

Turkey

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Bethan McKernan in Istanbul

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Mon 28 Sep 2020 19.13 BST Last modified on Mon 26 Oct 2020 13.38 GMT

Turkish and local soldiers in joint exercises in Azerbaijan Azerbaijan last month

Turkish and local soldiers in joint exercises in Azerbaijan last month. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Syrian rebel fighters have signed up to work for a private Turkish security company as border guards in Azerbaijan, several volunteers in Syria's last rebel stronghold have said, at a time

when the long-running conflict between Baku and neighbouring Armenia is showing dangerous signs of escalation.

The potential deployment is a sign of Turkey's growing appetite for projecting power abroad, and opens a third theatre in its regional rivalry with Moscow. Ankara is already engaged in a volatile power struggle with Russia in the conflicts in Syria and Libya, and tensions could now spill over into Nagorno-Karabakh.

1:58 Armenia and Azerbaijan clash over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region – video report

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The arrival of foreign fighters would inject a new layer of complexity into the battle between Yerevan and Baku over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, an enclave legally considered to be part of Azerbaijan but which has been run by ethnic Armenians since it declared independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The area attracts western concern because it is a major oil and gas pipeline corridor.

Clashes in July that killed 17 people in a different border region, as well as fresh hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh in the last two days, which have left 15 dead so far, have led to concerns that the dormant conflict could once again be lurching into full-blown war.

Turkey has strong cultural and economic ties with Azerbaijan. Russia has been traditionally close to Armenia but has forged links with the Baku elites in recent years, and continues to sell arms to both sides.

While most of the international community, including Moscow, have called for de-escalation and a return to the diplomatic process in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said on Sunday that Baku had his country's full support.

"The Turkish people stand with their Azeri brothers with all our means, as always," he said on Twitter, going on to criticise other nations for "double standards and insufficient reaction" against what he characterised as Armenian attacks.

Observers have questioned why Baku's highly-trained and well-armed military forces would be in need of assistance from Syrian mercenaries. Men in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province, however, say that a recruitment drive began a month ago.

Two brothers living in Azaz, Muhammad and Mahmoud, who asked for their names to be changed because of the sensitivity of the issue, said they were summoned to a military camp in Afrin on 13 September.

On arrival they were told by a commander in the Turkish-backed Sultan Murad division that work was available guarding observation posts and oil and gas facilities in Azerbaijan on three or six month contracts at 7,000-10,000 Turkish lira (£700-£1,000) a month – significantly more than they could earn at home.

The commander did not give details on what the job would entail, how long the posting would be, or when they were expected to leave. The men are also not clear about the name of the Turkish security company, or who would be paying their wages.

“Our leader told us that we won’t be fighting, just assisting in guarding some areas,” Muhammad said. “Our salaries aren’t enough for living, so we see it a great opportunity to make money.”

“There are no jobs available,” his brother added. “I used to work as a tailor in Aleppo but since we were displaced to Azaz [after Aleppo fell to Assad in 2016], I’ve tried many times to practise my craft but my family and I can’t earn enough.”

The promised salaries are vast sums compared with the 450-550 Turkish lira a month Syrian rebels earn from Ankara in the fight against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Ankara has supported the Syrian opposition since the early days of the war, even as the original Free Syrian Army umbrella group grew weak and splintered because of infighting and the growth of Islamist elements within rebel ranks.

Turkey also uses some rebel fighters as proxies against Kurdish-led forces despite allegations of human rights abuses from watchdogs.

Since December, Ankara has also facilitated the movement of thousands of Syrian rebels to Libya as mercenaries, where they have helped turn the tide of the civil war in favour of the UN-backed government fighting warlord Khalifa Haftar.

Omar from Idlib city, who also asked for his real name not to be used, was called to Afrin on 22 September along with 150 other men and was asked to prepare to leave, only to be told later the same day the deployment had been delayed until further notice. He said he had asked around for a broker’s number after hearing about the potential deployment, registering his name with a local agent on the understanding that Omar would pay him \$200 (£156) of his first month’s wages.

“When we first started being offered work abroad in Libya, people were afraid to go there, but now there are definitely thousands of us who are willing to go to either Libya or Azerbaijan,” he said. “There is nothing for us here.”

As with the Azerbaijan proposition, some men who went to Libya have said they were also told they would be employed as guards, but found themselves caught up in frontline fighting instead. Many have also reported that commanders pocketed up to 20% of their salaries.

Elizabeth Tsurkov, a fellow at the Washington DC-based Center for Global Policy, said: “The international community regards the lives of Syrians as expendable, with Syria serving as an arena to settle geostrategic scores and advance the interests of countries intervening in the country at Syrians’ expense.

“Syrians resisted and still resist this logic, but the economic ruin stemming from the war and the recent depreciation of the Syrian currency mean that most Syrians are now struggling to feed themselves. Faced with few choices, many are now willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder.”

Several sources in the Syrian National Army (SNA), the main umbrella of Syrian rebel groups funded by Turkey, as well as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor, say that a first batch of 500 Syrian fighters from the SNA's Sultan Murad and Al Hamza divisions has already arrived in Azerbaijan, including two senior commanders: Fahim Eissa, the leader of Sultan Murad, and Saif Abu Bakir of Al Hamza. The Guardian could not confirm the reports.

The rumours have been bolstered by several unverified videos circulated on social media that purport to show armed Syrian rebels travelling along an Azerbaijani road in the back of pick up trucks while chanting battle songs.

Both the Armenian government and Russian media have alleged that up to 4,000 Syrian men are already present in Nagorno-Karabakh, claims which have been denied by Baku as "nonsense".

A Turkish defence ministry source said on Monday: "We strongly reject such claims. Our support consists of military advice and training of Azerbaijan's armed forces ... The Turkish ministry of defence does not deal with recruiting or transferring militiamen anywhere in the world."