





## **Provocation Against Peace in The South Caucasus**

**IRFAN KAYA-ULGER**

Prof., Kocaeli University

In the Southern Caucasus, on September 12, 2022, Armenian forces launched an attack on Azerbaijan in the border regions of Taşkesen, Laçın and Kelbacer. It was also revealed that Armenian forces mined the areas to be evacuated. The strong response of Azerbaijan to this attack caused the attention to be focused on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict again. In the conflicts, Azerbaijan lost 77 and Armenia around 200 casualties.

What forces are behind this event? On 10 November 2020, after 44 days of war, a ceasefire agreement was signed between the two sides. Following this development, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan began negotiations to normalize relations and establish a peace agreement. Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev came together under the mediation of the Council of Europe and the EU. A Commission was established to define the borders between the two countries. At this stage, it was seen that Pashinyan made frequent calls to Turkey and wanted to normalize relations. Turkey and Armenia have appointed a special representative to carry out the negotiations for the opening of the border gates and the opening of the diplomatic representations. With the knowledge of Azerbaijan, Turkey started to normalize its relations with Armenia.

What could be the purpose of the Armenian attacks that started under these conditions? What forces are behind this event? It is possible to gather those who are disturbed by peace in the South Caucasus under three main headings: First, the politicians of Karabakh origin in Armenian politics, secondly Russia and finally the West, including the USA. Let us now examine why the listed actors do not want peace.

First of all, extreme nationalists, known for their radical views and maximalist demands in Armenian politics, are defined as the Karabakh gang or clan. Ultra-nationalist politicians, including former Presidents Kocharyan and Sarkisyan, interpret the peace agreement in the Caucasus as concessions by Armenia

to Turkey and Azerbaijan. This group, which is also supported by the Diaspora Armenians, adopts the symbol of Mount Ararat and considers the Eastern Anatolian region of Turkey as the Armenian homeland. They also advocate the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, Turkey's acknowledgment of the so-called 1915 genocide and the payment of compensation. Disconnected from reality, ultra-nationalist opponents accuse Nikol Pashinyan of making concessions to Turkey and Armenia and of betraying Armenia. The most important handicaps of ultra-nationalists, who are unpopular in the elections, are corruption. In addition, the people of Armenia think that extreme nationalists cannot solve Armenia's economic problems. As a matter of fact, in the parliamentary elections held in June 2021, Pashinyan's party received 54% support, while the parties of the extreme nationalists failed to show success. Thus, the provocation against peace may have been organized by ultranationalist Karabakh origin politicians. It is unlikely that Prime Minister Pashinyan may have supported these attacks in order to avoid the criticism of the opposition and to receive military assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the member states of the aforementioned organization, announced that they would refuse any request for assistance from Armenia.

Secondly, the force behind Armenia's provocation for peace may be the Russian Federation. Because the Moscow Administration is worried that if peace is established in the South Caucasus, the influence of Russia in the region will decrease. In the past, Russia has supported separatists in Georgia, which is a South Caucasus country, in order to keep it under control. The ties between Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions and Tbilisi were severed. On the other hand, there is a large Russian military base in Gyumri, Armenia. In addition, with the ceasefire agreement on November 10, 2020, 1960 Russian soldiers were deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh, which

is Azerbaijani territory, as a peacekeeping force. Despite all these developments, the establishment of peace in the region causes Russia to worry. According to the assessment made by Moscow, peace and stability in Transcaucasia are not compatible with the interests of Russia. When peace is established in the region, the relations of Armenia and Azerbaijan with Western Europe and Turkey will be strengthened. As a matter of fact, when the natural gas flow to Western Europe was cut off by Moscow due to the Ukraine war, Azerbaijan stepped in to close this gap. During the visit of European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen to Baku in July, a consensus was reached between the parties on doubling the Azerbaijani natural gas to be shipped to Europe. Therefore, the Moscow administration prefers that there be permanent conflict and tension in the South Caucasus. Because, in times of conflict, Russia's weight on the countries of the region remains at a higher level.

The third actor that can direct the Armenian attacks is the West. Here, the concept of the West refers to both Western European states and the USA. Because the interests of the West require conflict and confusion in the region. On the other hand, we should not forget the lobbying power of diaspora Armenians in Western countries. In this context, close relations between France and Armenia are important. Also, very recently, the President of the US Senate, Nancy Pelosi, visited Yerevan to support Armenia in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. This situation strengthens the suspicion that the provocation for peace in the region is of Western origin. Western European countries may have both directed ultra-nationalist politicians and made commitments to prime minister Nikol Pashinyan. It is not known to what extent Pashinyan, who claims that there is a direct connection between the economic development of the region and peace, will show interest in anti-peace guidance. Since its independence in 1991, Armenia has always been a loser in terms of economic and human development. A third of the country's population has migrated to Russia or Western European countries to find work. Infrastructure investments in Armenia are in a miserable state. There are people living in rural areas under more backward living conditions than in the USSR era. As a matter of fact, Pashinyan, as a politician who is aware of this situation, expects foreign capital investments to increase and trade to revive after peace is established. While this is the case, it will not be easy for Western countries to exert influence on Pashinyan with certain promises.

On the other hand, it is necessary to look at the provocation for peace in the South Caucasus from the perspective of Turkey. The powers that want conflict and war to occur again in this region want to keep Turkey in a ring of fire and limit its mobility. The Ukraine war, which started with the attack of Russia on February 24, 2022, continues in the north of Turkey. The conflicts and tensions that started in Syria due to the Arab Spring in the south still affect Turkey significantly today. There are 3.5 million refugees of Syrian origin living in Turkey, and work is underway to complete the 35 km wide buffer zone within Syria in the border regions. In the West of Turkey, Greece, with the guidance of the USA and Western Europe, is in a hostile approach towards Turkey. Thus, Turkey is surrounded by conflict and war from three sides. It is now desired to create a new conflict zone so that Turkey's energy does not turn to the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. It is necessary to evaluate the armed provocation of Armenia against Azerbaijan from this perspective.

As a result, although the conflicts that started with the Armenian attacks on September 12, 2022 have been brought under control for now, there is a strong possibility that they will be repeated. It is certain that one of the three actors listed above is behind these events. Finally, it is useful to draw attention to the position of the Iranian administration in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in particular and in the Armenian-Azeri conflict in general. The Tehran administration shot itself in the foot here. Supporting Armenia in the conflicts, Tehran has endangered





its national security by making great strategic shortsightedness. One third of Iran's population consists of Azerbaijani Turks. On the other hand, Iran's choice in this conflict, which acts within the framework of sectarian solidarity in foreign policy, is full of contradictions. The Tehran administration supported the Christian Armenia, not the Shiite and Muslim Azerbaijan. The conflicts that took place at a time when the preparations for a peace agreement in the South Caucasus continued at full speed, once again led the attention of the world to this region. As a regional actor in the new world conditions, Turkey also closely follows the developments in the Caucasus.