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Azerbaijan and Iran in the Shadows of Karabakh and Ukraine

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Abstract

Iran and Azerbaijan have recently seen a rise in tensions over competing strategic visions for their respective roles in the Caucasus. Events such as the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, seemingly allowed by the Iranian government, as well as Iranian military exercises near the border with Azerbaijan and the escalation of rhetoric coming out of Baku have pushed their relationship into a new era. Drawing on past scholarship and recent developments and analysis, this paper seeks to demonstrate the reasons for this deterioration of relations between the two countries, including the new position of power Azerbaijan finds itself in, the implications thereof for Iran, long-term Iranian policy goals, and other, wider regional changes and trends such as the echoes of the war in Ukraine. This paper argues that Iranian–Azerbaijani relations have reached this point through a mixture of Azerbaijani ascendancy, Iranian strategic failure, and the opportunities presented by Russia’s weakened position in the South Caucasus.

Introduction

At the start of 2023, Iran and Azerbaijan were experiencing particularly high tensions. An attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran led to accusations by Baku that the Iranian government had allowed the attack to happen, Iran held military exercises near the Azerbaijani border and President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan declared that relations between the two countries were at their lowest level ever. Furthermore, Azerbaijani officials have been using more and more hostile rhetoric targeting Armenia and Iran itself, with some officials claiming substantial amounts of territory—up to Tehran, in one instance—as being part of ‘Greater Azerbaijan’ (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023a; Shaffer, 2023).

Yet, in October 2023, the two states held a ceremony laying the foundation of a cross-border bridge as part of a transit route linking Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan (Aghayev, 2023). Taken at face value, this seems a good start towards restoring links and healing the void between the two countries. However, this move is at the very least partially related to Iran’s concern with the planned Zangezur Corridor, which would go through the Armenian province of Syunik and perhaps cut off Iran’s 40-km border with Armenia (and the rest of the South Caucasus outside of Azerbaijan by extension). In this way, as part of a larger transit network, the bridge bypasses the ‘Zangezur Corridor’ entirely, serving as a substitute for it. It is, in that regard, an almost perfect metaphor for the status of Iranian–Azerbaijani relations at the present time—on the surface, an attempt to build up better relations, with an undercurrent of Azerbaijan’s regional ascendancy and Iran’s strategic failings and attempts to counter Baku lying beneath.

This paper seeks to present an analysis of the current relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan. It will do so by first looking to previous scholarship on this compli-

cated relationship before analysing three key themes in the South Caucasus that have led to this state of affairs: first, Azerbaijan’s ascendancy in the region following the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and additional smaller attacks, such as those of September 2023; second, ineffective Iranian foreign policy concerning the South Caucasus; and third, the opportunities opened for both countries with the effective departure of Russian influence and military strength from the region. All three of these issues interact with and affect one another.

Mutual Fear

Like the rest of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan has a long history with Iran. However, in comparison to Armenia and Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran also have close cultural links. Both Azerbaijan and Iran adhere predominantly to Shi’ite Islam; Azerbaijan was also in the past a centre of many cultures with especially strong Persianate and Turkic presences, the region being part of both the Safavid and Turkic Qajar Persian Empires until its annexation by the Russian Empire.

The largest component of this cultural relationship is the fact that Iran has more Azerbaijanis living in its northwest than Azerbaijan does in its entirety. Azerbaijanis form the largest ethno-national minority within Iran. Indeed, this fact alone moves this component of the relationship from ‘cultural’ to ‘ethnic’. Because of Azerbaijan’s existence as an independent state, Iran views its Azerbaijani minority as a potential security threat. In this way, the Azerbaijanis of Iran fall into a group also consisting of Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds, and Baloch in that they are a minority with either a politicised community of the same kin group over the border, or full-fledged states in the case of the Turkmen and Arabs.

Significantly, the level of identification with the Iranian regime among the Azerbaijani minority may not be

as strong as previous scholarship suggests and, while the secessionist movement is weak, there is a growing affinity with the country of Azerbaijan among this group, as well as with Turkish culture in general (Cornell, 2015, pp. 322–325; Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023a). The region of northwest Iran, formed by the administrative units of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, and Ardabil provinces, is referred to as ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ in Azerbaijani nationalist discourse. It borders on the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, as well as all of Azerbaijan’s southern regions, and in recent years has been the site of unrest. Any countrywide turmoil in Iran could lead to an opportunity for the secessionist movement that the Azerbaijani government would be able to exploit to its advantage.

However, the fear is very much mutual. While Iran fears a nascent Azerbaijani nationalist movement, Baku, a firmly secular regime, fears the appeal of Shi’ite Islamism projected by Iran into its own population. A state/elite-led movement of Traditional Islam exists within Azerbaijan—a movement specifically aimed at limiting the influence of ‘foreign Islamic ideas’ in Azerbaijani Islam (Bedford et al., 2021, pp. 691–692). Further to this, Iran has funded Islamist groups within Azerbaijan, for example the militant, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-linked ‘Huseynyun’, though the effectiveness of such groups is minimal, with the Huseynyun serving more as a warning for Azerbaijan (Ahmed, 2021). It is not much of a stretch to identify as a primary source of ‘foreign Islamic ideas’ the Islamic theocracy to its immediate south with a substantial population of ethnic Azerbaijanis who have turned to local Ayatollahs in the past to advance their own interests (Cornell, 2015, pp. 319–320). This phenomenon is something a secular regime would want to counteract. Furthermore, Iran has not shied away from promoting irredentism of its own, with some officials claiming that, rather than leaving Iran, parts of its Azerbaijani population would welcome back the lands lost during the Qajar dynasty (Shlapentokh, 2019, p. 80).

President Abulfaz Elçibey of Azerbaijan, who was in power from 1992 to 1994, provides a link between these ethnic and the geopolitical issues. There was significant hope of a warming of relations between the two countries in the period directly after Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991. However, due to Elçibey’s pan-Turkism and irredentist posturing towards ‘Southern Azerbaijan’, the relationship broke down (Abbasov and Souleimanov, 2022, pp. 139–140). Another scholar describes Elçibey as a ‘nightmare leader’ for Azerbaijan from the Iranian perspective. As this period coin-

cided with the First Nagorno–Karabakh War, Iran gravitated towards Armenia to counteract the irredentism displayed by Elçibey, which acted as the turning point in relations between Iran and its two South Caucasus neighbours (Rice, 2020, p. 353). This pushed Azerbaijan towards Turkey and, by extension, the United States and the West—a relationship maintained by the pragmatic Aliyev regime, eager to access markets for its substantial energy reserves.

Azerbaijani Ascendancy, Iranian Abdication?

The period 2020–2023 was marked by Azerbaijani ascendancy in the Caucasus. From the 2020 Nagorno–Karabakh War onwards, Azerbaijan has been able to project hard power over the region in a way not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. This power has only grown since then, with a deal with the European Union (EU)—specifically, a gas export agreement signed in June 2022 aimed at doubling Azerbaijan’s export to the EU—ensuring greater revenue for Azerbaijani energy exports and the final destruction of the unrecognised Republic of Artsakh (i.e., the Armenian-controlled Nagorno–Karabakh region) in 2023. The latter drew limited international condemnation, with most focused on humanitarian issues. However, as most of the world recognises Nagorno–Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory, voices of dissent were muted. These victories, combined with a relative departure of Russia from the Caucasus due to the war in Ukraine, have led to an increased boldness from Azerbaijan, including state media referring to ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ in irredentist terms (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b).¹ This has been accompanied with claims against Armenia proper, ranging from the Syunik region to Yerevan itself (Fabbro, 2022).

The rhetoric employed reflects a regime confident in its assertions. Making ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ a talking point even before the final assault on Karabakh demonstrates that the Aliyev regime seems to have as an aim not just regional hegemony within the Caucasus, but status as a full-fledged power in the wider region. Partnerships with both Turkey and Israel may help in achieving this aim—both are keen to counteract Iran, and Azerbaijan can act as a reliable partner for both. These partnerships, bolstered in their stability by the enduring positions held by Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara, Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv/Jerusalem, and Aliyev in Baku, might further strengthen Azerbaijani resolve. Further, despite some opposition within the EU following the final assault on Nagorno–Karabakh in 2023, Azerbaijan’s energy ambitions, combined with these other crucial partnerships and Russia’s balanced position suggest the ambition of becoming a wider regional power.

¹ “‘South Azerbaijan’ Campaign Starts in Azerbaijan”, *Caucasus Watch*, 10 November 2022, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/south-azerbaijan-campaign-starts-in-azerbaijan.html> (accessed 7 November 2023).

By contrast, Iran's other foreign policy concerns—among others, influence in the Middle East, combatting Saudi Arabia, and containing the Taliban in Afghanistan—have led to a low-priority status for the Caucasus in Tehran. Russia's loss of focus on and waning influence over the South Caucasus due to the war in Ukraine has left Iran and Turkey as the region's major players in principle. Looking at the developments of the 2020 Karabakh conflict, one can see elements of Iranian support for Armenia, from calling for a cessation of hostilities to accusations from both Turkey and Azerbaijan of more explicit assistance through supplying military equipment (Sofuoglu, 2020). In stark contrast to this assistance of Armenia stand Iran's actions vis-à-vis Azerbaijan since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine; while relations had already plummeted, the decisive factor was the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Teheran. It is unlikely that the regime in Tehran orchestrated every aspect, but it is true that the actions of Iranian law enforcement were lax when it came to preventing the attack, both in planning and in action (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023a). This, followed by the holding of military drills on the border, was aimed at showing Azerbaijan that it remains a significant power. These drills began in 2021 and increased in intensity, with very large drills held towards the end of 2022 when the present tensions were growing (Motamedi, 2021; Kucera, 2022).

Moreover, there is the difference in the forms of power utilized—Azerbaijan has the capability to deploy military forces, but relies instead on soft power internationally. While it is certainly in possession of a highly advanced military, the main source of its strength can be seen in its successful diplomacy with the Western powers, particularly in terms of energy politics, partnerships made all the easier by the EU's search for new energy partners to replace Russia. This has not come without pushback, especially where the September 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh is concerned: France, for instance, supports Armenia openly, and the European Parliament passed a negative resolution on the issue.² Despite this, with the war in Ukraine showing no signs of stopping, the EU is still seeking to diversify its gas supply, and Azerbaijan does still provide some of the best means for this.

Iran, meanwhile, has an open network of proxies, and has, as previously noted, made some efforts at cultivating such a proxy within Azerbaijan. Iran may be keen to show that it still maintains some interests in the region, which could explain the relative easing of ten-

sions towards the end of the year. The Aliyev regime has spoken of opening the 'Zangezur Corridor' through Armenia's Syunik region to establish a land link with Nakhchivan; Iran strongly opposes this, and the aforementioned opening of a corridor through Iran instead aims to not only keep the peace in the Caucasus for Iran, but also offers Iran a chance at normalisation, as well as a bargaining chip to use against Azerbaijan (Aghayev, 2023). There is evidence of a cycle in this regard, the most notable example of which being September–October of 2023, as highlighted. To go from stating that relations are at their 'lowest level ever' to facilitating a land corridor is no mean feat (Shaffer, 2023). The cycle is a result of the mutual fear and pragmatism displayed by both states in their relations with one another—they both need to work together to achieve their own (differing) goals, but also regard each other with suspicion for the reasons outlined.

The Russian Gap

The secure position of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh is one important factor behind the emboldened rhetoric coming from Baku and the country's more aggressive recent foreign policy positioning. The reduction of Russian influence in Armenia and Azerbaijan is another factor.

Russia's pursuit of full-scale war in Ukraine meant it had to draw upon its soldiers in the South Caucasus to plug strategic gaps on the Ukrainian front in 2022. A mixture of Russia's inattention to the South Caucasus as well as its previous conduct in the region drew local ire and opened the way for new powers to take a more prominent role in the region. Ultimately, this proved to be an axis between Baku and Ankara (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b). The developments described serve Ankara well in strengthening its own position in the region via Baku: Azerbaijani energy passes to the West via Turkey, and a strong Azerbaijan ensures a constant supply through Turkey—and thus greater Western dependence on Turkey (Balci and Liles, 2020). It is therefore equally valid to call this a Turkish–Azerbaijani policy victory as it is to call it simply an Azerbaijani one.

As for Iran, it has not so much acted as a power filling the vacuum left by Russia as it has reacted to a strengthened Turkish–Azerbaijani regional presence. Iran has many foreign policy goals, and may be distracted by its own higher priorities. Iran and Russia are concerned about increasing Turkish—and, as such, Azerbaijani—influence in the region, and with Russian influence in the region waning, Iran must counter this influence by

² 'Nagorno-Karabakh: MEPs demand review of EU relations with Azerbaijan', European Parliament, Press Release, 5 October 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06132/nagorno-karabakh-meps-demand-review-of-eu-relations-with-azerbaijan> (accessed 13 December 2023).

itself (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023, pp. 126–127; Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b).

Iran is concerned by an increasing Turkish presence meaning greater NATO influence in the region—and since Azerbaijan is also allied with Iran’s longtime enemy, Israel, the increased power the two now hold in the region causes Iran discomfort (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023, pp. 130–131). Yet, when looking at recent Iranian actions, it has only reacted—the commencement of construction of a new link to Nakhchivan, for example, only came after the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh offensive. If Iran truly wanted to exert more power in the region, it would have acted faster to achieve this goal rather than wait until there was no alternative—i.e., before Nagorno-Karabakh’s fall and the establishment of a wider *de facto* border with Azerbaijan.

Iran’s interest in the region, while necessary for pursuing its other foreign policy goals, is in fact a secondary concern when put into the perspective of those other goals. Maintaining influence in Syria and Iraq, managing its relationship with Hezbollah, and combatting the Saudis all draw the attention of decision-makers in Tehran more than the South Caucasus; Iran has for this reason been keen to simultaneously remind Azerbaijan of its power and work with this ascending state (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b). Ultimately, Iran has many different interests across the wider region; Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is able to (and necessarily must) focus much more of its attention on the South Caucasus. Baku, and by extension Ankara, were better strategically positioned to take advantage of diminishing Russian influence, arguably even before it actually happened; Tehran simply has more interests to weigh up.

About the Author

Alexander Yeo is a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow.

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Conclusion

Azerbaijan–Iran relations and tensions are driven in equal parts by socio-political concerns creating a mutual fear in both states and by foreign policy concerns. The tensions between the two countries have manifested themselves in very different ways: Azerbaijan has become increasingly bold, while Iran has been highly cautious. Confrontation between the two serves neither’s purpose at present. Yet with Azerbaijan’s prospects looking up, despite some setbacks on the international scene, Baku has the edge when it comes to further consolidating power. Tehran, on the other hand, has many more projects to manage; Azerbaijan may prove another front in its conflict with Israel, yet other fronts—Syria, Lebanon and Iraq—serve a greater purpose in this conflict than a neighbour with whom they have peaceful, if fluctuating relations. Russia’s loss of regional influence has been countered with an increased Azerbaijani boldness. Russian peacekeepers not amounting to much in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran not intervening on behalf of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh (instead supporting Azerbaijan’s claim to the region), and Iran working with Azerbaijan to prevent conflict rather than counter it more strongly all suggest a shift of power in Baku’s favour.

Azerbaijan will most likely continue to project its power for the foreseeable future. Whether Tehran has the capacity, capability, cohesion and will to counter this projection, however, is not fully evident. Azerbaijan’s rise to power may have come at the expense of Armenian ambition and Russian influence, and it has in addition kept Iran from exerting meaningful influence in the Caucasus.

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Georgia and Iran: Opportunities and Constraints for Co-operation

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Abstract

This paper examines the main characteristics of Georgian–Iranian relations since 1991. The following issues are discussed: incompatibility in the perception of historical interactions; Iranian policies towards the South Caucasus states after the dissolution of the Soviet empire and the place of Georgia within it; the influence of political issues on the economic interactions of the two countries; the effect of the Russian factor on Georgian–Iranian relations; and the impact of the Russia–Ukraine war and Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict on Georgian–Iranian relations. It is stressed that the incompatibility of political interests rules out the possibility of rapprochement between these countries.

Introduction

Today, Georgia has no common border with Iran. Still, historically and geopolitically, these two countries can be considered neighbours. For example, though it enjoyed significant autonomy, Eastern Georgia was part of the Safavid state from the 16th to the beginning of the 18th century. Today, relations are normal—although, unlike in the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan, high-level visits between the representatives of the two countries are infrequent because of Georgia's pro-

Western and anti-Russian orientation, which is not in line with Iran's political course. Ultimately, the incompatibility of political interests rules out the possibility of the rapprochement of these countries.

Some main characteristics of today's Georgian politics hinder the two countries from growing closer: (1) the 'cold war' between Russia and Georgia, (2) close relations between Georgia and Turkey, and problems in Iran–Turkey relations, and (3) Georgia's pro-Western aspirations and close ties with the North Atlantic