Iran Torn Between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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The revival, on Sunday, September 27, 2020, of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict naturally provoked the reaction of the great neighboring powers. Erdogan's Turkey openly supports Azerbaijan, as the two countries share important cultural and linguistic ties – as well as a historical dispute with the Armenians. For its part, Russia, on the strength of its status as co-president of the Minsk Group (a group formed in 1994 to lead peace negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and co-chaired by Russia, France and the United States), intends to act as a mediator, while honoring the military cooperation agreement it has signed with Armenia. If the statements of the leaders of these two states have regularly made the headlines since the beginning of the conflict, the third large neighbor, Iran, seems more reserved and its attitude less commented on. Generally speaking, Iran's behavior in the face of this conflict that began at the time of the fall of the Soviet Empire remains relatively undocumented. Iran cannot, however, be considered totally alien to a conflict taking place on its doorstep and constituting a threat to its own security. Since the beginning of the conflict, Iran has been concerned by the possible presence of foreign troops just across its border, as well as by the need to protect the infrastructures bordering the conflict zone and its own population.[1] Moreover, Iran is home to a substantial Azerbaijani community, as well as an Armenian community that, while not large (from 100,000 to 150,000), is dynamic and influential; it is therefore a question of preventing the conflict from disrupting the Iranian domestic order (think here of the demonstrations in support of the Republic of Azerbaijan that broke out on October 1, 2020 in the cities of Iranian Azerbaijan – as in Tehran). It is often pointed out that Iran is a good friend of

Armenia, while its relations with Azerbaijan have been quite difficult for the last 30 years. Nevertheless, we should take into account the recent declarations from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: on October the 6th, Iran in fact declared its neutrality (some ten days after the start of the fightings), as well as its support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan (which represents *de facto* a judgment in favor of Azerbaijan).[2] Should we conclude that a shift is about to occur in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations?

Iran, an ally of Armenia

Until now, Iran's position seemed clear, though paradoxical. Rather than offering assistance to Muslim Azerbaijan, which has a Shiite majority but has chosen partnership with the United States, Iran has traditionally presented itself as a great ally of Armenia, and has done so since 1992, offering for example a supply route, during the war and afterwards, to the small landlocked republic. This privileged partnership is, moreover, often noted by analysts, testifying to the pragmatism of the Iranian authorities, ready to put the national interest above Islamic solidarity. Until now, the rhetoric in favor of defending oppressed Muslims that Iran employs prolifically when it comes to Palestine, Kashmir, or the Rohingya, is generally missing from the question of Karabakh. The choice of the Armenian partnership can be explained by the fact that Iranian authorities perceived the existence of an independent Azerbaijan as a threat, able to destabilize its own Azerbaijani north-western regions.

Towards a warming of Iranian-Azerbaijani relations

If the Iranian-Armenian friendship is a undeniable reality, albeit with a very limited impact, it should be noted that Iran has been seeking for several years to forge ties with Azerbaijan, with which it has maintained relations that are tense to say the least since independence in 1991.[3] Whether it be the instrumentalization of Islamist groups by Iran, the

question of Iran's Azerbaijani minorities, the dispute over the delimitation of the maritime borders of the Caspian Sea, ambiguous military demonstrations (on both sides), or more anecdotal episodes such as Iran's request in Baku to cancel the "decadent" Eurovision Song Contest in 2012 (which the mullahs equated with a "gay parade"), many were the causes of friction between the two parties. The tensions finally gave way to a thaw over the course of the 2010s, without ever having led to serious confrontation. Under the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani presidencies, demarches were undertaken to warm relations with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who seeks to implement a balanced and independent foreign policy, has been seeking to multiply ties with neighboring powers in the context of a certain loss of American influence (the country's main ally under his father, Heydar Aliyev) in the region. He thus undertook to extend the field of Azerbaijan-Iranian collaboration, whether in terms of security, energy, or trade. There is no doubt that Iran is seeking to avoid jeopardizing the efforts made on both sides to warm the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.[4]

A conflict that is spreading to Iran

One can thus speak of a new, albeit still timid, friendship between the two Shiite-majority countries, a friendship that is, however, less spectacularly celebrated than the Iranian-Armenian friendship. In the conflict of 2020, Iran is obviously playing the card of neutrality, and has offered itself as a mediator,[5] even claiming to be working on a plan to end the crisis; but it is still viewed as a staunch ally of Armenia, which causes problems for Iran, even within its own borders. Indeed, the population of Iranian Azerbaijan, whose national consciousness and desire for autonomy have never been so intense,[6] seems increasingly passionate about the conflict. This is evidenced by the demonstrations of October 1, 2020, which brought together several thousand people in the main cities of Iranian Azerbaijan and in Tehran, in which

protesters demanded the closure of the border with Armenia, the supposed crossing point for arms and military equipment. In this context, the reputation of Azerbaijan as an enemy of Iran is thus a source of internal tensions that can awaken secessionist sentiments, or even harmful inter-ethnic tensions (in some images in the Turkish media of the demonstrations of October 1, 2020, one sees demonstrators burning a flag of Armenia). Thus revelations such as those asserting that 80 Iranian companies have invested in the economy of Nagorno-Karabakh, or the episode in the April 2020 video showing Iranian trucks transiting towards Karabakh do not please the Iranian authorities and have been the subject of official denials.[7] What has set fire to the powder keg in recent days in Iranian Azerbaijan are the videos showing the passage of covered military trucks at Nordouz, on the Iranian-Armenian border, Iran denying, as we have shown above, the sending of any military aid to Armenia.

Dissonant voices at the core of power

On October 1, 2020 – the day when the above-mentioned demonstrations were scheduled – the representatives of Ayatollah Khamenei from the four provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan (Western Azerbaijan, Eastern Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan), issued a joint statement in which they stressed the need to return Karabakh to Azerbaijan. This declaration appeals both to international law and to Islamic morality and brotherhood. They emphasized that it is the principles of the Quran, as well as the Islamic Republic's philosophy of the defense of the oppressed, that obliges them to support and assist Azerbaijan in its struggle. Such statements are not new. In recent years several prominent personalities have expressed solidarity with Azerbaijan, whether clerics (Ayatollah Ameli of Ardabil), leaders of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (Mohsen Rezai, the former commander-in-chief of the Pasdaran, claimed in 2013 to have allowed the training of fighters of Azerbaijan on Iranian territory, as well as the

sending of Iranian fighters and military equipment across the border,)[8] or of deputies (think of Mahsoud Pezeshkian, representative of Tabriz, who in 2018 stressed the "Islamic" character of the Karabakh territory). However, it is surprising here that the term *Republic of Azerbaijan* is not used, as the authors refer to Iran's northern neighbor by the name *Azerbaijan*. It is, however, customary for Iranian officials to clearly distinguish the *Republic of Azerbaijan* from the provinces of Iran bearing the name *Azerbaijan*, in order not to create confusion, and to emphasize the existence of a political and institutional (or even cultural) border between the two regions. Using the generic term *Azerbaijan* to refer to the country ruled from Baku thus represents a bias, no doubt intended to flatter the opinion of the Azerbaijani population increasingly interested in the conflict.

It therefore seems that the Iranian authorities have to be cautious. On the one hand, their strategic partnership with Armenia must not be threatened; on the other hand, the best conditions must be created to increase cooperation with Azerbaijan and to preserve the sense of national solidarity of the Azerbaijanis in Iran. A temperate and conciliatory attitude is favored, and speeches of solidarity with Azerbaijan are allowed to be made on the margins of the central power. These discourses finally try to appropriate the Azerbaijani nationalist discourse by subverting it, i.e. by making it compatible with the conceptual framework of Iran: solidarity with the Azerbaijanis *of the north* puts Shiism before ethnicity (the statement mentioned above affirms that Azerbaijan is *country of the Ahl ol-Beit*; Ahl ol-Beit in Arabic means "the people of the House," which in Shiite theology refers to the Prophet and his descendants the Imams).

The Karabakh conflict thus represents a relative challenge for Iran, but also an opportunity to reshape itself with regard to ethical issues. It is above all a threat to its security, and it can also be a cause of internal turmoil. Iran has thus

officially affirmed its neutrality and its support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan,[9] and seeks to present itself as a possible mediator for countries that share a common culture with it, thus seeking to erase its image as a fundamental ally of Armenia, which seems shoes too big to wear for Iran. This proposal of mediation also allows Iran to present an image of a moderate country and dedicated to stability. Thus, the government allows pro-Azerbaijani speeches to be expressed on the margins, probably in order to recapture Azerbaijani public opinion. This phenomenon finally appears to be typical of Iran which, in recent years, has sought to channel the expression of dissident speeches, whether they are linked to religious (the Sunnis of Kurdistan or Baluchestan)[10] or ethnic (the Azerbaijanis) themes, by appropriating them and adapting them to the government's own conceptual and ideological framework.

As for the question of a possible mediation role in the conflict, one should be cautious. The privileged interlocutors in this conflict are the co-presidents of the Minsk Group – Russia, France and the United States, and the chances of Iran interfering in the negotiations seem low. But they are not non-existent: following the events of July 2020, President Aliyev castigated the inaction of the Minsk Group in the face of what he considered to be Armenian aggression. On the strength of its privileged relationship with Armenia, Iran could appear in Azerbaijan as a privileged interlocutor with a view to ending the crisis. Moreover, Iran never fails to criticize the lack of effectiveness of the Minsk Group, and Ali Velayati, the adviser to the Iranian Guide for Foreign Affairs, does not hesitate, for example, to affirm that Iran, because of its geographic and cultural proximity to the two actors, is more legitimate than France to work towards a way out of the crisis.[11]

[1] Recall the declarations of the Ministers of Interior and Defense of October 6, 2020: they expressed their concern about the security of Iranian residents after projectiles reached Iranian territory. They also warned the two belligerents and called for restraint. A representative of the district of Khodaafarin, which borders the conflict zone, also urged its population not to go and observe the conflict from the hills along the border of the Aras. See: *Keyhan* newspaper, October 6.

[2] *Keyhan* newspaper, October 6

[3] Vahad Papazian, the former Armenian Foreign Minister, for example, is reported to have said: "We have absolutely no complex about dealing with Iran"; see : Maroussia Edouard, « Arménie-Iran. Quelles perspectives pour les relations arméno-iraniennes après la « révolution de velours ? », Diploweb.com : la revue géopolitique, 19 février 2020, disponible à l'adresse suivante : https://www.diploweb.com/Armenie-Iran-Quelles-perspectives-pour-les-relations-armeno-iraniennes-apres-la-revolution-de.html

This friendship is celebrated again by Nikol Pashinyan who stated in 2018 that Armenia would not follow the U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran: : https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/433538/PM-Pashinyan-Long-Live-Iran-Armenia-Friendship/ ; https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/exports-by-country/ In 2017, Armenia receives only 0.45% of Iranian exports. Trade between Iran and Azerbaijan is slightly more dynamic, but without reaching a record high: 0.70% of Iranian exports in 2017.

[4] According to the Iranian President's website, it was Shahin Mustafayev, Deputy Prime Minister of Azerbaijan who mentioned that: "Senior officials of both countries have been working

very hard to develop and deepen Tehran-Baku relations": http://www.president.ir/fa/117581/printable/

[5] See Ruhani's declarations in *Tehran Times*, October 1, 2020.

[6] Emil Aslan Suleimanov and Joseph Kraus, *Iran's Azerbaijan Question in Evolution Identity, Society, and Regional Security*, Silk Road Papers, Washington DC, September 2017.

[7] https://eurasianet.org/iranian-trucks-in-karabakh-spark-protest-in-azerbaijan/

https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/karabakh/1758949.html

[8] Aid never confirmed by the Azerbaijani government; Rezai's statements were even refuted by the Azerbaijani officials: https://gulustan.info/2013/03/11/false-assertions/

[9] This was reaffirmed by Seyyed Abbas Mousavi, Iran's new ambassador to Baku, during the presentation of his credentials to President Aliyev on September 7, 2020. : https://azerbaijan.az/en/news/3328/

[10] See: Stéphane Dudoignon, *The Baluch, Sunnism and the State in Iran*, Hurst, Oxford University Press, London, 2017.

[11] *Keyhan*, 6 of October.

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