A New Direction in Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy: Irredentism

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The problem in Azerbaijan-Iran interstate relations has been further aggravated in the aftermath of the 2020 Second Karabakh War, which resulted in Azerbaijan's military victory over Armenia. The results of the war have violated the rules of the game observed by the parties, despite the misunderstandings that have arisen in bilateral relations from time to time since the Republic of Azerbaijan regained independence. In my article posted on Baku Research Institute's website on 15 October 2021, we noted that relations with Iran have never been smooth and unproblematic during thirty years of Azerbaijan's independence; recent developments indicate a deepening of mistrust and antagonism between the two neighbors sharing historical, cultural and religious proximity, and this will have long-term consequences for bilateral relations. Now, a year later, we can see that this conclusion was justified, with a more serious problem arising between the two countries, accompanied by mutual diplomatic demarches, harsh criticism and accusations in official media. This article deals with today's tensions in Azerbaijan-Iran relations, their possible impact on both bilateral and regional cooperation, as well as the new foreign policy direction suggested by the rhetoric and political line of the current Azerbaijan government.

Why and what Iran fears

The causes of the recent tension between Azerbaijan and Iran must be sought in the developments in the region between September and October 2022. A series of clashes erupted on 13 September along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border, leaving a large

number of troops dead or wounded on both sides. “Since the beginning of military operations on September 13, Azerbaijan has occupied another 10 square kilometers of the territory of Armenia,” Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan said. (He claimed that Azerbaijan in May 2021 had occupied 40 square km of Armenian territory.) This incident was perceived by Iran as Azerbaijan’s attempt to realize the Zangezur Corridor by force, which is a main concern of Iran.

After the 44-day Karabakh War, Iran defined a new *red line* in its regional policy: the inviolability of borders and the inadmissibility of geopolitical changes in the region that do not suit Iran’s interests. However, the increasing strength of the Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance and the Azerbaijan-Israel strategic partnership, indicated by Baku’s decision to open an embassy in Tel Aviv, suggest a change in regional geopolitics against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran considers the possibility of the extraterritorial status of the transport-communication corridor that will pass from Zangezur to the southern part of Armenia’s Sunik province as a change of borders because in this case, Iran’s land connection with Armenia will be cut off, and as a result, Iran’s access to the sea ports of Georgia, bypassing Azerbaijan and Turkey, and from there to Europe, that is, the *Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor*, will also be blocked. The news of Azerbaijani forces’ advance into Armenia during the September 13-14 operations caused a sharp reaction from the Iranian government. Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, warned that the Islamic Republic will not tolerate changes in regional borders. The same position was expressed by Naseer Kanani, an official representative of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, and Chairman of the Iranian Parliament Commission on National Security and Foreign Policy Vahid Jalalzadeh.

Following the border clashes, Israeli Minister of Defense Benjamin Gantz’s official trip to Azerbaijan on October 3 undoubtedly caused significant political irritation for Iran.

Based on the article authored by former ambassador to Azerbaijan Mohsen Pakaein and published on the website of the IRNA news agency, we can say that Tehran approached this trip from the context of geopolitical and border changes in the region, assessing it as a threat to Iran's interests. We can tell that Iran was provoked because on the day the Israeli delegation arrived in Baku, a telephone conversation took place between the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri and Azerbaijani Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov at the initiative of the Iranian side.

The next event that worried Iran was the inauguration ceremony of Zangilan airport on October 20, which was attended by Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Zangilan, a district liberated from occupation, borders Iran to the south, and Armenia (Syunik province) to the west. Even after the war, Iran was seriously concerned by official announcements and news about a dairy farm to be built by Israeli companies. Statements from officials in Tehran said Iran will never tolerate Israeli presence and activities near its borders. It is clear that Iran suspects that Israel is carrying out some military or intelligence activities in Zangilan, and this airport is an important infrastructure facility that can be used for these purposes.

In this regard, we can view as warnings to Azerbaijan, Israel and other interested parties a large military drill launched near the country's border with Azerbaijan in northwest Iran by Iran's military in the fall of 2021 and the subsequent large-scale military drill launched in the same area a year later. This three-day exercise, which was launched on October 17, 2022 and included elements such as crossing the Aras River using pontoon bridges, the control of roads and elevations, and the imitation of an offensive operation, caused serious dissatisfaction at the official and public level in Azerbaijan and was assessed as unfriendly towards Azerbaijan. A day after the inauguration ceremony of Zangilan airport, Iran's new consulate general was inaugurated in Kafan, Armenia. Gafan is

the administrative center of Sunik province, i.e. Zangezur, and it is not accidental to inaugurate a consulate general here. The purpose was to observe events in the region and protect the interests of the Iranian state. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, who visited Armenia to attend the inauguration, reiterated that the Iranian side will not accept changes in the historical borders in the region, that this is their red line, and that Iran will take all steps to counteract such attempts. The appearance of the Iranian consulate building in Sunik suggests that it is still incomplete, and thus, the Iranians moved up the inauguration date as a response to perceived Azerbaijani encroachments. In the following days, the decisions and statements made at the official level in Tehran and Baku led to soaring tensions.

Brief chronicle: The State Security Service of Azerbaijan (SSS) on 1 November 2022, released a statement concerning the disclosure of an illegal armed group created under the control of the Iranian special services. A day later, exercises of Azerbaijani Special Forces military units began in the territories near the southern borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In such an unfavorable atmosphere, the expected visit to Azerbaijan of the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament was postponed. The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence announced on 7 November that it had uncovered and arrested a group of 26 terrorists, linked to ISIS, in relation to the Shiraz attack that was led by an Azerbaijani national. On 10 November, Azerbaijan's ambassador in Tehran was summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, and the next day, the Iranian ambassador in Baku was summoned to the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry. The Iranian side conveyed to the Azerbaijani ambassador Iran's strong dissatisfaction with "unfriendly" statements by Azerbaijan's high-ranking officials and misinformation about Iran in the country's media, while the Azerbaijani side, on the contrary, expressed concern in relation to what Iran had conveyed to Azerbaijan's ambassador. On 14 November, the Azerbaijani ambassador was again summoned to the Iranian MFA,

where he was handed a protest note "in connection with criminal acts committed in the country by several Azerbaijani citizens." On the same day, the SSS of Azerbaijan successfully exposed an Iranian spy network. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev commented on Iran's recent steps in his remarks at an event organized on the occasion of Victory Day in Shusha in the context of his appeal to Armenia and the Armenian people: "They [Iran] need to understand this so that they do not become a victim of the circles based abroad and want to treat this region as a playground for the second time. We have the main say here. We have the main power here. Our army has shown heroism, professionalism, and dedication. If necessary, we will show it again, we will achieve what we want, everyone knows this, and those who conduct military exercises in support of Armenia on our border should also know this. Nobody can scare us."

The idea of Whole (Greater) Azerbaijan at the official level

Similar problems in Iran-Azerbaijan relations have arisen periodically since the Republic of Azerbaijan declared independence. We have written about it in a previous article. However, now we see irredentist rhetoric and propaganda are now repeated in statements by Azerbaijani officials and in state media broadcasts along with harsh criticism and warnings against Iran. The topic of South Azerbaijan and its historical lands, accusations against the Iranian regime are now aired on Azerbaijani state television at an unprecedented level and style. AzTV airs an interview with Mahmudali Chehreganli, a well-known Iranian immigrant who lives in exile in the United States and has not been allowed into Azerbaijan for many years. Almost everyone in the country knows that state channel AzTV's broadcast policy (especially regarding important political issues) is determined by the presidential administration. Another state television channel, Public Television (ITV), is keeping up with AzTV in this regard. It can even be said that ITV surpasses the state television in terms of the airtime on the topic.

Aliyev's speech at the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on 11 November 2022 was sensational and can be considered a fundamental shift in Azerbaijani foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran. In his speech, Aliyev drew attention to the violation of the educational rights of millions of Azerbaijanis living in Iran, though he did not mention Iran by name: "The young generation of the Turkic world should have the opportunity to study in their mother tongue in the countries of their residence. Unfortunately, the majority of the 40 million Azerbaijanis living outside Azerbaijan are deprived of these opportunities. The education of our compatriots living outside Turkic states in their mother tongue should always be on the agenda of the organization. Necessary steps should be taken in this direction."

Of course, this speech did not go unnoticed in Tehran. According to the Iranian authorities, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian slammed Aliyev's "unrealistic statements" during a phone call with his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov. Meanwhile, a group of Iranian lawmakers, who fiercely responded to Aliyev's remarks, conveyed their displeasure more openly, reminding that the Republic of Azerbaijan itself was taken away from Iran in the Gulistan Treaty.

During his tenure as head of state, Aliyev has said several times that he is the president of all Azerbaijanis in the world, but this is the first time that he has spoken out on problems of Azerbaijanis (Turks) in Iran at an official level at a meeting of a Turkic regional organization, marking it as a problem for the entire Turkic world and calling on the Turkic states to make necessary steps in this direction. At an international conference held in Baku at ADA University on 25 November 2022, Aliyev returned to the topic and this time openly said, "We will do our best to protect the Azerbaijanis living in Iran."

This position expressed by Azerbaijan's Aliyev means the emergence of a new line in the nation's foreign policy, although it is not yet clear how sincere the state will be in its pursual. The idea of *Whole Azerbaijan*, the theme of the *South*, as the ideological legacy of the 1988-1991 popular movement and its leader Abulfaz Elchibey, had been, until now, only on the agenda of Azerbaijan's nationalist opposition. In the modern history of Azerbaijan, Elchibey played the main role in politicizing this idea and popularizing it as a national task. One of the main criticisms directed by Aliyev's rule and their supporters against the Elchibey government (1992-1993) until recent years was that the government was incompetent in both domestic and foreign policy and set Azerbaijan up to be the enemy of big neighbors like Iran and Russia. However, as a result of the return of most of the occupied territories in the 44-day war (although there are still questions about the territory under the control of Russian peacekeepers), Aliyev first robbed the opposition of the Karabakh issue as the most important topic used in the internal political struggle, and later, by embracing the South issue, he has now gathered around him some of his nationalist opponents. Those who do not want to join this union are now left in an ideological vacuum. Aliyev is already trying to raise himself above the internal political struggle and competition by acting as the *protector and leader of all Azerbaijanis* in the world. He claims national leadership. However, Ilham Aliyev is not presented in this way in official propaganda, probably because that address was given to his father and for this reason, he did not want to obscure him.

Conclusions

How far will this new irredentist direction in Azerbaijani foreign policy go? Where will it end? How will it affect bilateral and regional cooperation? These are questions that await answers. Despite all the problems, bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have been on the rise over the past 30 years, based on a rich treaty-legal base. Tehran and

Baku have always shown a pragmatic approach by avoiding controversial points that could turn into confrontation and have a negative impact on mutual economic and trade relations. It is worth noting that shortly after the tension in the fall of last year, the two parties in March 2022, in Baku, signed a "Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on creating new communication links between the East Zangezur economic region of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through the territory of Iran." This is quite an important accord. The purpose of the memorandum is to establish a new railway, road connection, communication and energy lines between the East Zangezur economic region of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan AR through Iran. To that end, it is planned to construct 4 bridges, 2 highways and 2 railways, as well as communication and energy supply infrastructure over the Araz River. This means that whether it is possible to realize the Zangezur transport corridor through the territory of Armenia or not, there is an alternative option for Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan and Iran are also cooperating within the framework of the *North-South International Transport Corridor* aimed at reducing the delivery time of cargo from India to Russia, as well as to Northern and Western Europe. For this purpose, it is planned to connect the railway network of Azerbaijan and Iran, which testifies to the strategic nature of cooperation. March 2018 saw the commissioning of the first phase of the project to connect the Astara (Azerbaijan) – Astara (Iran) railway.

Another cooperation platform implemented with the participation of the two countries is the "3 + 3" model (i.e., the three South Caucasus countries, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan plus Russia, Turkey and Iran) and this format formally came to the political agenda after the Second Karabakh War. Although Georgia did not participate, Moscow in December 2021 hosted the first meeting in this format. The

second meeting is planned to take place in Tehran, and Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Abdollahian invited his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov to that meeting in a telephone conversation in which he also conveyed Iran's displeasure with Aliyev's "unrealistic comments" in Samarkand. This fact can be interpreted as the intention of the parties to de-escalate tensions between the two countries. Also, suggesting de-escalation are the article written by Ali Akbar Vilayati (advisor to the Supreme Spiritual Leader of Iran and former foreign minister) and the statement by Hikmat Hajiyev (Assistant of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration), who positively assessed Vilayati's views in his own statement.

However, we should also keep in mind that the disputes between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran are not a temporary situation stemming from some specific events, but are of a fundamental nature. The fact that both sides claim the same territory—Iran considers Azerbaijan as its historical territory, while the Azerbaijani public's irredentist sentiments have now made their way into official discourse—means that the disputes are long-term and the interests irreconcilable, which points to the impossibility of establishing an environment of mutual trust in relations.