# Crisis in Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations

written by Shahin Jafarli Şahin Cəfərli

Azerbaijani-Iranian state relations have entered another crisis phase. On 12 September 2021, Azerbaijani police began inspection of Iranian heavy trucks delivering goods to the Armenian population of Karabakh, placing checkpoints on the parts of the Gorus-Kafan automobile road which cross Azerbaijani territories and demanding custom duties. In the process, the Azerbaijani police arrested two Iranian truck drivers, which triggered new tensions, eliciting mutual accusations on the official level and resulting in implementation of sanctions. Of course, relations with Iran have never been smooth and unproblematic during thirty years of Azerbaijani independence. Yet these recent events suggest the emergence of a deeper rift and antagonism between two culturally, historically, and confessionally close neighbors. That rift will certainly have a long-term impact on mutual relations. In this piece I attempt to discuss some past and contemporary features of the Azerbaijani-Iranian relationship as well as the geopolitical consequences for that relationship of the second Karabakh war (2020), which resulted in an Azerbaijani victory.

**Recent History**

While the Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence on 18 October 1991, Iran recognized the emergence of Azerbaijani state only on 25 December of the same year. Diplomatic relations were established another three months later in March 1992. By comparison, Turkey recognized Azerbaijani independence on 9 November 1991 and diplomatic relations were established on 9 January 1992. Similarly, Romania recognized Azerbaijani independence on December 11th, Pakistan on December 12th. Although there is no official information on

the reasons for the delay in the recognition of Azerbaijani independence by Iran, the dominating view in Azerbaijan is that this pause was caused by the uneasiness and subsequent hesitation of Tehran to recognize the emergence of a bordering independent state that bears the same name as Iranian Western and Eastern Azerbaijan provinces populated mostly by Turks who might feel a sense of loyalty to the new state. It should be noted that from 1969 onwards, the Iranian General Consulate has operated in the now-Azerbaijani capital of Baku. As a result, Iran has had more opportunities in comparison with other countries to have access to first-hand information on the processes and events going on in Azerbaijan. No doubt the capture of power in Azerbaijan by the nationalist Popular Front and the 1992 election as president of its leader, Abulfaz Elchibey, a vigorous promoter of the idea of *United Azerbaijan*, a vague program to *reunite* the former Soviet republic with the territory called Azerbaijan in Iran, frightened Iranian officials. That much is evident from the Islamic Republic's subsequent support of an armed coup against this government in Ganja city a year later in June 1993. The then-ambassador of Iran in Azerbaijan, Ali Afshar Nahavandian met the leader of the Ganja revolt, colonel Surat Huseynov, and presented him with a copy of the Holy Qur'an.

Until the recent row between the two countries, the most important tensions in their relationship took place in 2001. In late July of that year, Iranian warships and aircraft forced an Azerbaijani drillship operated by BP to leave the waters of Iran's prospective Araz-Alov-Sharq oil fields. Previously, in 1998 the Azerbaijani state oil company SOCAR had signed an agreement with BP and Statoil (now Equinor) envisaging exploration of those fields and preliminary work had begun. However, the Iranian Oil Ministry declared that because parts of that area were located on the Iranian sector of the Caspian Sea, it considered the agreement illegitimate. Eventually, BP was forced to stop all of its activities on the Araz-Alov-Sharq prospective oil fields. But continuing

pressure by Iran eventually triggered a Turkish response after Azerbaijan's appeal to Turkey for help. When Ankara failed to achieve satisfactory results from a diplomatic warning to Iran, it decided to make its intentions known with a public demonstration of its military in Azerbaijan. In late August 2001, the then-Chief of Staff of Turkish Military Forces, Huseyn Kivrikoglu, travelled to Azerbaijan to meet President Heydar Aliyev. There he was awarded with the medal *Azerbaijani Banner*. A unit of Turkish F-5 fighter aircraft then conducted a flyby over the skies of the Freedom Square of Baku and Caspian Sea.

Since the early days of Azerbaijani independence, Iran has tried to expand its influence over Azerbaijan with soft-power methods. The Iranian Cultural Center and the Imdad Khomeini Relief Foundation's Azerbaijani branch, which began their official operations in Baku in 1993, were very active in the early years of Azerbaijani independence. Iran has also advertised itself as a center for education for the Shiite population of Iran. Thousands of Azerbaijanis have studied in the seminaries of Qom, a center of religious education in Iran.

Despite the seeming innocuousness of these efforts, the Azerbaijani state has met institutions with Iranian ties with repressive countermeasures. In 2011, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Justice revoked the registration of the Relief Foundation's Azerbaijani office, mentioned above. The Iranian Cultural Center remains active, but only thanks to its diplomatic status. In regards to its own citizens and their organizations, over the years, the state has opened multiple criminal investigations against the Azerbaijani Islamic Party (AIP), founded in 1991, because of the party's supposed secret relations with Iran. In 1995, the Party's chairman Haji Alikram Aliyev and his deputies were imprisoned on charges of espionage for Iran, and the party's state registration was subsequently revoked by the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan. After an official decision banned girls from wearing headscarves in

secondary schools in Azerbaijan in September 2010, protests were held in Baku and other cities. In January 2011, AIP's chairman Movsum Samadov, one of the organizers of these protests, was detained and initially sentenced to administrative detention, however, later the state brought charges against him for allegedly plotting a coup and other crimes, and he was sentenced to 12-years imprisonment. That same year, the deputy chairman of the party, Arif Qaniyev, and others were accused by the Ministry of Security and General Prosecutor's Office of launching the radical religious group *Cəfəri heyəti* (*Committee of Jafarites*) with the financial assistance of the Iranian Cultural Center in Baku. The leader of the group, Haji Abgul Suleymanov, was sentenced in 2012 to 11-years imprisonment. After all these events, the then-Chief of Staff of Iranian Military Forces Hasan Firuzabadi, in a threatening tone, urged the President Ilham Aliyev "to take measures to prevent awakening of the people [of Azerbaijan]" or expect an "awful fate," i.e. the rebellion of Azerbaijani Shia against Aliyev's government. Following an official protest note from the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry, the Iranian embassy in Baku said the statement did not belong to General Firuzabadi. In February 2020, acting chairman of the Islamic Party Ilham Aliyev (not to be confused with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who is Chairman of the New Azerbaijan Party) was detained by the State Security Service of Azerbaijan, and in May of this year was sentenced to 16 years of imprisonment on charges of treason. Along with other charges he was accused of receiving money from Iran.

There are many other episodes in recent history of antagonism between the two countries. These include protests that were held in front of the Azerbaijani Consulate in Tabriz to oppose the Eurovision 2012 song contest in Baku. Azerbaijani protesters then organized a counter-protest in front of the Iranian Embassy in Baku, which resulted eventually in the recall of the Iranian ambassador to Azerbaijan. The official reason Tehran gave for the recall were the insulting slogans

of Azerbaijani protesters during the counter-protest. Azerbaijan retaliated by recalling its ambassador to Iran. Later, unrelated to the protests, Azerbaijani authorities refused entry to the country to cleric Farid Asri, who was also the deputy head of the Iranian Cultural Center in Azerbaijan.

In November 2015, Azerbaijani police conducted a raid of one of the most conservative towns of the Baku metropolitan area, Nardaran, where Ayatollah Khamenei's followers are particularly numerous. As a result of this raid, 7 people, including 2 police officers, died and 4 were injured, while multiple arrests were made. Taleh Bagirov, the head of the Muslim Unity Movement was detained and subsequently accused of multiple crimes, including terrorism, a violent coup attempt, possession of fire arms, and homicide.

In July 2018, Yunis Safarov attempted to assassinate the chief executive of Ganja city, Elmar Veliyev. A week later two police officers were killed in skirmishes with rioters in the central city square when "[t]he crowd gathered to protest against the authoritarian style of rule of the wounded [Veliyev], and in support of [Safarov]. After initial controversial statements by state officials regarding the former incident, the authorities blamed both events on alleged Shi'i religious radicals."[1] A joint statement issued by the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General's Office, the State Security Service, and the Interior Ministry tied Iran to the assassination attempt. The institutions announced that Safarov went to Iran in 2016 and lived in the city of Qom for 8 months and during that time he visited Syria and underwent combat training as part of the armed forces in the Syrian.

Iran has also been linked, though dubiously, to the events leading to the death of Azerbaijani writer Rafig Tagi. In November 2011, Tagi was stabbed by unknown killers in Baku city and a few days later died in hospital. Although Azerbaijani authorities began a criminal investigation and

classified the writer's death as a homicide, in January 2014, the prosecutor's office closed the case, citing the impossibility of identifying the person who committed the crime. According to some Azerbaijani media outlets, Iranian Ayatollah Fazil Lanakarani issued a fatwa in 2006 to assassinate Tagi after the publication of Tagi's article *Europe and Us*. Though Azerbaijani media outlets never presented the original text of this fatwa, Lanakarani's order supposedly claimed that in Tagi's article, the writer insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. After the death of Tagi, the son of Lanakarani, Muhammad Javad wrote in his father's website that "undoubtedly, the person who made Muslims happy by carrying out this call will be greatly rewarded by Allah."

As we have seen, over the last 30 years, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran hardly developed toward more cooperation. However, the negative impact of the controversies and disputes noted above on the relations between two sides has largely been minimal and short-term. With their pragmatic approach to geopolitics, both governments have sought to avoid long-term and disastrous consequences to their spats. Now though, recent tensions caused by the 44-day Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan may portend something different than the past thirty years of relative peace.

**The War That Changed the Geopolitical Balance: Why is Iran afraid of the Zangezur Corridor?**

While the recent events along the Gorus-Kafan highway described above served as the starting point of renewed antagonism between Baku and Tehran, they should not be regarded as the underlying reasons for the new tensions. Those checkpoints and customs duties are one of the results of the 10 November 2020 Joint Declaration signed by Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Russian leaders, which ended military hostilities between warring parties, i.e. Azerbaijan and Armenia. According to the agreement Azerbaijan had the right to sovereignty within its Zangilan and Gubadli regions, which

would be restored according to pre-1991 boundaries. As a result, the road which connects the Armenian Gorus and Kafan regions and links Armenia to Iran now trespasses the Azerbaijani border in two spots. Iran considers that these developments changed the geopolitical balance which, until now, had served its interest. Tehran presumes that this change can potentially lead to the alteration of political map of the region. The fear that Zangezur corridor, a 40-kilometer route passing through the Meghri district of Armenia, could fall under the control of Azerbaijan and its ally Turkey moved Iranian military leadership to concentrate troops on its northwestern borders along the river Arax, while hostilities still continued between Azerbaijan and Armenia in October, 2020. Iranian General Seyyid Abdulrahim Musavi at that time warned that Iran will not tolerate the territorial disintegration of regional states and the alteration of borders. The news site *caliber.az*, which is linked to Azerbaijani official circles, even claimed that during the war Iranian military unites challenged and halted for a day the Azerbaijani Army as it advanced towards Zangilan.

In general, these kinds of sharp and persistent statements on regional geopolitics entered the official rhetoric of Iran only after the Second Karabakh War. Initially voiced by the military leadership of Iran, these statements were then repeated by political elite. During his visit to Armenia in January 2021, Javad Zarif, then foreign minister of the Rouhani government, stated that the protection of the territorial integrity of Armenia is an utmost priority and red line for Iran. The Joint Declaration did not put an end to Iranian worries thanks to a clause in the agreement which provides for the establishment of a transport corridor, the Zangezur Corridor, linking mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic via Armenia. Referencing this clause, the Azerbaijani side has now persistently raised the question of the Zangezur Corridor in the post-war period. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has even issued a warning

that the corridor will be opened by force if Armenia refuses to cooperate. Iran considers this a threat to its national interests. Iran assumes that the Zangezur Corridor will not be just a transportation corridor belonging to Armenia and used by Azerbaijan as well. Iranian leadership believes that the Zangezur Corridor can be transformed into a large exterritorial geopolitical project. This exterritorial project would mean the end of a land connection between Armenia and Iran, which could produce multidimensional geopolitical-geoeconomic consequences.

If Iran loses its land connection to Armenia, it will mean near isolation from the South Caucasus because its connection with this region will be entirely dependent on Azerbaijan, a much less willing partner than Armenia. In such a case, the Persian Gulf – Black Sea (Caucasian) international transport corridor project via which Iran hopes to reach Europe and bypass Turkey and Azerbaijan will be in jeopardy. This idea was developed by Iran in 2016. Along with Iran and Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Greece participate in this project as well. Over the last five years, delegations from the five state have met five times to discuss the project. This corridor is meant to be multimodal and is projected to link Iranian sea ports with Georgian sea ports. Although China and India have not joined the project yet, project leaders have proposed that goods from these countries will enter the Bandar-Abbas port of Iran and from there be taken to Armenia via land transportation, and then to Georgian Poti sea port by rail. Eventually goods will be delivered to Greek and Bulgarian sea ports via the Black Sea. Due to the lack of capacity of Armenian transportation infrastructure, the project plans to build a 490-kilometer North-South highway from the Iranian border to the Georgian border. During the last five years, construction work progressed very slowly. Armenia's weak financial potential has not helped it to implement the project in short order. Now, after recent developments in the region, Iran has expressed interest in

direct participation in this highway project. Iranian leadership plans to finish quickly the construction of the Tatev road, which will be an alternative to Gorus-Kafan highway. In early October, Khayrulla Khademi, the Iranian Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development, visited Armenia and pledged to assist the country in the construction of this strategically important road.

Because the planned Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor bypasses Russia, Moscow's interest in the implementation of this project is questionable. (A similar plan to build a gas pipeline from Iran to Europe along the same route, which is assuredly not in Russia's interest, remains only an idea.) Although in the joint trilateral statements of 10 November 2020 and 11 January 2021, transportation communications in the Zangezur Corridor will remain under the purview of Russia, typically an Iranian ally in the region, Azerbaijani and Turkish insistence, and Russian silence, on the corridor feeds the idea that these three countries share an interest in blocking the Iranian project. In general, the political outcomes of the Second Karabakh War have revealed the contradictory regional interests of Russia and Iran. That transportation communications through Zangezur will remain under Russian control does not abate Iranian concerns. The recent visit of Iranian foreign minister Huseyn Amir Abdollahian to Russia on 6 October 2021 demonstrated that the two countries have opposing views on the matter. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov voiced Azerbaijani concerns over the military drills of the Iranian Army on the border and said that Russia is against the provocative character of any military exercise. In response to Iranian concerns over joint Azerbaijani-Turkish navy trainings in the Caspian, Lavrov reminded that Iran has not yet ratified the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. With this, Russia is sending a message that the South Caucasus is its region of influence.

Another matter which significantly raises Iranian concerns is that by securing a direct land connection between Azerbaijan

and Turkey, the Zangezur Corridor opens the path for the establishment of a Turkic belt. A direct link from Turkey to Azerbaijan and via the Caspian to the Turkic Republics of Central Asia means encirclement of northern Iranian borders with Turkic countries, and this creates the prospect of igniting nationalist and separatist sentiment among the multi-million Turkic population of Iran. Another result of the corridor is that by connecting Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, it will reduce Azerbaijani dependence on Iran in this important issue. Combined together all of these issues are reasons behind the current aggressive reaction of Iran.

Iran justifies its show of force on its northern borders with Israeli activity in Azerbaijan. Iran, in fact, named these recent military exercises "Conquerors of Khaybar" in direct reference to the battle in 629 C.E. between Muslims and Jews. There is a high probability that when Iran talks about alleged "Zionist activity" on its borders, it implies the participation of Israeli firms in the establishment of cattle farms in the de-occupied Zangilan region of Azerbaijan which borders Iran. It is possible that military or reconnaissance activities disguised as cattle farming are conducted there. Yet Azerbaijani-Israeli relations, including their military-security dimensions are not new developments. It is no state secret that previously Azerbaijan has bought modern weapons from Israel, and that the Azerbaijani Border Service has used them. Iran is well aware of these facts. Therefore, the potential Israeli threat is more likely a pretext to justify Iran's military build-up on the Azerbaijani border for domestic and global Muslim audiences. Nevertheless, the clear intention of the build-up is to pressure Azerbaijan.

**Conclusion**

I outlined in the beginning of this article that during the course of the last thirty years Azerbaijani-Iranian relations have been problematic and were witness to multiple difficult

events. However, given the typically minor consequences of previous spats, the current tensions are unprecedented.

Iran has now resorted to saber rattling in its campaign against the opening of Zangezur Corridor, using rhetoric and military exercises in ways that it has not employed in the past. Yet, because Russia is interested in the construction of this transport corridor, Iran is incapable of impeding its progress through these tactics. Azerbaijan has demonstrated that it is not afraid of its neighbor, which has a larger army and runs many proxy groups in the Middle East. Azerbaijani President Aliyev openly addresses harsh criticism towards Iran, insisting on its sovereignty and interests, while declaring Iran absolutely incapable of interference. Azerbaijan does not believe that Iran will escalate to military intervention. Azerbaijan has on its side a military alliance with Turkey and a Metternichian Russian insistence on the stability of borders and regimes within its circle of influence. It is no coincidence that, in a response to Iranian activities on the border, Azerbaijan and Turkey held joint military exercises, *Unbreakable Brotherhood-2021*, on 5-8 October, which included aircraft flyers in Nakhichevan.

Since the early stages of Azerbaijani independence in the 1990s, Iran has been concerned that a strong Republic of Azerbaijan could be attractive for Iranian Turks and thus would have a potential to trigger separatist trends within Iran. The cheers with which Iranian Turks watched the advance of Azerbaijani military during the Second Karabakh War, as well as their protests against the delivery of Russian arms to Armenia via Iran were worrying signals for the Islamic Republic. The recent conflict between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran are therefore, hardly trivial because they portend a potential existential threat to Iran's continued territorial integrity.

[1] Goyushov, Altay. "Azerbaijan." In *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe, Volume 11*, edited by Oliver Scharbrodt, Samim Akgönül,

Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Egdunas Racius, 11:71–87. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019, 71. https://brill.com/view/title/56496.