led to a similar hardening of the Armenian position, making constructive diplomatic negotiations virtually impossible. As for Karabakh, having been excluded from the negotiations process, it remained even less inclined to compromise than Yerevan.

### **What for?**

The decision to embark on military operations on the part of Baku may seem somewhat adventurous, to say the least, because of the enormous risks associated with it. However, to quote Shakespeare, this may be madness, yet there is method in it. From the point of view of the Aliyev government, a limited military operation could have several goals, both in terms of internal and external politics.

When it comes to what the Aliyev government wants to achieve internally, things are quite clear: restoring credibility inside the country, rallying the society around a patriotic agenda, and distracting from socio-economic problems. Of course, one may argue that in order to reach these goals, there need to be serious gains on the frontline, however this does not seem entirely necessary.

As we have witnessed with the wars in Syria and Ukraine, the reality on the ground may be completely different from that portrayed in the media coverage, and in an authoritarian regime with little independent media, the government can be quite successful in manipulating public opinion.

And even if the military gains are quite modest (or non-existent), the pro-governmental media may create an image of a decisive victory, which can be successfully marketed to a large part of the population.

As for the external context, here there are at least two interconnected goals. First, Azerbaijan is sending a message that the status quo is unacceptable and its statements about the readiness to alter the status quo by military means should be taken seriously. The second goal, most probably, has to do with the format of the OSCE Minsk Group process.

In recent years, Azerbaijan has often expressed its irritation with the current format of negotiations, where the peace process is mediated by the three Minsk Group Co-Chairs (France, Russia and the United States). The Armenian position, on the other hand, although it has also often expressed its own disagreement with specific statements or actions of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs, however, has in general supported the Minsk Group's efforts.

The incidents over the last few years, and especially the recent round of escalation, have exposed the Minsk Group more as a weak actor, unable to stop the "unfreezing" of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In any case, as the majority of commentators have noted, neither side would be interested in prolonging the current stage of confrontation, and especially in taking it to the level of an all-out war.

However, when an escalation happens it is an extremely complicated task to keep it within certain limits: it may easily pass a certain point of no return, after which the political and diplomatic logic of events is replaced by a purely military-driven logic.

The threats made in the past few days, such as Baku's threat to bomb Stepanakert and other cities in Karabakh, which was immediately countered by the threat by the Karabakh military to respond by targeting Azerbaijan's energy infrastructure, are a glimpse of the "nightmare scenario."

Unfortunately, the international community's efforts to stop the violence have also seemed somewhat half-hearted and have not been sufficient to prevent the escalation. So, ultimately, we must hope, that not just the military and political leadership in Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert, but also the societies of the countries involved, would realize how high the risks are, and would have the prudence to stop before it is too late.

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**Regional Studies Center (RSC)**  
Yerevan, Armenia