

## **Karabakh Truce Shaken by Gunshots and Tough Talk**

**Author:** [Armen Karapetyan](#)

OSCE mediators urge end to attacks after a month in which 20-year-old ceasefire was broken in thousands of incidents.

As an upsurge in fighting between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops is accompanied by increasingly tough rhetoric, the ceasefire that has held for two decades is more under strain than ever.

The competing accounts of what is going on along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and on the “line of contact” around Nagorny Karabakh are hard to reconcile, but adding up all the reports of ceasefire violations gives around 5,000 for January – the biggest monthly figure since active hostilities ended in a truce in 1994.

“From a military perspective, this escalation per se is not new,” Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Centre in Yerevan, said. “What is new, however, is an expanded battle space – the geography of attacks is much broader and includes parts of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border – and an expansion in intensity of the attacks.”

Giragosian was speaking at a discussion meeting which IWPR and the Media Centre in Yerevan held on January 26 to examine the implications of the upsurge in fighting. (See **Fears of "War by Accident"** .)

Worryingly, officials on both sides are using the word “war” to describe what is happening. In remarks quoted by RFE/RL radio’s Armenian service on February 6, an Armenian defence ministry spokesman referred to “a slow war on the border”, while his Azerbaijani equivalent responded by saying “in actual fact, the war has not halted in the last 20 years”. War would end when Armenian forces withdrew from Azerbaijani territory, he said.

The Minsk Group – the OSCE’s mediating body on the Karabakh conflict chaired by the United States, Russia and France – issued several expressions of concern. In a joint statement issued on February 7, the group’s co-chairs and the OSCE’s current chairman, Ivica Dacic, said, “We all agree that the military situation along the Line of Contact and Armenia-Azerbaijan border is deteriorating, posing a threat to regional stability and endangering the lives of civilians..... After 2014, in which approximately 60 people lost their lives, we are alarmed that this disturbing violent trend has continued.”

The statement called on all sides to “end incursions, cease targeting villages and civilians, stop the threat of reprisals and the use of asymmetric force, and take additional steps to reduce tensions and strengthen the ceasefire”.

Defence officials in Yerevan and Stepanakert recorded ten deaths of Armenian military personnel over the month of January. Azerbaijan said it lost four men although the number is likely to be higher. Again, these fatality numbers are out of the ordinary, and in recent times comparable only with a burst of violence in July and August last year, when over 20 of Azerbaijani and Armenian soldiers were killed.

The summer skirmishing receded when the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan had a meeting set up by Russian leader Vladimir Putin in August. Serzh Sargsyan and Ilham Aliyev met again in September and October, in what seemed to be first steps towards resuming the long-dormant peace process. One confidence-building measure they undertook was to withdraw heavy weapons from the front lines. (See **Reset in Azerbaijan-Armenia Talks Process?** and **Unquiet Peace Holds on Azeri-Armenian Lines.**)

That optimism has faded, with **the downing of an Armenian helicopter** in November and a month of fighting this January.

At the start of the month, Armenia’s defence ministry issued new orders to officers deployed along the frontier, authorising them to use their own initiative in retaliating against attacks and to take preemptive action when they saw fit.

President Sargsyan confirmed this apparent switch in tactics when he addressed defence ministry staff on January 26, telling them that “if there are more substantial build-ups along our borders and on the front line [the Karabakh Line of Contact], we reserve the right to deliver preemptive strikes”.

Azerbaijan’s defence ministry came out with its own statement on January 12, insisting that it would exercise its right to fly manned and unmanned aircraft over the Line of Contact with Karabakh, and to deploy “all available military equipment” without reference to the other side. On January 29, it announced that its forces had shot down an Armenian drone plane near Karabakh. Armenian officials said this was “absurd” and suggested instead that the Azerbaijanis might have downed one of their own aircraft.

Speaking a day after Sargsyan's announcement Azerbaijani President Aliyev dismissed Armenia as a mere "colony" which "cannot exist as an independent state".

Aliyev was referring to the large economic imbalance between his oil-rich state and Armenia that affects the arms race between them.

The Global Militarisation Index 2014, produced by the Bonn International Centre for Conversion, ranks both Armenia and Azerbaijan among the world's ten most heavily militarised states, measured by defence spending against gross domestic product and the number of armed forces personnel per capita.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute notes that defence spending has risen exponentially in both countries. Between 1995 and 2013, Armenia's annual defence spending went from 52 million to 427 million US dollars. But that pales in comparison with Azerbaijan, which spent 3.4 billion in 2013, and 66 million back in 1995. Much to Armenia's annoyance, its security and economic ally Russia has been happy to take Azerbaijan's cash for high-tech weapons including modern tanks and missiles.

These figures do not include defence expenditure in Nagorny Karabakh, governed by a separate Armenian administration since the war stopped in 1994 although no one has recognised its claim to independence from Azerbaijan.

Giragosian sees this disparity in spending power as a risk factor since it could result in "a shift in the balance of military power in Azerbaijan's favour over the longer term". Right now though, he said, it was not enough to change a situation where "Armenia's defensive position is still stronger than Azerbaijan's potential offensive capacity".

In the shorter term, Giragosian said, the real risk was that war could break out "by accident, based on miscalculation".

### **Armen Karapetyan is a freelance journalist in Armenia.**

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