

Transcaucasus fighting grows, as Turkish intervention looms

by Konstantin George

The war in the Transcaucasus imminently threatens to expand into a wider international conflict, with a level of bloodshed not seen in the region since World War I. Only if the European powers, especially Russia, take decisive measures soon to contain the war, can this nightmare be stopped. As of May 21, a direct Turkish military intervention, with the covert blessing of the Bush administration, was drawing inexorably closer.

The U.S. "green light" for a Turkish move was signaled by State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler on May 20. She condemned Armenia, and said that Washington would never accept any unilateral change in the status of the Armenian-inhabited enclave of Karabakh, or of the Azerbaidzhan exclave of Nakhichevan. Referring to Armenia, she added, "We cannot permit violation of CSCE [Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe] principles without strong condemnation." As an editorial in the May 21 German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau* noted, the Bush administration, pursuing a policy drafted by Henry Kissinger, is employing Turkey as its "dagger on the Asian mainland," and has turned a blind eye to the systematic violation of the human and minority rights mandated by the CSCE that has brought the Armenians of Karabakh to the verge of mass starvation.

The U.S. policy is playing with fire. Russia cannot stand idly by should Armenia be attacked by Turkey, except to incur such a humiliation, that this itself would unleash incalculable strategic consequences. Armenia is a signatory to the new Russian-led "collective security" pact, modeled on NATO, consisting of Russia and five other members of the Community of Independent States (CIS) and signed at a summit on May 15 in Tashkent. The treaty contains an article identical to NATO Article V, which stipulates that an attack on any member is an attack against all. Russia is thus duty-bound to send troops to Armenia to repel any attack. A Russian-Turkish deal to apportion the Transcaucasus between the two could prevent a collision in the short term. But such Russo-Turkish crisis management games will backfire, and sooner rather than later.

Özal calls for war

The first step in the planned Turkish military intervention is a Turkish Army occupation of the Azerbaidzhan exclave

of Nakhichevan. The Turkish leadership has made no secret of this. Turkish President Turgut Özal, in a May 19 interview with the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* conducted at the Houston, Texas hospital where he is recovering from surgery for prostate cancer, was explicit: "We will send troops to Nakhichevan. We need to send them without hesitation. Otherwise, events which have happened in Karabakh can be repeated there." Özal did not exclude that troops could also be sent into Karabakh.

The Özal statements came after a meeting on the weekend of May 16-17 with U.S. President George Bush, with whom he has maintained regular telephone contact. As in the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and illegal occupation of 40% of that island, any Turkish move into the Transcaucasus would only occur with tacit U.S. support. The Özal call for intervention was echoed in the Turkish Parliament by one of the leaders of the opposition, former Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, the prime minister at the time of the invasion of Cyprus.

The Özal interview was synchronized with the first official statements by the Turkish government preparing the way for a military intervention. On May 19, the ruler of Nakhichevan, Gaidar Aliyev, the former KGB operative and communist boss of Azerbaidzhan who has assumed the role of a pan-Turkic crusader, appealed to Turkey to provide Nakhichevan with "the most modern" arms and equipment, to defend against alleged Armenian attacks. The speed of the Turkish reply indicated the request had been rehearsed. Within a few hours, Turkish Prime Minister Suleiman Demirel, in Budapest, Hungary at the time, telephoned Aliyev to say that Turkey would provide all military "aid and assistance" required by Nakhichevan.

Speaking in Budapest, Demirel demanded that the U.N. Security Council follow the "Kuwaiti example" and send a U.N. military intervention force to "punish" Armenia. Demirel added that Turkey would prefer a U.N. intervention, rather than having to intervene by itself.

While Demirel was giving the U.N. an ostensible last chance to act before Turkey acted, his government was finalizing preparations for precisely such a unilateral Turkish move. By May 20, Turkey was dropping even the pretense of wanting "international forces" in the Caucasus, when Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin told the Ankara Parliament that

“international organizations are incapable” of stopping Armenia, and therefore Turkey must consider the “last resort” of a unilateral action. Demirel himself was working on reaching an understanding with Russia, and working out the details of military moves. He will attempt to finalize such preparations when he arrives in Moscow on May 25 for urgent talks with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on the Transcaucasus.

In Ankara, after a May 18 late-night session of the Turkish cabinet, presided over by Vice Premier Erdal Inonu, together with the military command, led by General Guresh, chief of the General Staff, the following Turkish government communiqué, an ultimatum to Armenia, was issued: “Armenia finds itself on an extraordinarily wrong path. It is a cause of concern for the region and unfortunate for the new republic Armenia that this state has based its existence on a policy of aggressive expansionism.” The Turkish government declared that it was holding Armenia “responsible for the consequences” which will follow from its “aggressive behavior.”

Neo-Ottoman protector

The Demirel demand for U.N. military action against Armenia followed a statement issued in Budapest one day earlier demanding a military intervention by the “world community,” modeled on the U.S.-led U.N. military actions against Iraq, to rescue Bosnia from Serbian aggression. Demirel declared that Turkey would be willing to supply a large troop contingent for any such “Desert Storm” type of operation. His statement came 48 hours after President Özal, speaking from his Houston hospital bed, demanded a U.N. military action on behalf of Bosnia, and offered substantial Turkish forces.

While urgent measures are needed to stop the Serbian regime’s barbarism in Bosnia, the Turkish motives are anything but altruistic. Turkey is acting on the basis of the Ottoman Empire doctrine, where it asserts for itself a protector role for all Muslim national groupings and minorities anywhere in the Balkans, Transcaucasus, and parts of the Near East. The ability to implement a U.S.-promoted neo-Ottoman doctrine in Turkish foreign policy is a result of the failure of Europe to do anything to stop Serbian aggression, and its complicity in the international isolation of Armenia. This was reiterated May 20 in an European Community communiqué which condemned the alleged “aggressive actions” by Armenian forces in Karabakh, adding that the EC could not “permit the violation of CSCE principles” without “strong condemnation.”

For Turkey, Bosnia is merely a convenient precedent for establishing the “right” to intervene anywhere in the Balkans on behalf of Muslims. This definition includes the Albanians of Kosovo, the 25% Albanian minority and the 10% Turkish minority in the Republic of Macedonia, the 1.5 million Turkish minority in Bulgaria, and the 250,000 Turkish minority in the Greek province of Thrace.

The Turkish regime, however, is denouncing Serbia for

the same types of crimes of territorial conquest and mass expulsion of hundreds of thousands of civilians that Turkey committed in its conquest of northern Cyprus in 1974. Turkey’s de facto annexation of northern Cyprus, depopulation of its 200,000 Greek inhabitants, the resettlement of mainland Turks in their homes, and the wanton destruction of churches and cultural-historical sites parallels Serbia’s de facto annexation of 60% of Bosnia, depopulating it of Bosnian Muslims, and settling Serbs there instead.

More insidious is the Turkish regime’s comparison of Armenia with Serbia. The Armenian military victories against Azerbaidzhan, beginning with the capture on May 8 of Shusha, the last Azeri stronghold within Karabakh, and culminating with the capture of Lachin on May 18 and the opening of a land corridor connecting Armenia with Karabakh, have served as the pretext for Ankara’s moves toward military intervention. However, these Armenian victories were the result of military operations forced on Armenia by relentless Azeri onslaughts against Karabakh.

By the beginning of May, Azeri artillery and rocket fire from positions in and around Shusha, directed against the Karabakh capital of Stepanakert and its airport, had become so severe that the airlift supplying the Armenian population with essential food had become impossible. The only alternative to mass starvation of the Karabakh Armenians was to eliminate the Shusha bases and establish a land corridor to supply food and fuel. That is now under way.

The Nakhichevan pretext

Starting on May 18, the Turkish and Azerbaidzhani leadership and media have been conducting a systematic disinformation campaign, alleging that Armenian forces are engaged in an “invasion” or “massive attacks” on the territory of Nakhichevan. The provocative content of this campaign has been buttressed by the added detail that the Armenian “drive” is concentrated close to the 10-kilometer section of Nakhichevan that borders on Turkey, i.e., with the alleged aim of breaking Turkey’s link to the Azerbaidzhan exclave. As the Armenian side has correctly insisted, no such invasion or “massive attack” exists, but the charge is to justify the Turkish Army acting to defend, i.e., occupy, Nakhichevan. Such a move would form the basis for an inevitably protracted international conflict in the region, drawing in Russia and Iran.

Turkish occupation of Nakhichevan would only be a precursor to linking Turkey to all of Azerbaidzhan, with Turkish forces seizing the thin strip of Armenia sandwiched between Nakhichevan and Azerbaidzhan which forms Armenia’s border with Iran. The creation of an emergent Turkic “Greater Azerbaidzhan,” besides crippling Armenia, would usher in an Turkish-Iranian confrontation. The Azeri Popular Front leadership of this nascent Greater Azerbaidzhan has the “reunification” of Azerbaidzhan with Iranian Azerbaidzhan, i.e., the break up of Iran along ethnic lines, as its stated policy goal.