

Erdogan: Russia Backing Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan

Turkish President Recep Erdogan on Wednesday accused Russia of siding with Armenia in the conflict with Azerbaijan over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, saying the meddling was similar to Moscow's actions in Ukraine and Syria, Agence France-Presse reported.

“Russia likes taking sides, it has done so in Ukraine, Georgia and today in Syria,” said Erdogan. Moscow stands accused of backing separatist insurgents in eastern Ukraine, supporting Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and fighting a brief war with Georgia in 2008 over the self-proclaimed republics.

Armenia has accused Russia of not taking sides emphatically enough. President Serzh Sargsyan said Wednesday it was “painful for us that Russia and other countries ... sell weapons to Azerbaijan,” AFP reported.

Azerbaijan has spent about \$4 billion on Russian weapons in recent years. But Moscow, which has close economic ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, announced earlier this year it would also send a big weapons shipment to Armenia.

The announcement — which came amid Russia's souring relations with Turkey, a close Azerbaijan ally — said Moscow would provide Armenia with a \$200 million credit to buy multiple-launch rocket systems, anti-tank missiles, handheld anti-aircraft missiles and upgrades to tanks, among other gear.

Russian-Turkish relations turned increasingly acerbic after Ankara shot down Moscow's bomber plane near the Turkish-Syrian border in November. Russia has been conducting air strikes in Syria since September 2015.

“You say you are in Syria at the invitation of the regime,” Erdogan charged at Russia, AFP reported. “You are not obliged to go there. If you do, take the side of the oppressed, not the oppressor.”

After violence between Armenian and Azeri forces flared in Nagorno-Karabakh earlier this month, Erdogan vouched support for his Azeri “brothers,” and predicted that the breakaway region would some day return to its “original owner” — Azerbaijan.

But at a time when accusations of taking sides seem to be fired from all directions, Erdogan would hear nothing of having that charge directed against Turkey.

“Russia says that Turkey is taking sides. If we are looking for someone who is taking sides, it is Russia,” he was quoted by AFP as saying.

A six-year war in Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic-Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan, ended in 1994, but violent outbreaks between Armenian and Azeri forces have continued ever since. The latest conflict, the worst in years, subsided after a fragile truce was reached in Moscow on Tuesday.

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