

AZERI-TURKS OF IRAN: TRAPPED BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND GEOECONOMICS

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Introduction

Iran and Azerbaijan are neighbors with no territorial dispute, yet their relationship is marred by perpetual mistrust due to a clash of ethnic identities and shared religious beliefs. Iranian disquiet began to soar after the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2016. Viewing it as a wake-up call, Tehran responded by focusing on improving ties with Baku. What happened in 2020 was however beyond Iran's appraisal and much of the world's too. The Yerevan-occupied regions fell so spectacularly fast, leaving Iran exposed to new uncomfortable strategic realities. The Armenian buffer between the Azerbaijani people and Iranian-Azeris was suddenly no more. The last time Iran felt so uneasy about its northern border was in 1991 when Azerbaijan became an independent state, with the Aras River becoming a dividing frontier between the Azeri people. For Tehran, the primary concern is of a secessionist ethno-nationalistic movement arising among the Azeri-Turk community, its largest ethnic minority. This paper assesses the state of Iran's Azeri minority, its relationship with Tehran and Baku as well as its implications on regional and global developments. While their geostrategic alignments are diametrically opposed, Iran and Azerbaijan can still manage to find some common ground on a geo-economic plain.

Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism

After Azerbaijan's triumph over Armenia in 2020, Iran's northwestern Azeri populace expressed clear happiness while being bluntly critical of Tehran's pro-Yerevan approach. The Azeri populace totals over 15 million of Iran's 80 million population, making it the Iranian government's raw nerve.⁽¹⁾

This was clearly illustrated by IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour's comments during the Azerbaijan-Armenia war, "The first message is to our people, so that they may feel that we are vigorously monitoring the situation in the region and putting the necessary measures in line with it." He also explained, "The second message is to the countries of the region that they should respect their border integrity and should not accept a change in the geopolitics of the borders. This subject is the red line of the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁽²⁾

With the re-emergence of the state of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, Iran first felt the tremors of Azeri ethno-nationalism in its northwestern provinces. To its good fortune, the Armenian annexation of Azerbaijan's Iran bordering districts and Nagorno-Karabakh created an effective buffer. Though the state of Azerbaijan did have a small border patch with Iran, Azeri nationalistic morale was dampened after the loss of vast swathes of land to a hostile enemy.

It was not always the case though as until the 1920s Azeri-Turks not only provided numerous dynasties to the Persian thrones (the Seljuks and the Qajars) but also remained the most loyal ethno-linguistic minority in the modern day state. King Raza Shah Pahlavi adopted a strict policy of assimilation which lasted until his ouster in 1979.⁽³⁾ It was not just specific toward Azeris but also included other minorities such as Arabs, Balochis and Kurds. However, the Azeri community was suspected the most due to its agriculturally rich land, strategic location and ongoing geopolitical confrontation with the Soviet Union, which then also included today's state of Azerbaijan. For economic opportunities, better prospects for social assimilation and to avoid rampant stereotyping, Azeris migrated to major industrial cities within Iran, especially the capital Tehran. Inhabited along Iran's northwestern frontier with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, the Azeri provinces are still among the most under-developed regions after Sistan-Balochistan in the southeast.

When the Khomeini-led opposition overthrew the Shah, the Azeri-Turks hoped the latter's oppressive policies would be reversed and their key demands about adopting and teaching the Azeri language alongside Persian would also be accepted. The commonality of the Shiite faith also bolstered their optimism. Their demands were not outlandish.

The Azeri demand for education in the Turkic language was denied then and continues to be denied now. Though allowed under the Iranian Constitution,⁽⁴⁾ the Azeri language remains banned in educational as well as

state institutions. The community finds it imperative to teach its children the Azeri language privately. Spoken Azeri has become increasingly Persianized in terms of syntax, morphology, phonology and basic lexicon since the birth of the modern state of Iran.⁽⁵⁾ The Azeri youth are often unable to read Azeri texts because they are written in the Persian alphabet; a derivation of the Arabic script.

Then there are more symbolic and nationalistic Azeri demands such as the restoration of Arg-e-Tabriz or Ark Castle in Tabriz after it was destroyed in the 2003 earthquake and changing street names from Turkish to Farsi.⁽⁶⁾ The societal discrimination of Azeris is no less concerning than the denial of their right to learn, speak and write in their mother tongue.

The outrage over the drying up of Lake Urmia, the world's second largest salt lake, stems from its significance for livelihoods as well as for heritage.⁽⁷⁾ The Azeri populace blames the Iranian government for ignoring the environmental and agricultural consequences of diverting the lake's upstream water. The lake is also an indicator of climate change affecting Iran's most fertile lands, a concern which is alleged to lie low on the government's priorities.

The Azeri-Turks spread over East and West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Gilan, Khorasan and Tehran rely on satellite receivers for Turkish and Azerbaijani entertainment programs as their major source of learning the Azeri language. Access remains limited to the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) as Iran blocks the transmission of all Azeri-Turkish televised or online content. In urban centers like Tabriz, Ardabil, Urmia, Marand and Marageh the struggle for Azeri constitutional rights – the use of the Azeri mother tongue in education, the plight of Lake Urmia and an end to entrenched stereotyping against Azeris – continues in various creative ways.

Their grievances might be similar but not all Azeris agree on how to resolve them. The main dividing factor is the split between ethno-nationalistic and sectarian preferences. Due to the massive indoctrination process, which officially started in 1979, social conservatives in urban areas along with residents of rural dwellings identify themselves as Shiite Muslims first, Iranians second, and Azerbaijanis last. The differences among the Azeris deepened with the uprising in Syria in 2011, in which Iran remains heavily invested. Not only did the Khomeinist Azeris support the Iranian government's policy but they also joined the fight as mercenaries in the quest for livelihood and to perform their religious duty. The war in Syria proved to be a tool for national cohesion and the reinforcement of sectarian identity.⁽⁸⁾ However, the Syrian war was not as effective in pumping nationalistic fervor as the war against Iraq was. Had Saddam not attacked Iran, Azeri-Turks would have risen against Iranian rule, experts believe.⁽⁹⁾ Imam Khomeini's religious networks and the government's offices used the external invasion to keep the Azeris

tied to Tehran as their indigenous leadership and organizational structures were nascent and outreach channels were ineffective.

Though Tehran's grip on Azeri regions remained firm all the while, its surveillance apparatus became more active and widespread following Azerbaijan's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh. A sense of fear and imprisonment has scared Azeris away from publicly expressing their jubilation over the victory and raising their perpetual woes.

Censorship notwithstanding, urban Azeris are more drawn to Turkish dramas and sources of entertainment on social media than those shown on state-controlled outlets. Drifting away from the state-promoted theocracy, the outwardly-looking Azeris find more respite and prestige in ethno-nationalism. Regarding Syria or Iraq, they tend to support Turkey's narrative and policies, while on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azeri outrage was no secret.⁽¹⁰⁾ Iran was not too swift and firm in its balancing act as its supply of oil and vital resources to Armenia during the 44-day conflict was duly noticed by secular-leaning Azeri nationalists in Iran.

Over the decades, the northwestern regions of Iran echoed with protests, from the 2006 cartoon crisis depicting Azeris as cockroaches⁽¹¹⁾ to the 2011 Urmia rallies which reiterated their quest for Azeri-Turkish identity. Tractor Sazi football fans based in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan have been the most outspoken about their admiration for Turkey and their quest to acquire their rights. From pro-Turkey slogans and waving its flag, they carry banners reflecting the plight of Lake Urmia and express their right to be educated in their mother tongue. Fans of Tabriz soccer represent the self-confident, united and visible force of the Azeri populace who are ready to challenge the government's censorship of the internet or free speech and its intimidation through law enforcement authorities. Since Tractor Sazi fans are not a tightly-knit organization, they are vulnerable to infiltration and persuasion. Their outrage is not consistent. However, the rivalry with Persian clubs goes beyond the footballfield.⁽¹²⁾

Iran's establishment managed these tense situations whether Azeri public outrage or protests from a law and order perspective, but the state-tolerated discrimination of Azeris manifested through hostile attitudes toward their heritage and history was not checked. The Azeris have learnt to live in Iran but with an innate fear of being portrayed as disloyal and resentful toward the Iranian state and Persian culture. The pro-Azeri protest chants during the 2017–2018 Dey were the last vocal and newsworthy expression of Azeri nationalism.⁽¹³⁾ The jubilation visible during and after the Nagorno-Karabakh war has disappeared, possibly because of a lack of leadership and foreign support.

Iran has been building anti-Arab and anti-Turk sentiments over the last 40 years, which has somewhat favorably affected its Azeri populace. They dislike Turkey for the same reasons that it is popular among others. Turkey is prosperous, secular and modern. The Azeris see it as a staging ground for NATO operations, the secularization of Muslims and a safe haven for Israel. Turkish and Azerbaijani satellite channels, formally banned in Iran, impress the younger and urban population while bringing intangible ethno-linguistic and cultural emancipation. The Azeri citizens of Iran have been targeted for decades with Iranian nationalistic propaganda and the projection of Turkey and other Turkic people as either westernized or barbarians.

One less emphasized factor is the role of an independent but small circle of Azeri Shiite clerics who continue to resist the influence of Qom. Iran's state-appointed imams work in concert with internal security institutions, yet their efforts, which are restricted to calling for Shiite harmony and the teachings of Iman Khomeini, seem to be insufficient in the ethno-political concerned Azeri region. The Azeri-Turkish diaspora has played a significant role in the political awakening inside Iran, but it lacks external support from Turkey and Azerbaijan. Their television channels have been closed in Turkey and they are hounded by Iran's secret agents or Tehran's sympathizers.⁽¹⁴⁾ The activism of the Azeri-Turkish diaspora has a marginal impact on northern Iran but can mobilize important capitals to pressurize Tehran.⁽¹⁵⁾

Preempting the perceived, prospective threats from its northwestern neighbor, Iran pursues low-key preaching activities in Azerbaijan. Baku can employ stringent measures to check such soft advances and retaliates by exposing them publicly. In October 2021, Azerbaijan closed institutions associated directly with the Supreme Leader's Office in Baku on the pretext of disregarding COVID-19 precautions and spreading the virus.⁽¹⁶⁾

Tehran sees Azerbaijan as a secularize and Russified state with deep leanings toward Turkic ethno-nationalism. Religion, particularly Shiism, in the identity of Caucasian Azerbaijan is beset with challenges such as strict governmental control, which it does not face in Iran's other neighboring countries such as Iraq and Pakistan. On the other hand, growing Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran has been marked by negative attitudes not only toward ethnic Persians but also toward other ethnic minorities, for instance, Kurds, Balochis, and Arabs. As things stand now, there are marginal prospects for Azeris forming a joint resistance platform along with other ethnicities against Iran.⁽¹⁷⁾ Kurds and Turks do not get along and this fact holds ground in the case of Azeri-Turks and Kurds in Iran too. There may not be instances of frequent all-out violence but there is a cultural and political conflict. Both do not share the same sect either, Kurds are Sunni in their entirety while Azeri-Turks are predominantly Shiite. Over the decade, there have been cross-marriages in

western cities like Urmia and Mako but the prospects of a tactical alliance against the Persians or the government in Tehran are nearly non-existent.

Discontent amongst Azeri-Turks in Iran appears in three shades. The foremost is the legal positivist who believes in peaceful political struggle through electoral cycles as per the framework of Iran's Constitution and courts. The most docile and conformist political path has delivered little. Even after Baku's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, Tehran has not granted any concessions in respect of their decades-old demands. The only protest in 2020 in the Azeri-Turkish city of Tabriz was in solidarity with the people of Khuzestan Province who were demanding water.⁽¹⁸⁾ However, Iran's Azeris became vocal about the country's hostile approach toward Azerbaijan on social media platforms like Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp. The average Azeri living in the remote northwest is less likely to bypass Iran's highly monitored cyberspace by using a VPN. Building a pro-Azeri narrative using an anonymous account (fake name and photo) in a highly insecure setting requires much persistence, hard work and resources.

The second is the federalist discourse, which seeks the federalization of the country, seeking regional autonomy under the larger umbrella of the Iranian state. Such voices are tolerated in the political arena but with suspicion and are often publicly stigmatized.

The third and more straightforward shade is the of secession from the state and reunification with Azerbaijan. The Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (GAMOH) has spearheaded this discourse since its founding in 1995, seeking liberation from "Persian chauvinism." The discourse's emphasis is on the process of assimilation of Turks in Iran, promoting greater awareness of Azeri ethnic identity and calling for the independence of Iranian Azeri inhabited territories. GAMOH's founder Professor Mahmudali Chohraganli was jailed for two years with other comrades but was released in 1999 on health grounds. He took refuge in the United States in 2002. In April 2005, the corpses of its two members were found floating in the Aras River while in September, GAMOH was accused of killing a government official in Urmia. March 2006 was a watershed moment for GAMOH, as its members attended the Second World Azerbaijani Congress in Baku. Iran was enraged, leading it to launch a crackdown in Tabriz and ban the Navid Azerbaijan newspaper. Ever since, its significant support base in Iran's Azeri majority provinces has become more tame or muted.⁽¹⁹⁾ With its own flag and parliament, secular and pro-Western GAMOH attracted too much attention from Iran's law enforcement agencies, making it impossible to operate with foreign financial and political support.⁽²⁰⁾

Tensions, Cooperation and Suspicions

In the absence of an effective and resourceful Azeri political movement in Iran, can Azerbaijan feel compelled to use military means to prop up resistance across the border? This assumption led Iran to conduct a preemptive show of force on Azerbaijan's border last year. Among Iran's irritants was also a poem recited by Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan in December 2020, lamenting how the Aras River separates Azeri-speaking people in Azerbaijan and Iran. This poem symbolized the pan-Turkism doctrine of unification of all Turks.

An excerpt of the poem reads, "They separated the Aras River and filled it with rocks and rods. I will not be separated from you. They have separated us forcibly."⁽²¹⁾ Almost 200 years ago, the Russo-Persian War brought humiliation to Iran during the era of the Qajar dynasty which lasted until 1925. As per the Treaty of Turkmenchay, Iran lost large swathes of land in the South Caucasus to Russia and the Aras River became the boundary line between Iran and the Soviet Union, which still exists. Tehran is nervous at the prospects of the narrative of Shiite harmony losing to ethno-nationalism, triggering an uprising and eventual war with Azeris aided by Turkey and Israel among others.

The former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif responded to the poem recital by tweeting that President Erdogan "was not informed that what he ill-recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas north of Aras from Iranian motherland. Didn't he realize that he was undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan? No one can talk about our beloved Azerbaijan." Ankara summoned Tehran's envoy to express displeasure.⁽²²⁾

The 44-day war over Nagorno-Karabakh seems to have left Iran nearly as bruised as Armenia.⁽²³⁾ To deter Azerbaijan's confidence and alarmed by some events and statements emanating from the neighboring country, the IRGC launched Fatehan Kheybar, its biggest military drill along its northern border on October 1, 2021, involving thousands of troops, squadrons of tanks and armed vehicles, formations of artillery and dozens of gunship and utility helicopters. Besides the deployment of its variety of air defense systems and an assortment of drones, Iran's fighter jets flew sorties with aggressive and interception payloads. It was anything but a military training exercise in light of the statements issued by Iranian military commanders.

"The IRGC will attack Azerbaijan with 4,000 missiles, which will completely destroy Baku," Mohammad Bagheri, an IRGC military commander serving as Iran's chief of staff, was quoted as saying by Iranian national media. Turkey and Azerbaijan jointly responded to Iran with another extensive military drill in the liberated region along the Iranian border.

Iran's threats prompted the armies of Azerbaijan and Turkey to carry out an exercise dubbed the "Indestructible Brotherhood 2021" in the Nakhichevan

region. Motorized infantry, special forces, air defense and air-borne assets participated in the Azeri exclave sandwiched between Armenia and Iran.⁽²⁴⁾ It provoked the IRGC regional commander in Tabriz, Colonel Hossein Pursmail, to bring Israel into the mix, which was not even part of the military buildup. He remarked, "The repetition of Israel's threats against Iran through the mouth of the Republic of Azerbaijan is not only not in the interests of Baku but is also a threat to its very existence." No doubt, Israel's drones and other weapons systems were instrumental behind the Azeri victory against Armenia but so far, there has been no alleged or reported Israeli attack on Iran. Pursmail's statement encapsulated the Iranian perception of Azerbaijan's gains against Armenia. The actual trigger for the massive exercise was the trilateral exercise dubbed the "Three Brothers" involving Pakistani and Turkish special forces alongside Azerbaijani ones. The units "successfully accomplished the tasks of infiltration behind imaginary enemy lines by land, sea, air, as well as an ambush, attack, amphibious, and airborne training."⁽²⁵⁾ The trilateral military training perturbed Iran and it lodged its concerns with Pakistan and Turkey, which were dispelled immediately. Earlier, Azerbaijan and Turkey had held a largescale winter military drill in early February 2021. Azerbaijan's decision to detain Iranian truckers crossing into its territory in transit to Armenia via the Goris-Kapan Road exposed Tehran's disregard for changed realities. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev publicly expressed the country's concern over the violation of its sovereignty.⁽²⁶⁾ Intensive diplomacy led to the defusion of tensions, but it only seemed temporary. Iran's discomfort with Azerbaijan's signing of defense pacts with Turkey on top of deep strategic and economic ties with Israel and more recent joint military training with Pakistan exposes the limits of its soft and hard power alike.

Tehran has long felt threatened by deep military ties between Baku and Tel Aviv. From Iran's perspective, Azerbaijan can be more than a listening post for its foes as it is a suitable location to launch preemptive attacks against its vital installations, nuclear and missile facilities, in particular. Tensions are particularly high across the Gulf after Tel Aviv established diplomatic relations with Abu Dhabi and Manama. The prospect of an Israeli attack has increased further after the fall of occupied Azeri territories from Armenian control. Over the past decade, Israel and Azerbaijan have become strategic partners with Tel Aviv's imports soaring to over \$4 billion and Azeri gas catering for 40 percent of Israeli energy needs.⁽²⁷⁾

Azerbaijan's modern military equipment largely comes from Israel, thanks to a \$1.6 billion deal signed in 2012 and a \$5 billion defense contract in 2016. Azerbaijan has achieved impressive results through the use of Israel-made loitering munitions such as Harpy, Harop and Orbiter 1 K besides Turkish drones.⁽²⁸⁾

Iran fears that Turkey and Israel can push Azerbaijan to instigate a more robust secessionist movement. Such a movement can cause Azeri desertions in Iranian security organizations and the armed forces, potentially transforming the movement into a militant outfit. So, Tehran has pursued a multitrack approach to address the newfound headache on its northwestern border, which had been dormant due to cordial ties with Armenia. While Tehran is improving its military infrastructure in the northwestern region, it is developing combat capabilities suitable for the landscape and countering Azeri armed forces, which put on an impressive show but against a smaller and less capable enemy in 2020. As things stand, Iran's military muscle is on par with Azerbaijan's while it maintains numerical superiority. Tehran has been deepening its ties with Ankara and Baku while its key ally Moscow remains bogged down in the Ukraine war. To deter Israel, Iran is not only polishing its existing capabilities but is engaged in sabre rattling as well. The most notable was the attack on an Israeli-aligned organization in Erbil in March. Though it was not a legitimate military target, Iran did not hide behind the notion of plausible deniability but admitted firing missiles from its soil.

In line with its doctrine of forward defense, the IRGC was quick to launch an Azeri Shiite outfit, Huseynyun, with its own flag and emblem, unveiled right after Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Huseynyun is thought to have been raised along the lines of Hashdal-Shahbi or Fatemiyoun.⁽²⁹⁾ The insurgent group has not been heard of except on Iran-affiliated online communication channels or its propagation via social media. Neither have any subversive activities been reported in Azerbaijan nor have authorities revealed that any individual affiliated with Huseynyun had been arrested.

The real question, however, is about the prospect of a political resistance movement becoming strong enough to openly challenge Iran's rule in its northwestern Azeri province. The grievances of the Azeri people are deep but they do not seem compelled yet to take matters to the next level. The conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan was sudden for the Azeris living across the river too. There have been no signs of foreign interference in Iran's Azeri populace. Ankara and Baku are treading a fine line in keeping Iran's Azeri question alive but falling short of confronting it in one way or the other.

For Azerbaijan itself, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is far from settled. A sizeable chunk of land is still under Armenian control while Russian peacekeepers will remain stationed for another three years (2025) as per the agreement. If the status quo prevails (border demarcation), Yerevan would like it to be extended until November 2030. Currently, some 2,000 Russian troops are stationed at 27 outposts scattered throughout Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Interdependence and Geoeconomics

The ceasefire deal caters for “all economic and transport links” between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the setting up of an “unobstructed” transport corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan. Such a corridor will be consequential for Iran as Azerbaijan will not need its land route to connect to its exclave which borders Turkey. Azerbaijan will provide a five-kilometer corridor in Lachin to Armenia. In case Armenia reopens rail links, Azerbaijan will have to reciprocate its linkage to Iran through Nakhichevan. Iran’s rail link with Armenia will also connect her to Russia, for which it relies on Armenian roads besides maritime trade with Russia through the Caspian Sea.

In January, Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan ordered the early reconstruction of the Armenian railway through Meghri and Yeraskh, set for completion within three years at a cost of \$200 million.⁽³⁰⁾ Azerbaijan is already upgrading its side of the railway system. Russia is keen not only to keep Azerbaijan in its economic and strategic sphere but also to build long-term linkages for the future.

Iran will become a beneficiary of Russia’s success in developing interdependencies between Armenia and Azerbaijan, eventually extending to its production houses and dry ports via road and rail links. In 2021, Tehran received a rude awakening when Azerbaijan asserted itself in 2021 by halting the unauthorized entry of Iranian trucks through its newly liberated territories in route to Armenia. The arrest of truck drivers caused a major diplomatic crisis between the neighbors escalated tensions between the two countries.⁽³¹⁾ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Iran remained key trading partners. Throughout the war and until now, Iran was a vital source of hydrocarbons, minerals, metals, fertilizers, agricultural products, fertilizers, and glassware. Yerevan exports electricity, machinery and chemicals to Tehran. Armenia is hurrying to build alternate roads to keep trade ongoing via its shrunken 44-kilometer border with Iran. The southern region of Syunik or Zangezur, as Azerbaijan likes to call it, is a strategically important region as it separates the Azeri mainland from the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic. Prior to the tripartite agreement, Azerbaijan was dependent on Iran for logistical and aerial connections to its 5,500 square-mile exclave. As per the new deal, Armenia will provide a land connection – the Zangezur corridor – to Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan while Baku will oblige Yerevan with a similar one called the Lachin corridor linking Armenia and the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both the corridors are yet to be operational and modalities like customs facilities to control cargos and people need to be hammered out.

“At this stage, we have achieved an agreement on building the rail connection from Azerbaijan through Armenia to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic and also an agreement on the construction of the highway, but the exact route

of the highway has not yet been identified," President Aliyev told a press conference.⁽³²⁾ Tensions exist and the progress remains slow, largely due to domestic politics in Armenia.

To avert any internal ethnic movement in the future, Iran has taken the route of interdependence which suits Azerbaijan too, at least for the time being. On March 11, Azerbaijan and Iran signed an agreement to establish new transport and electricity supply links connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhichevan via Iranian territory.⁽³³⁾ The neighbors agreed to build new railway lines, highways, communication, and energy supply lines to connect Azerbaijan's East Zangazur and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through Iran. Tehran will build four bridges on the Aras River, two each for motorways and railway tracks just 5 kilometers away from the Armenian border.

Due to the delay on Yerevan's part in providing a Nakhichevan land link to Baku, the Iranian proposal is irresistible. Iran is not only trying to build trust with Azerbaijan but also seeking similar concessions for its goods to Europe through the South Caucasus.

The thaw that began in early 2022 with the agreement on joint infrastructure projects for transit trade led to an MoU for the construction of a road bridge over the Astarachay River at the border of the two countries.

On December 23, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian paid a follow-up visit to Baku to offer Tehran's role in the reconstruction of Nagorno-Karabakh and the strategic cities of Zangilan and Jebail.⁽³⁴⁾ Iran is invoking a bilateral cooperation agreement signed during President Ilham Aliyev's Iran visit in February 2016 whereby it seeks to continue the construction of hydropower facilities and hydropower plants Khudaferin and Giz Galaxy on the Aras river. Iran had won the contracts from Armenia but promised Azerbaijan to respect its claim over the territory.

On its part, Iran seeks Azerbaijan's cooperation to realize the North-South Transport Corridor for connectivity to Europe while Baku is invested deeply in becoming a reliable energy source for the European countries. Tehran's strategic alignment rests on Russia and China while Baku presses for closer collaboration with NATO, Turkey and Israel. Azerbaijan started its peacekeeping duties under NATO in Afghanistan in 2002 which ended in August 2021. On the eve of the Economic Cooperation Organization summit in Ashgabat, Iran signed a gas transit deal with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The prospects for the realization of such a complex arrangement are grim as the two Caspian states will likely prefer laying a pipeline instead of opting to depend on Iran.

Conclusion

If the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal passes the crucial test of the smooth functioning of respective passageways in the months ahead, Azerbaijan's interdependence on Iran will reduce significantly. Yet Baku will prefer to keep backup logistical corridors via Iranian territory. The level of mutual trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan is understandably low, which serves Iran splendidly.

Increased cooperation with Azerbaijan while building military infrastructure for any eventuality is the right approach from Iran's perspective in managing a potential internal upheaval among its Azeri populace. However, Tehran's strongarm tactics in addressing political and identity concerns will not be addressed by building bridges and interdependence with the South Caucasus. Acknowledging the Azeri populace's right to learn, speak and write in their mother tongue as per the Iranian Constitution can boost pro-Iran sentiments in its northwestern regions, especially when ties with Azerbaijan are improving.

As for racial discrimination and the use of slurs like "Turkish donkey" for referring to Azeris, Iran faces a two-pronged challenge: First, its unserious attitude to deal with racial complaints through law-enforcement services, second, its lack of a clear vision to tackle the deeply rooted racism in dramas, humor and political discourse. It is the most precarious crack in Iran's relationship with minorities, including the Azeri.

The raising of militant outfits like Husyenyun is bound to be counterproductive; however, it is expected that Iran will refrain from supporting them. Azerbaijan can conveniently launch a tit-for-tat move. If Iran's strategy of appeasing Azerbaijan is based on trade and commerce, then respect for mutual sovereignty and non-interference should supposedly be observed.

Given the complexities of Iran's stratagem, it is safe to assume that all options remain on the table. Iran seems to be playing the economic card to tame Azerbaijan after its victory in the 44-day war. Tehran's insecurity with Baku will remain a constant given the latter's relations with Tel Aviv going from strength to strength across multiple domains. The trilateral coalition between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel is a source of anxiety which Iran has to learn to live with. Baku-Tel Aviv ties became stronger while Turkey and Israel were at odds with each other after the MV Mavi Marmara incident. Without a doubt, Tehran recognizes the fact that Tel Aviv-Baku relations are of a strategic, technological and economic nature. This explains Iran's attempt to revive Azerbaijan's trust and establish relations based on bilateral mutual interest and economic interdependence. Unlike Iran, Azerbaijan will continue to look toward NATO and Europe.

Despite of Iran's fear of foreign roles in inciting Azeris' discontent, there are hardly any significant signs of activism among the Azeri-Turkish populace in Tehran or in the northwestern regions. Given the fissures in the Iranian approach to its northwest regions, Tehran's rivals might be granted with an opportunity to use the Azeri minority as a bargaining chip.

Endnotes

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