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**Iran-Azerbaijan Confrontation:
Threats and Challenges**

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Iran-Azerbaijan relations have never been easy but they became particularly tense in September-October 2021, attracting attention within the region and beyond.

This confrontation between the parties escalated into large-scale military exercises and a war of statements but, fortunately, the tension did not reach a level of military confrontation.

In the second half of October, the confrontation slowly subsided. However, the problem has not disappeared. Its causes still exist and have a great potential of reigniting the conflict.

Such a situation creates a fertile ground for a number of threats and challenges for the entire region, including Georgia.

Standpoints of the Parties

Shiites make up the majority of the population of Iran and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, their approaches (for example, to the issue of state organization) are fundamentally different from each other. For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the current model of secular Azerbaijan is very contrasting.

An additional important factor to consider here is that official Baku has chosen Israel, an adversary of Iran and linguistically and culturally related Turkey, as its main foreign policy ally. All of this inevitably raises concerns in Tehran.¹

The situation became especially tense after the Second Karabakh war as this conflict significantly changed the balance of power in the region.²

Tehran believes that this balance has not changed in its favor. Tehran believes that it was precisely the second Karabakh war that significantly increased the influence of Turkey and Israel on Baku.³

There are also suspicions in Tehran that Israeli military units are stationed on the territory of Azerbaijan.⁴ The Iranian side claims that after the Second Karabakh war Baku provides Israel with full freedom of action to penetrate deep into the territory of Iran.⁵ Official Baku categorically denies these allegations.⁶

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has warned all neighboring countries not to allow "foreigners to interfere in the region" which he claims could become a "source of discord and harm."⁷

¹ Alex Vatanka, "Azerbaijan and Israel's Encirclement of Iran," <https://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijan-and-israels-encirclement-iran>

² Zurab Batiashvili, "Why Did Iran-Azerbaijan Relations Become Strained?," <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1328>

³ Taras Kuzio, "An Azerbaijani-Iranian War Will Lead to a Regional Conflagration," <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/azerbaijani-iranian-war-will-lead-regional-conflagration-195008>

⁴ "Iran Begins War Games Near Tense Azerbaijan Border, Citing 'Zionist' Presence," <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-begins-war-games-near-tense-azerbaijan-border-citing-zionist-presence>

⁵ Alex Vatanka, "Azerbaijan and Israel's Encirclement of Iran," <https://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijan-and-israels-encirclement-iran>

⁶ "Azerbaijan Denies Presence of Israeli Military on its Soil," <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211006-azerbaijan-denies-presence-of-israeli-military-on-its-soil>

⁷ Alex Vatanka, "Azerbaijan and Israel's Encirclement of Iran," <https://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijan-and-israels-encirclement-iran>

On the other hand, Israel suspects that Iran will soon have nuclear weapons and experts are increasingly talking about a possible Israeli attack on Iran in order to eliminate Tehran's capacity to develop such weapons.⁸

Tehran also uses caution vis-à-vis the issue of ethnic Azerbaijanis living in the north of the country as it fears the incitement of a separatist movement there⁹ (there are about 20 million ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran while the population of Azerbaijan itself is roughly 10 million¹⁰).

The news was preceded by the Azerbaijani arrest of two Iranian truck drivers on a section of the Armenian-Iranian land route of which the Azerbaijani side regained control after the second Karabakh war. According to the Azerbaijani side, these drivers were involved in illegal trade with the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh.¹¹

Furthermore, official Baku and official Ankara requested opening the roads connecting Turkey, Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan via the territory of southern Armenia (the opening of these roads is also envisaged by the Russia-Azerbaijan-Armenia peace agreement signed a year ago) which is also called the "Zangezur Corridor" in Azerbaijan.¹²

At the same time, Azerbaijan (including at the highest levels) began to talk and hint that the southern part of Armenia (which the Armenian side calls Syunik and the Azerbaijani side - Zangezur) is an ancient Azerbaijani territory which has found itself within the territory of a neighboring country through historical "misfortunes."¹³

Clearly, if this scenario were to be realized, it would not only physically block the transport routes connecting northern Iran (Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Black Sea-Europe) but, from Tehran's point of view, a united Turkish-Azerbaijani arc would encircle Iran which might further exacerbate nationalistic attitudes among Azerbaijanis living in northern Iran.¹⁴

It was these events that Iran assessed as a direct threat against it and decided to hold an unprecedented military exercise in September-October 2021 (the first phase of which began on September 21 and the second on October 1) near the Azerbaijan border; the exercises involved four Iranian divisions with a total of 50,000 Iranian soldiers.¹⁵

⁸ "Israel's Military Chief Says 'Accelerating' Iran Strike Plans," <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/israels-military-chief-says-accelerating-iran-strike-plans>

⁹ Taras Kuzio, "An Azerbaijani-Iranian War Will Lead to a Regional Conflagration," <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/azerbaijani-iranian-war-will-lead-regional-conflagration-195008>

¹⁰ Zurab Batiashvili, "Why Did Iran-Azerbaijan Relations Become Strained?," <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1328>

¹¹ Heydar Isayev, "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations Strained Over Truck Driver Arrests," <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-iran-relations-strained-over-truck-driver-arrests>

¹² Zurab Batiashvili, "Why Did Iran-Azerbaijan Relations Become Strained?," <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1328>

¹³ Joshua Kucera, "What's the Future of Azerbaijan's 'Ancestral Lands' in Armenia?," <https://eurasianet.org/whats-the-future-of-azerbaijans-ancestral-lands-in-armenia>

¹⁴ Zurab Batiashvili, "Why Did Iran-Azerbaijan Relations Become Strained?," <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1328>

¹⁵ Zurab Batiashvili, "Why Did Iran-Azerbaijan Relations Become Strained?," <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1328>



Iranian Military Exercises Near the Azerbaijani Border

Naturally, exercises of this scale have not gone unnoticed in Azerbaijan. As the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev stated: "Every country has the right to conduct military exercises on its territory. This is their sovereign right. But why now and why in the proximity of our borders?"¹⁶

Of course, Baku was not left alone in this confrontation and soon (October 5-8) Azerbaijan and Turkey responded by holding military exercises near the Iranian border under the telling name of "Unwavering Brotherhood"¹⁷ thereby signaling to Tehran that they are even ready for a military response. (The "Shusha Declaration" signed between Turkey and Azerbaijan also includes mutual military assistance).

¹⁶ "Iran Carries Out Military Drills Near Azerbaijan Border," <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/iran-carries-out-military-drills-near-azerbaijan-border-50410>

¹⁷ Tom O'Connor, "Iran Looks to Russia as Azerbaijan President Pets Israeli Drones Across Border," <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-looks-russia-azerbaijan-president-pets-israeli-drones-across-border-1636826>



"Unwavering Brotherhood" Turkish-Azerbaijani Joint Military Exercises, October 5-8

A similar message was sent by the President Aliyev on October 5 when he visited a military base in the city of Jabrayil near the Iranian border and took photos with an Israeli-made drone.



President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and Israeli-made Drone at a Military Base in Jabrayil

Baku also sent a strong military message to Tehran through the Azerbaijani embassy when at the height of tensions the diplomatic mission posted a photo of an Azerbaijani soldier holding an Israeli-made weapon on its Twitter account.



Photo Published by the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran of an Azerbaijani Soldier Holding an Israeli-made Weapon

Against this background, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, left for Moscow on October 5, meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.¹⁸ At this meeting, however, the Russian side was actively lobbying for the 3 + 3 formula (Russia, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia)¹⁹ which is a priority for them at the moment and it seems that Tehran has not received the level of support from Moscow necessary to counterbalance the Azerbaijani-Turkish tandem.

Consequently, Tehran was not able to acquire the levers that might have changed the new status quo in the region.

As a result, the process of de-escalation began after these events: on October 13, a telephone conversation took place between the Foreign Ministers of Iran and Azerbaijan where the parties agreed to resolve the crisis through dialogue. Indeed, on October 21, the Azerbaijani authorities released two Iranian drivers arrested in September on charges of violating Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.²⁰

Nevertheless, it is impossible to assert that the problems have been fully resolved. On the contrary, additional problems have arisen in some areas. For example, according to various media outlets, pro-Iranian religious leaders were arrested in Azerbaijan in the second half of October²¹ and pro-Iranian websites were also blocked in the country.²²

Despite everything, the situation has overall de-escalated and the degree of tension in bilateral relations has also diminished. However, since the causes of the existing problems still remain, it will most likely resurface many times over. In this regard, there are several potential threats and challenges for the whole region, including Georgia.

Threats and Challenges

- During the increase in the tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan, Russia often activates the topic of the 3 + 3 formula and presents this project as a way to solve the problems and start serious regional cooperation. Starting long-term cooperation with the occupant country, more so in a union where our Western partners will not be represented, is not in Georgia's interests and will leave the country tête-à-tête with Russia;
- The Iran-Azerbaijan military conflict would have posed a serious threat not only to big cities (for example, during the escalation the Chief of the General Staff, Mohammad Bagheri, said that in the event of a conflict, the Iranian side would launch 4,000 cruise missiles towards

¹⁸ "Diplomat Elaborates on Amir Abdollahian's Visit to Moscow,"

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/465872/Diplomat-elaborates-on-Amir-Abdollahian-s-visit-to-Moscow>

¹⁹ "Russia Offers 3+3 Format Caucasus Regional Platform," <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/russia-offers-33-format-caucasus-regional-platform>

²⁰ Samuel Ramani, "Iran-Azerbaijan Crisis Points to Shifting Regional Currents," <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/iran-azerbaijan-crisis-points-shifting-regional-currents>

²¹ Ulkar Natiqqizi, "Amid Tensions with Iran, Azerbaijan Detains Shia Clerics," <https://eurasianet.org/amid-tensions-with-iran-azerbaijan-detains-shia-clerics>

²² Maryam Sinaee, "In Latest Azerbaijan-Iran Spat, Baku Blocks 'Pro-Iranian' Websites," <https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211023783816>

- Baku²³) and projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the transportation of natural gas through the “Southern Corridor,” etc., which would most likely be targeted in the event of a military conflict;
- A military conflict between the two countries would have seriously damaged the economy of Azerbaijan. This would have had a negative impact on bilateral economic ties (Georgia-Azerbaijan bilateral trade turnover in 2015 was USD 954.5 million)²⁴ as well as direct investments and the attraction of Azerbaijani tourists to Georgia after the pandemic (1.5 million Azerbaijani visitors arrived in Georgia in 2019²⁵).

²³ “Tensions with Azerbaijan Reveal Iran’s Loss of Influence in Caucasus,” <https://thearabweekly.com/tensions-azerbaijan-reveal-irans-loss-influence-caucasus>

²⁴ Georgian Foreign Trade 2020, Statistical Publication, National Statistics Office of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2021, https://www.geostat.ge/media/39340/External-Merchandise-Trade-2020_publication-2021.pdf

²⁵ “Number of Foreign Visitors to Georgia in 2019,” Georgian National Statistics Office, https://www.geostat.ge/media/29372/ucxoel_vizitorTa_statistika_2019_GEO.PDF