

Moscow's losing control

Up in the region I like to call "Mideast North," Azeris and Armenians are at each other's throats.

In the past few days Moscow has sent more than 11,000 crack airborne troops into strife-torn Azerbaijan, which is on the verge of full-scale civil war.

All this reminds me of Palestine in 1947, when Arabs and Jews were battling each other as well as the British. Except that even today the Arab-Jewish conflict is only about 50 years old, while the Armenians and Azeris have been sharpening their feud for the past 1,200 years.

Armenians are an ancient Christian people whose mountainous homeland is right in the middle of one of the Mideast's prime invasion routes. Azeris are a Shia Moslem people of Turko-Iranian roots. Their home, Azerbaijan, is divided between the USSR and Iran. Smack in the middle of Azerbaijan is a largely Armenian enclave known as Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenians have been demanding that the enclave be put under their control. Azerbaijan has refused. Demonstrations quickly turned to violence. Azeris have been blockading rail lines into Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. This past week, anti-Armenian pogroms erupted in the Azeri capital, Baku. Armed gangs of Armenians and Azeris are battling in the countryside, just as Jewish settlers and Arab farmers fought in 1947.

Both sides have ignored Moscow's threats or attempts at conciliation. What's particularly curious to me is that Moscow seems unwilling or even unable to send enough troops to the Transcaucasus region to impose tight martial law. A few months ago, the head of the interior ministry's security forces openly said he didn't have enough troops to cover the entire USSR — even though these MVD forces are said to number more than 250,000 men.

One wonders why more regular army units have not been sent south. Are they unreliable, too busy

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watching other areas or does the party fear the army? It's well known that once soldiers are used in domestic security duty they often get a yen for political power — or Bonapartism, in Marx-speak.

Another interesting point: Many Azeris are saying it was Afghanistan that sparked their defiance of Moscow. The withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan showed the 80 million or so Moslems of the USSR that militant Islam could beat the mighty Russians. And it is this issue that most deeply worries the Kremlin.

Soviet Central Asia is by no means monolithic. In this vast region of steppe and hill country one finds Tatars, Mongols, Tajiks, Turkomen, Uzbeks, Kazaks, Khirgiz and a host of other peoples. In spite of this ethnic and linguistic diversity, Islam is a powerful unifying force. Now, a second potent force is slowly emerging, as this column has been noting in recent years: Pan-Turkism.

Most of the peoples who inhabit the great crescent that sweeps across central Asia from Istanbul to the Chinese province of Sinkiang are of Turkish origin and speak variants of Ural-Altai Turkish tongues. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Turkish reformers — the origin of the term Young Turks — began promoting the concept of a great Turkish nation from the Bosphorous to the Great Wall of China. Turkish volunteers went off to fight the Bolsheviks in Central Asia during the 1920s.

Today, the rallying cry of Pan-Turkism is again being heard. In Istanbul, more than 200 Pan-Turkish organizations are in business. Across Moslem Central Asia, the call to Turkish greatness is sounding. Moscow is deeply alarmed.

The Kremlin's No. 1 problem is not the Baltic or even the economy, but Central Asia. That's why the seemingly obscure rumpus between Azeris and Armenians so frightens the Soviet leaders.

Leaning too hard on the angry Azeris might just trigger off a jihad, or holy war, among Central Asia's Moslems. Worse, an Azeri or Kazak Ayatollah might pop up, setting all Asia ablaze.

This is why the cash-strapped Soviets are still giving \$350 million a month in aid to the communist regime in Afghanistan. If it falls to the mujahedin, the flames of militant Islam could quickly spread into Soviet Asia. This point was underscored last week when jubilant Azeris tore down fences and barbed wire on the border with Iran — a sort of anti-Moslem Berlin Wall.

The situation in the Caucasus is worsening. Georgians, Ossetians, Daghestanis, Cherkess, and groups that even a lot of Russians have never heard of, are on the warpath. It's Lebanon's Shia, Druzes and Maronites all over again.

Poor Mikhail Gorbachev. When does he find time to sleep? How long will his health hold up? Running the crumbling USSR and the Mideast North is just too much for one man.

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