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RAHIM RAHIMOV

194

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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After Azerbaijan's defeat of Armenia in the 44-day war of 2020 and conservative Ebrahim Raisi's election as the Iranian president, the relative thaw that Azerbaijani-Iranian relations had witnessed under former Iranian president Hassan Rouhani ceased. Serious disagreements between Baku and Tehran became vivid. In that light, Iran and Azerbaijan have experienced yet another escalation of tensions since mid-October. On the one hand, contemporary manifestations of contested but also intermingled elements of the shared history and, on the other hand, the so-far consequences of Russian-Ukrainian war are echoed in the current escalation. Thus, against such broader historic and international backdrops, the question is whether or not the reconciliation of Iranian-Azerbaijani frictions is plausible.

Peculiarities of the Escalation

The latest wave of escalation broke out as Iran launched war games along the Azerbaijani border. The wargames came as part of Tehran's efforts to deter "any change in the region's geopolitical and historical borders as well as the status quo in transit between Iran and Armenia."¹ Specifically, Tehran wants to contain Baku's push for the Zangezur Corridor which implies the establishment of a land corridor along the Armenian side of the Iranian border to connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave and then further to Turkey. But Tehran views the perspectives of the project otherwise and detrimental to its interests.² In particular, Tehran regards the Zangezur Corridor as disrupting the "neighborliness" between Armenia and Iran and serving Turkic unity which has been institutionally manifested through the creation of the Organization of Turkic States.

A comparison of this wave of escalation to the previous tensions; in particular, the one that took place a year ago in September 2021, clearly indicates that the historic context and contemporary troubles of the bilateral relations and the causes of the current rift remains almost entirely unchanged. But what constitutes a difference is Azerbaijan's belligerent and defiant reaction manifested through a strong rhetoric of the official figures and media outlets, notably the Azerbaijani State TV Channel AzTV. The Baku-based Caucasus Muslims Authority and its head, Azerbaijan's top religious leader, Haji Allahshukur Pashazade, publicly condemned the Iranian acts.

The first-ever military drills along the Iranian border, the adoption of an official decision to establish an embassy in Israel and the reinstatement of

the issue of the rights of the multi-million ethnically Azerbaijani [Turkic] community of Iran to the official discourse are the three major novelties in Baku's response to Tehran. What is new in Tehran's behavior are the opening of the consulate in Kapan, Armenia and demonstrative exercises of pontoon bridge installations to cross over the Aras River that is the natural border between Azerbaijan and Iran and embodies historical connotations. The international context and the Iranian domestic situation are also distinctive to the current escalation.

Impact of Russia-Ukraine War

The broader international context has been reshaped by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war as it has contributed to the Iranian-Azerbaijani escalation in two ways. First, the war has caused a diversion of cargo transportation away from the traditional Russian route to the Middle Corridor via Azerbaijan hence exacerbating the repercussions of the proposed Zangezur corridor for Tehran.

Tehran Times quoted Iranian MP, Mohammad Safaei, who described the war games as "a response to Israel's influence in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Central Asia as well as plannings for some 'conspiracies' against Iran."³ Then, he added that "Zionists are seeking to undermine the Islamic Republic's influence in Central Asia." This little but significant nuance; that is, the implication of Central Asia, somehow escaped the attention of the media and the policy and expert communities. That nuance is helpful to grasp the essence of the broader international context of Tehran's motivations and the related Turkic factor. Indeed, Israel has built good relations with Central Asian nations such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, too. But Tehran's tumultuousness is aroused by increasingly closer ties between the Turkic nations of Central Asia with Azerbaijan and Turkey alongside with, if not rather than, the Israeli factor. And the rising importance of the Middle Corridor shapes the economic component of the Turkic unity.

According to the Azerbaijani Railways Company, trans-Caspian cargo transportations via the Middle Corridor have risen by 45% in the first ten months of 2022 as compared to the figures in 2021.⁴ The surge has been triggered by the diversion of transportation away from Russia due to the war against Ukraine and the related Western sanctions.⁵ The Organization of Turkic States regards the Zangezur Corridor as part of the broader

Middle Corridor. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war exacerbates the Iranian worries over the Zangezur Corridor. Emotionally, the Zangezur Corridor is portrayed as aiming to connect the Turkic world and/or disrupting Iranian-Armenian neighborliness depending on each side's perspective and discourse.⁶ In fact, there is a Georgian route and the related Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line which connects Azerbaijan to Turkey as part of the Middle Corridor. Practically, the Zangezur Corridor is vital for the creation of a direct land connection between Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave and also could act as an alternative to the Georgian route hence ensuring a diversification of the routes. Politically, the Zangezur Corridor would be crucial to Armenian-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Turkish normalization. None of these are in line with Iranian interests.⁷

Iranian wargames took place as the Azerbaijani and Turkish presidents, Aliyev and Erdogan, inaugurated the newly constructed international airport in the de-occupied Zangilan district located at the nexus of the Armenian-Azerbaijani-Iranian state borders. As Erdogan and Aliyev was inaugurating the Zangilan airport, the Iranian and Armenian Foreign Ministers rushed to open an Iranian consulate in the Kapan region next to Zangilan and on the Zangezur Corridor route. The level of the rush was so much that the consulate was opened in an unfinished building. The aim in opening the consulate and conducting the wargames was to warn Azerbaijan against pushing for the Zangezur Corridor.⁸

Second, Russia appears entangled in Ukraine and, therefore, is weakened and distracted away from the Armenian-Azerbaijani topic hence somewhat prompting Turkey, Iran, France and other actors to grapple to fill the gap left by Moscow's distraction. Notably, Azerbaijan and Turkey held large joint drills codenamed "Brother's Fist" along the Azerbaijani-Iranian border in December 2022 in yet another response to Iran. Presidents Aliyev and Erdogan addressed the defense ministers and military personnel involved in the drills via mobile phones emphasizing Azerbaijani-Turkish unity against the threats. The participation in the joint drills has been the major Turkish reaction to the Iranian-Azerbaijani escalation. Two more developments that have taken place in December 2022 are not directly related to the Iranian-Azerbaijani escalation but useful to complement the context: a high-ranking Turkish General-Colonel, the Commander of the Turkish Service Group in Azerbaijan, Bakhtiyar Ersay, has been also appointed as Advisor to the Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan. The Presidents of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Turkmenistan, the three Turkic nations that border

Iran, held a trilateral summit in the Turkmen city of Avaza. The significance of the continuation of work aimed at establishing the Zangezur Corridor was stated at the summit.

The French senate has recommended the government to sanction Baku and recognize the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh republic. And the Azerbaijani parliament reciprocated with a resolution that condemned France. Emmanuel Macron's accusations of alleged allying with Russia in the 2020 war and violation of the territorial integrity of Armenia infuriated Azerbaijan. President Aliyev lambasted those accusations likening them to a "rooster crow" applying the connotative powers of Azerbaijani linguistics.⁹

Amidst the tensions with Paris and Tehran, Baku simultaneously experienced a troubled time with Moscow. In particular, President Vladimir Putin publicly encouraged Armenia to reject what he termed the "Washington plan;" that is, according to the Kremlin, recognition of Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan in the would-be peace treaty. And Baku did not miss the opportunity to remind everyone of the deadline that Russian peacekeepers should leave by November 2025 under the Armenian-Azerbaijani-Russian Trilateral Declaration. Azerbaijani State Television condemned Russia for a "war of occupation" and "crimes against humanity" in Ukraine through the tongue of the channel's director. This unprecedented act captivated Francis Fukuyama who tweeted: "This is something."¹⁰

The synchronicity of Paris, Tehran and Moscow gave the impression to Azerbaijan that the three acted in coordination or in cahoots rather than accidentally. Yet such an Azerbaijani impression was reinforced by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's pre-conditioning of Macron's participation in the planned December 7 meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders through EU mediation and the related cancellation of the event that effectively derailed the Brussel format of the peace negotiations. Tehran opposes the European presence in the region that is manifested through the deployment of the EU monitoring civilian mission in Armenia along the shared border with Azerbaijan, nonetheless it holds Baku and not Yerevan as the culprit.

Domestic Context

The domestic context of the Iranian-Azerbaijani escalation has been reshaped by the nation-wide protests triggered by the controversial death of young Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, who had defied the mandatory

Islamic dress code.¹¹ Related tensions are sensible among the Iranian Azerbaijanis.¹² However, the tensions in Iran's Azerbaijani provinces have not taken conspicuously ethnic colors.

Amidst the escalation with Tehran, President Aliyev brought the issue of the ethnic Azerbaijanis (Turks) of Iran to the agenda of the Organization of Turkic States on two occasions. On each occasion, he underlined that the Turkic world is much broader than the geographical boundaries of the Turkic states.¹³ Aliyev told the Samarkand Summit of the Organization that "unfortunately, the majority of 40 million Azerbaijanis, who live outside the borders of the state of Azerbaijan, are deprived of these opportunities [of schooling in their native language.]"¹⁴ The majority of those Azerbaijanis live in Iran and they are considered the largest ethnic group after Persians. However, there are also other Turkic speaking populations, particularly Turkmens. He pledged to continue the "efforts for our compatriots, who have been separated from the state of Azerbaijan due to a bitter verdict of the fate, to keep committed to the ideas of Azerbaijanism." Those ideas encapsulate the sense of affiliation with the homeland of every Azerbaijani at home and abroad irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity, language or other background, the policy of multiculturalism and the principle of the secularity of the state.

The president's messages were heard in Tehran. In an apparent response, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei's Chief Advisor on Foreign Affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, wrote an article. In his piece, he basically questions the Turkic identity of Azerbaijanis, tries to make the case for precedence of Shiite identity over the ethnic one and simultaneously attacks [Ottoman] Turks for "intending to annex the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan" (1918-20). Moreover, Velayati as well as other Iranian figures and media outlets frequently refer to the republic of Azerbaijan as "north of the Aras River" and Azerbaijanis as "Azeri." He used an ambiguous phrase to sum up his arguments: "Every Azeri is Iranian and every Iranian is Azeri even though that Azeri or Iranian is outside Iran or has another passport."¹⁵ Apart from historic connotations and contested issues, Velayati's remarks have also been prompted by the ongoing Iranian protests and related fears that protests may take ethnic colors in Azerbaijani-populated cities and provinces.

The protests mainly driven by the youth,¹⁶ including especially girls and young women, who defy the imposed life-style, revealed vulnerabilities of Iran.¹⁷ And Tehran in line with Moscow tends to characterize the war

in Ukraine as a Western-Russian confrontation rather than a Russian-Ukrainian one as it does not want Western culture and liberal values coming closer to the region. Tehran also accuses Baku of siding with Israel and the West. Of course, neighboring Azerbaijan is not a Western liberal democracy. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's multicultural society with a European-like life-style, freedom of religion and the secularity of the state may be seen a captivating model to many in Iran. That becomes more vivid when conflated with ethno-national and cultural-linguistic sentiments and the sense of the affiliation of Iranian Azerbaijanis with their kin nation hence underpinning Tehran's nervousness.¹⁸ Therefore, Velayati's remarks are symptomatic of that nervousness whereas President Aliyev reiterated once again - and explicitly - that Azerbaijan will continue its defense of the right of Iranian Azerbaijanis to schooling in their native language and "do everything to protect ... the secular development of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis, including Azerbaijanis in Iran."¹⁹

Whether Baku's vow to support the rights of the multi-million Iranian Azerbaijanis will continue, if yes, then whether notionally or actually will matter a lot to reshaping of the disrupted Iranian-Azerbaijani status-quo. Nonetheless, the new status-quo, when or if it emerges, will not resolve the underlying Iranian-Azerbaijani frictions. The Azerbaijani intellectual and pundit on Iran, Ahmet bey Agaoglu (1869-1939), concluded 100 years ago that the intricate relationship between the two nations has been formed through thousand years of political rule of various Turkic (Azerbaijani) dynasties over Iran and the simultaneous domination of the Persian language and Shiism which was formally introduced by the Azerbaijani ruler, Shah Ismail, in the moral sphere.²⁰ For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the religious [Shiite] identity is superior to ethnic [especially Turkic] identity whereas for the secular Republic of Azerbaijan, Shiism is a religious faith and not a political ideology. Such a dichotomy and the related broader implications that have been formed over centuries underlies the mutual mistrust and the fears between Iran and Azerbaijan.

In this deep historic light, the old disrupted status-quo that was held during the years of the tandem of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was characterized by the fact that Azerbaijan avoided promoting the topic of Southern Azerbaijan and hosting or accommodating Iranian Azerbaijani political activists who advocated for the independence or the separation of Southern Azerbaijan from Iran and, therefore, had to leave Azerbaijan whereas Tehran has refrained from openly instigating

related religious [Shiite] groups within Azerbaijan. But with the eruption of the tensions, many Iranian Azerbaijani political emigrants have come back and reappeared on Azerbaijani TV channels, media and public events speaking out against the Iranian government's behavior.

Furthermore, in line with the old status-quo, Azerbaijan has not engaged in the formulation and implementation of a formal specific policy targeted towards the Azerbaijani community of Iran. Basically, Baku has tried to keep neutral on that matter in order not to provoke Tehran. Illustratively, there has been no specialized TV channels, no university scholarships programs specifically designed for the Iranian Azerbaijanis and no plan or efforts to form a soft power there, etc. In that context, it would be challenging for Baku to influence the Iranian Azerbaijani population, if needed. However, Baku can bet on the historic bonds and the ethnic-cultural and linguistic sense of affiliation of the Iranian Azerbaijanis to the republic of Azerbaijan, as the kin nation, and the Iranian Azerbaijani political emigrants abroad. Indeed, such bonds and a sense of affiliation were expressed among Iranian Azerbaijanis during the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan²¹ and arrests of Iranian Azerbaijanis supporting the republic of Azerbaijan and protesting Tehran's lining with Armenia were recorded in Iran. Incidentally, there have been arrests of Iranian Azerbaijanis who have voiced support for Azerbaijan amidst the current tensions with Tehran. The arrest of an ethnically Azerbaijani (Turkic) Iranian comedian for posting "Here is Azerbaijan" on social media in Iran is a case in point.

However, voicing support on social media does not necessarily translate into doing real deeds. Yet whether the expressions of support and related incidents are episodic or massive is to be clarified. But the possibility to gauge the level of support for Baku among Iranian Azerbaijanis is absolutely limited, if at all. Illustratively, since Iran has never disclosed the ethnic demographics of the country, a rough number, let alone the exact figure, of ethnic Azerbaijanis (Turks) is only anyone's guess. According to modest estimates, Iranian Azerbaijanis outnumber, at least twice, the ten-million population in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

The developments and the realities that have taken place since the 2020 war epitomize the disruption of the status-quo between Azerbaijan and Iran. And the latest escalation with its manifestations, implications

and consequences overshadows the coming of a new status-quo in the bilateral relationship. But this process of the formation of a new status-quo will be complicated and take time. While the issue of the Zangezur Corridor is central to that process, the positions of Armenia and Russia, not Iran, would eventually determine the outcome of the project. Therefore, it will also depend on a range of factors including the course of the war in Ukraine, the trajectory of Azerbaijani-Russian relations and the Western position on the matter.

The war in Ukraine, its repercussions for the South Caucasus region and related developments did not trigger but only highlighted the scale of the frictions and the existing disagreements between Baku and Tehran. Indeed, the nature of the Iranian-Azerbaijani frictions is fundamental and systemic and, in some ways, going centuries back. Therefore, even if the current disputes such as the Zangezur Corridor are settled, the underlying frictions in the bilateral relationship will persist under the new status-quo. Neither Baku nor Tehran is in a position to resolve those frictions on their own in the foreseeable future. And there is no sign that they could come together to address that challenge. And this promises new waves of tensions.

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