

POSITION PAPER

The Iran-Azerbaijan Escalation: Motives, Consequences and Future Scenarios

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In remarkable and fast-paced developments, tensions have mounted between Iran and its northern neighbor Azerbaijan, indicating possible consequential regional developments. This escalation began when Azerbaijan blocked Iranian trucks from crossing into Armenia at the end of August 2021 and carried out joint drills involving Turkey and Pakistan dubbed “The Three Brothers-2021” in the Caspian Sea on September 20, 2021. It seems that Iran considered these drills as posing a threat to its vital interests and indicative of an imminent shift in the regional geopolitical map which would open the door for its regional rivals: Turkey and Pakistan. In light of these drills, Iran announced that it would carry out a military drill near its borders with Azerbaijan. Though Tehran claimed that Israel’s presence in southern Azerbaijan near its borders was the reason behind its decision, it seems that the move was more related to the regional geopolitical landscape taking shape and the competition and rivalry between all actors — especially following the developments on the Afghan landscape and — before that — the liberation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the repositioning of Azerbaijan. The latter country has become a significant actor in the calculus of regional powers that are involved in competition and disputes with Iran.

Based on the foregoing, this study raises a principal question about the future scenarios related to the Iran-Azerbaijan escalation. From this question, several sub-questions emerge, mostly concerning the dimensions of the escalation; the course of the ongoing escalation; and the circumstances surrounding the escalation at the domestic and external levels for Iran and Azerbaijan. In addition, an important question is related to the possible ramifications for Iran in light of this escalation.

1. Dimensions of the Escalation and Its Future Course

The crisis unfolded when Azerbaijan decided to impose customs tariffs on Iranian trucks passing through the Azerbaijan-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh region into Armenia. Azerbaijan claimed that these Iranian trucks entered the country illegally, disrespecting its sovereignty. It also reiterated that the law related to paying customs and crossing fees includes all automobiles, not only Iranian vehicles and trucks. It seems that what angered Azerbaijan the most was that it sent verbal warnings and official memorandums but both were ignored by Tehran. Baku has argued that some Iranian truck drivers attempted to hide their identities by using Armenian plates on their trucks.

In the aftermath of this truck crisis, the escalation between Iran and Azerbaijan took a new turn — following the “The Three Brothers-2021” drills involving Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Turkey in the Caspian Sea. Iran expressed dismay at the drills. Spokesman for Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Saeed Khatibzadeh said that the agreements signed between the five countries overlooking the Caspian Sea stipulates that any military presence on Iran’s shores would be illegitimate. Hassan Ameli, representative of the supreme leader in the province of Ardabil, which borders Azerbaijan, was the first to call for responding to Baku. He advised Baku not to tamper with “the lion’s tail.” He also plainly called on the IRGC to display its strength to Baku — which happened as Iran mobilized its forces and carried out drills involving heavy weapons and helicopters on its borders with Azerbaijan on September 19, 2021.

This Iranian escalation was countered by an escalation from Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev — who leveled stinging criticisms against Tehran and accused it of carrying out the drills without notifying his country. He also accused Tehran of disrespecting Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the illegal entry of Iranian trucks into the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Although Aliyev said that Iran has the right to carry out military drills, he questioned the timing and asked why such drills had not been held over the past three decades when the region was occupied by Armenia.

Iran responded via Saeed Khatibzadeh, the Iranian Foreign Ministry's spokesman. He reiterated that the military drills carried out by the IRGC are related to Iran's sovereignty, and he alleged that the aim behind them was to foster peace and stability across the region's countries. He also revealed one of the main reasons behind Iran's escalation against Azerbaijan was the presence of the Zionist regime near its borders and Tehran would take the necessary steps to protect its national security. Iran views with suspicion the strong ties between Azerbaijan and Israel. Both countries over the past years have developed strong military and security links as well as relations in the fields of trade and energy. Iran dubbed the drills "Conquerors of Khyber" — alluding to the animosity between Muslims and Jews.

Over the past few days, Iranian officials have repeatedly expressed their rejection of any Israeli presence near their borders — in a tacit reference to the strong ties and military cooperation between Baku and Tel Aviv. In this respect, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian reiterated in an interview that Iran would not tolerate "any presence by the fake Zionist regime and its provocative measures" near its borders. And it would not tolerate any regional geopolitical changes and this would be considered to be a "red line." The commander of Iran's ground forces Kioumars Haidari threatened that his country "would not tolerate elements of the Zionist regime in the region." Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev further exacerbated tensions after he threatened to involve regional and international powers in case Iran continued with its drills near Azerbaijan's borders.

These recent remarks led the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to weigh in on the crisis, sending tacit messages to Azerbaijan. He said that countries to the northwest of Iran should not allow “foreign armies that serve their own national interests” to interfere in their affairs and engage with their armies.

The reciprocal military mobilization was accompanied by Iran’s political and media circles escalating against Azerbaijan and Turkey. There have also been calls from “radical” Iranian lawmakers to annex Azerbaijan’s territories — as well as to respond to Turkey’s new Ottomanism with a new form of Safavism. On the other side, angry protesters attacked the Iranian embassy in Baku in protest against Tehran’s escalation and the tone of defiance and supremacy expressed by Iran’s officials and transmitted threats which amounted to calls for Azerbaijan’s territories to be annexed by Iran, with Tehran alleging that they were once part of Iranian territories taken away because of colonial policies. Azerbaijan’s authorities shut down the office of the supreme leader’s representative in the country’s capital as well as a Shiite shrine. Azerbaijan’s response to Iran’s escalation further mounted, with the country starting new and massive four-day military drills with Turkey in the border area of Nakhchivan.

2. Motives Behind the Iran-Azerbaijan Escalation

2.1 Geopolitical Transformations and Reshaping the Concept of Regional Security

For the current moment in time, the Iran-Azerbaijan escalation cannot be addressed independently of regional and international developments. The political spheres surrounding the two countries have witnessed changes, offering opportunities as well as presenting challenges. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan left behind a vacuum that has led to regional reconsiderations. The two countries, Iran and Azerbaijan, are facing new regional equations to secure their interests. For its part, Iran has embarked on advancing its policy of turning eastward and has a new standing now in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It plans to forge strategic relations with China and Russia. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan — the US ally in the region

–has strengthened ties with Turkey and Pakistan to counter Tehran’s moves and Russia’s threats. In this context came the Pakistan-Turkey-Azerbaijan drills in the Caspian Sea, against which Iran strongly protested, saying they went against the signed international agreements banning any presence of foreign forces in the waters of the Caspian Sea. Iran fears that the balance of power may tip in favor of its northern neighbor, due to the geopolitical, demographic, and economic ramifications if the scales were tilted.

On the other side, Azerbaijan wants to position itself at the center of the current regional balances, which could possibly allow it to retain its gains after the liberation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region through influential regional alliances — especially in light of Iran not welcoming Baku’s recapturing of the territories, Armenia’s defeat and Ankara edging closer to its northern borders, hence allowing it to possess an important lever over Tehran.

Iran fears that this Turkish-Pakistani-Azerbaijani alliance will marginalize its regional role while strengthening the influence of its regional rivals —Turkey and Pakistan — around a geographic region extending from Turkey’s line of influence in northern Iraq to the Indian Ocean; reaching the end of Pakistan’s and Iran’s borders. The aforesaid seems to be a large-scale encirclement of Iran’s clout, where Azerbaijan and Afghanistan act as linkage points to extend Turkey’s and Pakistan’s influence. This alliance may pose a bigger threat in case the Gulf states join it. The indications of this possibility are apparent, especially in Afghanistan.

2.2 The Nakhchivan Corridor and Turkey’s Growing Role

Preceding the current developments is the history of tense relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. The tensions, however, came to the fore again after the ceasefire agreement signed between Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Karabakh region. This agreement stipulated that a new corridor will be established to connect Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan (an autonomous republic under the nominal authority of Azerbaijan) —which means more opportunities for Baku and Ankara and more challenges for Iran.

For Iran, this corridor will end any direct borders between itself and Armenia. Yet the corridor carries with it significant transformations in Iran's northern sphere. The corridor has an important role in connecting Turkey with the states making up the Turkish world (Central Asia) via Azerbaijan. Furthermore, it will grant Turkey a parallel economic space and a historical geopolitical, economic and commercial shift in its favor, especially as this corridor is located on the historic Silk Road and grants Ankara an opportunity to partake in the giant economic projects in the region. From the perspective of Eurasian connectivity, the Nakhchivan corridor has the potential of becoming part of the transport corridors between the North, South, East and West that pass through the southern Caucasus.

Hence, it is understandable why the Iranian Parliament issued a statement in which it said that any changes to the borders of Iran's neighboring countries would be considered a "red line" for Tehran. This also explains the reasons behind Iran's military movements near its northern borders, the significant deployment of IRGC forces to the country's northern region and the sudden rise of a new Azerbaijani Shiite group named Hossainyoun.

Map 1: The Meghri Corridor Connecting Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan Near Iran's Borders



Although Turkey shifted its foreign fighters from Syria to the Karabakh region, Iran has suspicions that these fighters still exist in the region and continue to receive Turkish support. Hence, there could be a Turkish scheme to use these fighters as part of a proxy war with Iran to pressure it in other regional files, such as the Syrian or Afghan files.

2.3 Iran's Concerns About Its Trade With Armenia and the Eurasian Sphere Being Negatively Impacted

In Eurasia, Iran has posted its highest exports to Armenia, paving the way for Iranian products to have a competitive privilege compared to the products coming from Turkey. Iran dominated the Armenian market before the expiration of the preferential treatment agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Union.

It is noticed that Iranian exports to Armenia were posting a steadily upward trend. From 2016 to 2019 these exports doubled (Table No. 1) and nearly equaled the number of Iranian exports to Russia. Iranian exports to Armenia accounted for 39.71% of total exports. The percentage reflects Armenia's increasing importance for Iran over the past four years. Most of the trade volume consists of fruits, vegetables, nuts, cement, ferrous metal products as well as natural/liquefied gas. While the total Iranian imports from the Eurasia Union countries went down by nearly half (as shown in Table No. 2) imports from Armenia remained roughly stable.

Iran's energy exports to Armenia are of huge importance. It is also important to point to Iran's importance for Armenia. Russia is Armenia's biggest trading partner, as expected. We also see that the Iranian items were at fourth position over the past four years in relation to Armenian imports. These reached nearly \$325 million in 2019. In a bilateral meeting with the Armenian president at the Eurasian Economic Union summit in the capital Yerevan, the former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shed light on the importance of this special trade relationship between the two countries.

He said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and Armenia have many capacities in various areas such as energy, transit, tourism and

industry to use in line with benefiting the two nations.” These remarks were echoed by the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, “Iran is a sustainable source of energy and natural gas for Armenia, and his country wants to extend the gas-to-electricity barter agreement with Iran until 2040.”

2.4 Azerbaijan’s Relationship With the US and Israel

Iran fears that there is a possibility that Azerbaijan could turn into an actor that destabilizes Tehran’s stability. Azerbaijan is an important US ally in the Caucasus region. Baku blocking the path for Iranian trucks heading to Armenia, bringing the number of passing Iranian trucks to zero, puts huge pressure on Iran in light of the US sanctions. This blockage also poses a threat to Tehran’s strategy that depends on its neighbors to help it in circumventing the restrictions placed on its exports. This, of course, favors the United States, especially before returning to the Vienna talks regarding negotiations to revive the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal.

Moreover, Azerbaijan’s close ties with Israel is a security concern for Iran, especially in light of growing security and military ties and Israel’s intelligence and military presence in Tehran’s northern neighbor. This Israeli presence is of grave Iranian concern, especially following the increasing attacks on Iranian targets over the past years and the large-scale Israeli infiltration into Iran, which led to the assassination of the nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, the attacks on the Natanz nuclear site which caused huge damage to it, the attack on IRGC headquarters and the other secret attacks which Tehran suspects had been carried out through collaboration with agents who sneaked into the country via its borders with neighboring countries. Iran’s concerns are mounting in light of ongoing Israeli threats to target its nuclear program and the likely scenario of Israel using Baku’s territories to strike its nuclear sites.

In this context, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said in his meeting with the new Azerbaijani ambassador on September 30 that Iran “doesn’t tolerate any presence and activity that threatens our national security by the Zionist regime near our

border, and we will take whatever measure we deem appropriate in this respect.”

Azerbaijanis still remember the Iranian position supportive of Armenia’s occupation of Karabakh due to Tehran’s concerns about internal Azeri nationalist aspirations — as Azeris make up nearly 10 million out of Iran’s 83 million people. The liberation of Karabakh gave rise to nationalistic demands among Azeris living in northern Iran. Iran views Azeri nationalistic demands with sensitivity in light of the tense relations between the central government and ethnic minorities. The latter view the ongoing developments on the borders of Iran as a new opportunity to move ahead with their own demands.

There are similar nationalistic demands from the Balochis, who are on the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as Kurdish and Arab demands in the western and northwestern parts —all of which are weaknesses that could be exploited by Iran’s rivals to exert pressure on it in order to weaken it and move the battle inside Iranian territories.

3. Ramifications for Iran

It is expected that this crisis with Azerbaijan will thrust Iran into a vortex of new challenges, including the following:

3.1 More Isolation for Iran

The Iran-Azerbaijan escalation will intensify pressures and lead to further challenges accumulating for Iran at home, given that Tehran is already suffering from international isolation and dire economic conditions that sparked mass and ongoing popular protests due to the deteriorating economic and living conditions caused by the sanctions that were imposed in light of the country’s nuclear ambitions, misadventures overseas and its aggressive interventions in the internal affairs of regional countries.

3.2 Raising the Demands of Ethnic Minorities

This escalating conflict between the two neighboring countries provides a platform for Iran’s Azeri minority to raise its ethnic

inclinations. This minority previously staged mass protests in support of Azerbaijan during its dispute with Armenia over Karabakh. These ethnic inclinations could spark ethnic unrest in northwestern Iran in a way that makes the escalation with Azerbaijan costlier and increase the domestic and external challenges facing the country.

3.3 Encircling Iran From Different Borders

The mutual escalation between the two neighbors opens up a new front that contributes to encircling Iran with a host of crises and complexities — since it further strangles Iran and shackles it with crises from several directions. Hence, Iran is caught in the middle of a vicious cycle of crises and frictions. On the western border, there is Iraq that suffers from complex security, economic and political challenges. On its eastern border, there is Afghanistan that stands as a new arena for regional and international disputes since the US withdrawal from the country and the Taliban takeover of power.

On its northern border, Azerbaijan stands as a new episode in the dispute with Iran that serves the efforts to encircle Iran with a vicious cycle of conflicts and crises. As to the rest of the countries neighboring Iran, their relations with Tehran are marked by disputes given the widening differences over spheres of influence like Turkey, or cases in which relations with Iran have been totally severed like Saudi Arabia on the western side of the Arabian Gulf. Hence, instead of Iran spilling beyond its borders to encircle its competitors and rivals, it is now mired in a cycle of crises and disputes across its borders from all directions.

3.4 Providing the United States and Israel an Opportunity to Pressure Iran

The escalation of Iran's dispute with Azerbaijan will deepen and expand the spheres of the disputes between Tehran and its regional and international rivals — especially Turkey, Israel, and the United States across different geographic spheres in the region. This comes at a time when Iran is facing multiple challenges in its regional spheres of influence, reflected in the ongoing Israeli airstrikes targeting the positions of its militias in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the region.

Yet there are widening differences between Russia and Iran regarding the Syrian arena due to the intersection of their interest as well as the international isolation and US pressure on Tehran in order to improve Washington's negotiating position in the imminent Vienna talks.

The Iran-Azerbaijan escalation gives wider room and a new opportunity for what Tehran classes as its foes such as Israel and the United States to impose more pressure on Iran, and to encircle it, as well as to shackle it with more crises. However, Iran could possibly take advantage of the challenges it is facing and turn them into an opportunity to maximize its position at the Vienna talks to revive the nuclear deal. On the other side, these challenges could hasten Iran's willingness to positively engage with Saudi Arabia via Baghdad's mediations, particularly on the outstanding issues between the two countries.

3.5 Thwarting the Strategy of Cooperation With Neighbors

This Iran-Azerbaijan escalation restricts Tehran's ability to maneuver to circumvent the economic sanctions and curbs the effectiveness of its dependence on neighboring countries to re-export its oil to the outside world. The economic crises in light of the sanctions contributed to mass protests in Iran in anger against the deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

4. Scenarios of Escalation: From Confrontation to Pacification

In light of a host of factors surrounding Iran and Azerbaijan, most notably regional rivalries, attempts to reshape the regional security paradigm, and the intersection of economic interests as well as security and demographic threats, the potential scenarios of the Iran and Azerbaijan escalation are outlined. There are three potential scenarios: sliding into military confrontation, escalation without confrontation or pacification and containment.

4.1 First Scenario: Military Confrontation

The possible scenario of military confrontation means that the two

countries will continue the phase of escalation — especially after Turkey and Azerbaijan announced the holding of joint drills in response to Iran's military movements. This could lead to relations deteriorating further, hence both countries sliding into an open conflict, which could contribute to regional and international powers participating.

This scenario is likely to happen due to the increasing pace of international and regional disputes, which have contributed to the formation of military alliances. In light of this critical conjecture in the region as all parties are seeking to entrench their geopolitical gains and maximize their security and economic interests — this is in addition to preparing for the geographic and legal redrawing of borders based on geographic realities. The aforementioned could pose a threat to the unity and integrity of Iran's territories, agitating separatist demands among its ethnic minorities and depriving Iran of maneuvering in the available regional spheres which help it with countering Western pressures — as is the case with the Meghri corridor which separates Iran from Armenia, potentially impeding its outreach to Eurasia which has gained significant importance for Iran over the past years after the signing of the free trade agreement between the two sides.

This is in addition to the strategic gains the corridor offers to Turkey — Iran's rival. It opens up an opportunity for Turkey to reach out to its ethnic extensions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, in addition to multiple economic and political opportunities. These opportunities impede Iran's attempt to position itself as a bridge for the international trade corridors — especially the Chinese ones.

Added to the aforesaid is the intensive Israeli presence on the northern borders of Iran, which gives Tel Aviv the ability to carry out military strikes against Tehran's nuclear sites — in light of Israel's keenness to deprive Iran of developing nuclear weapons.

In addition, the Iran-Azerbaijan escalation provides Iran with the chance to boost its military presence on its borders with Baku and mobilize its forces in anticipation of pending threats. Iran may opt

for using one of its proxies connected to the IRGC to operate on its borders with Azerbaijan.

Some reports point to the emergence of a militia named Hossainyoun, a wing of the IRGC in Azerbaijan. This militia, or any other intelligence operatives, could carry out subversive operations to pressure Azerbaijan in regard to Israel's presence in its territories. Furthermore, the militia may ignite a war at any moment as a result of any miscalculation on the ground or any attempt by either of the two sides to escalate further — especially Iran — in order to direct part of its domestic crises outward through a military confrontation to halt the declining legitimacy of the Iranian government at home, particularly the Raisi government, which is facing popular discontent and growing crises.

4.2 Escalation Without Confrontation

Moreover, it is likely that Iran and Azerbaijan will continue the recent escalation at all levels — until each side achieves the biggest gains without resorting to direct armed confrontation (a war). At the political level, it is likely that the back-and-forth war of words and the provocative remarks between the leaders and policymakers of the two countries will continue. Azerbaijan will likely deepen its alliance with Turkey while Iran will boost and advance its ties with Armenia against Azerbaijan. Both countries – or either of them – could possibly lodge a complaint with the UN Security Council. At the economic level, Azerbaijan will continue to limit and even block the movement of Iranian trade through tightening measures and bringing to zero the number of Iranian trucks passing through the Iran-Azerbaijan border crossing towards Armenia and the vast geographic sphere reaching out to the Asian and European spheres. This could contribute to further negative ramifications on the Iranian economy at a time when it is bearing the brunt of crippling US sanctions. This will be a strong motive for Iran to continue its escalation against Azerbaijan, which in turn will not sit back and remain silent over Tehran's aggressive moves.

At the military level, Iran may continue its military exercises near Azerbaijan's borders on an intensive scale, while mobilizing soldiers and fighters near the borders under the pretext of having a right to carry out military drills. Yet Azerbaijan may decide to continue holding military drills with Turkey in response to Iran's repetitive drills. The IRGC could also carry out small-scale strikes targeting Azerbaijani targets — the same tactic Iran pursues against other regional countries.

Both Iran and Azerbaijan could resort to this scenario given the high material and human costs arising from any armed confrontation between the two sides. Iran does not favor engaging in open armed confrontations, given its deep internal challenges (deteriorating economic, living and health conditions caused by US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic), and external challenges (international isolation resulting from its nuclear ambitions, and its regional misadventures and interventions). There are also Iranian concerns about losing opportunities in light of this scenario. Engaging in a war with Azerbaijan will deprive Iran of its gains in its spheres of influence across the Middle East. For these gains, Iran has paid heavy financial and human costs in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The positions of Iran's militias in Syria and Iraq suffered hundreds of Israeli and US strikes and raids — but they did not prompt Tehran to engage in a direct military confrontation with Israel, since it is well aware of the consequences of any miscalculated act. Iran's revenge did not go beyond limited strikes in response to the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. This was because Iran was well aware that engaging in open confrontations would impact the survival of the Iranian political system itself — a priority for Tehran. Iran also realizes the inevitability of multiple parties fighting on Azerbaijan's side in case of any armed confrontations between itself and Baku. Israeli weapons have played a major role in tipping the balance of power in favor of Azerbaijan in its war against Armenia and eventually contributing to it winning the war. Yet Azerbaijan does not favor the scenario that sees it going to war with Iran — due to its battered economy as it emerges from a war with Armenia which was less than a year ago.

4.3 Third Scenario: Pacification and Containment

This means that Iran and Azerbaijan will opt for cooling the escalation and attempt to find mechanisms to contain the escalation, whether bilaterally or through regional and international intermediaries. The aim would be to reach substantial understandings that allay the concerns of the two sides and pave the way for settling their differences in a way that ensures the interests both sides are preserved and avoids the continuation of the ongoing escalation, preventing it from reaching the point of no return.

What supports the likelihood of this scenario is that both sides are not prepared for paying the cost of war. Azerbaijan has recently emerged from the Karabakh war and Iran is suffering from what it calls “economic warfare” waged against it by the United States and the West. It suffers from a huge budget deficit, disastrous living conditions and mounting protests at home. In addition, waging war is not likely because of the security protocols adopted by the two countries at their shared border within the framework of mutual deterrence and they have not taken any offensive posture at the moment. Perhaps none of the two countries want to bear the cost of engaging in a battle that would exacerbate their challenges, allow for regional and international interventions that would pose an existential threat to both their governments, or threaten their sovereignty and the unity of their territories, especially as the Iranian government is mired in a bitter feud with the West, the United States and other regional powers. The aforementioned powers could fan the flames of the dispute between Iran and Azerbaijan and use it to impose more pressures or extract substantial gains and concessions — especially from Iran such as ensuring it adjusts its regional behavior, ends its missile program and subversive activities.

In addition, there are regional efforts to contain the differences between the two countries and settle them before they worsen. There are calls for meetings to be held at the foreign ministerial level. If such meetings do happen, they will contribute to cooling down the tensions and containing the ongoing escalation.

The escalation is also in light of Turkish-Iranian competition based on religious-ideological and economic differences. The escalation between Tehran and Ankara has recently turned into a dispute. However, the two countries are still able to settle their differences and are not prepared to engage in a confrontation to adjust the balance of power in the region, especially in the Caucasus. The mutual economic interests guarantee a certain level of cooperation to tackle crises, given that both countries have problems in their relations with the United States and the West. They also face challenges that require them to coordinate their positions rather than enter perpetual disputes. Yet, both countries fear external interventions in their territories through attempts to exploit the plight of ethnic and religious minorities — which could lead to both countries limiting the ongoing escalation in Karabakh.

Conclusion

The scenario that sees Iran and Azerbaijan enter armed confrontation is ruled out given the high cost of war, the tattered economy of both countries, the growing domestic and external challenges facing both countries, the shared fear that they will risk their interests that could be preserved without losses through sitting down at the negotiating table. Escalation without engaging in a military confrontation is the most likely scenario for both countries in the short run. According to this scenario, they could achieve their desired objectives from escalation without losses. When each country achieves its desired objectives within the scenario of escalation without confrontation, they could move on to the scenario of pacification and containment, given the fact that that the mutual escalation is still defensive in nature; it has not become offensive yet.

The aforementioned indicate that there are major transformations happening at the regional and international levels in regard to curbing the role or clout of some regional powers seeking expansion and incursions at the expense of the security and stability of other countries. These transformations are essentially not in favor of Iran which adopts a hostile and expansionist attitude towards its Arab

neighbors. Although it has spheres of influence facing a myriad of challenges, Tehran has found itself besieged by a cycle of crises, enemies, and foes due to its policies, expansionist interventions and its disrespect for the internal affairs of other countries. This reflects the fact that there are new regional and global policies aiming to curb Iran's clout and curtail its moves — not only through imposing sanctions — regarding which Tehran possesses a vast amount of experience in relation to circumventing and mitigating their impact, but also through encircling Tehran with a host of security crises, and disputes, to force it to change its behavior and turn into a normal state.



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