FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 25.10.2021 | Rovshan Mammadli

What is behind the growing Iran-Azerbaijan tension?

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh has seen regional power dynamics shift to Iran's detriment — in particular because of Azerbaijan-Israel relations

In recent days, the focus of the world has sharply turned towards the Caucasus and the spike in apparent animosity between Iran and Azerbaijan.

The proximate cause of the recent tension appears to have been the entry of Iranian fuel lorries into Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh — an act that Baku considers illegal. After this incident, Baku closed the part of Armenia's key Goris-Kapan highway that passes through Azerbaijan, handed a diplomatic note to the Iranian ambassador, and detained the Iranian drivers whose fate, for now, remains unknown.

That has been accompanied by other irritants for Iran, including a series of military exercises involving Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan, and a spike in anti-Iranian rhetoric from Azerbaijani officials.

And now, for the first time in decades, the Islamic Republic has conducted large-scale military exercises at its northern border with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Baku has launched joint military exercises with Ankara.

'Conquerors of Khaybar'

Parallel to the drills, the war of words between the two countries has accelerated. While there are many issues that Tehran cannot agree with Baku, it has two primary concerns right now: Israel's potential use of Azerbaijani territory for intelligence and military purposes against Iran and the possibility that Azerbaijan could seize Armenia's southern Syunik Province and cut off Iran's ties with Armenia.

Iran's Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian's words that 'we will never

tolerate the existence of a false Zionist regime' near the Iranian border, nor 'any changes to the regional borders and geopolitics' reflect these concerns.

That Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was accomplished with the help of Israeli-made drones has led to speculation that Tel Aviv's support did not go unrequited.

From Tehran's point of view, it is Tel Aviv that is trying to destabilise the region and create an atmosphere of distrust between the two neighbouring countries. The title of the ongoing drills drives this point home: 'Conquerors of Khaybar' is a reference to the battle of Khaybar in the year 628, in which the Prophet Muhammad defeated the Jews of the Khaybar region, who, according to Islamic sources, incited the Arab tribes against the Muslims of Medina. According to the Islamic Republic, Israel is using the areas retaken by Azerbaijan for intelligence operations against Iran.

Tehran has long accused Baku of assisting Israeli intelligence in the 2010–2012 assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, with Iran's Foreign Ministry summoning the Azerbaijani ambassador to Iran and giving him a note of protest in 2012.

The Tel-Aviv-Baku friendship

While Azerbaijan insists that the Tel-Aviv-Baku friendship is not directed at any third party, both in the past and now, Iran takes the opposite view.

The use of Israeli-made drones by the State Border Service of Azerbaijan to control the border with Iran as well as the participation of Israeli companies in projects located in areas on the Iranian border that were reclaimed by Azerbaijan last year has only increased Tehran's suspicions.

That Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was accomplished with the help of Israeli-made drones has led to speculation that Tel Aviv's support did not go unrequited. In return, the thinking goes, Israel wanted something from Azerbaijan, and that 'something' probably has to do with Iran.

Israel's escalating rhetoric

In his speech to the UN General Assembly in September, Israeli Prime

Minister Naftali Bennett declared that 'Iran's nuclear programme has hit a watershed moment. And so has our tolerance. Words do not stop centrifuges from spinning [...] We will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.'

Bennet's stark comments have come at the tail of escalating rhetoric from Israeli military leaders. Israeli Defence Force Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi publicly declared in January that the IDF was preparing fresh 'operational plans' for a potent military strike. In August he said that Iran's nuclear progress has prompted the IDF 'to speed up its operational plans', with a fresh budget to do so. And in September Kohavi said that the IDF has 'greatly accelerated' preparations for action against Iran's nuclear programme.

To compound the issue, Iran also feels isolated by the regional players in the post-war South Caucasus.

Even after denying an Israeli presence in Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev was photographed smiling broadly and petting an Israeli-made Harop drone in Jabrayil, on the Iranian border.

Meanwhile, the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Iran marked the anniversary of last year's war by posting a picture of an Azerbaijani soldier carrying an Israeli Tavor assault rifle. Azerbaijan has consciously drawn attention to Israel's influence over the country.

And, in this situation, Tehran has more reasons than ever to be sensitive to the Israeli threat.

The Karabakh ceasefire

To compound the issue, Iran also feels isolated by the regional players in the post-war South Caucasus. While Russian soldiers are serving as peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and a joint Turkey-Russia monitoring centre is observing the Karabakh ceasefire truce, the Islamic Republic is stuck on the sidelines. Despite Iran bordering the territories, Azerbaijan reclaimed in the war, Baku has not invited a single Iranian company to take part in the post-conflict reconstruction process.

Nor is distrust of Iran limited to Azerbaijan. In recent weeks, Georgia has been denying entry to some Iranian residents who hold residence permits in the country — the reasons for this remain unknown.

With all this in mind, Azerbaijan's recent irredentist claims to the lands connecting Armenia to Iran arouse fear not only in Yerevan but also in

Tehran. The trilateral Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijan declaration of November 2020 granted Azerbaijan the right of transit to its exclave in Nakhichevan from southern Armenia (Syunik Province). This transit connection is widely referred to in Azerbaijan as the 'Zangezur corridor' which President Aliyev has threatened to take by force if it is not opened willingly.

Then, on 7 July, Azerbaijan announced the reorganisation of its internal economic regions, which included a new region, bordering Syunik, called 'Eastern Zangezur' — with the implication is that there is a 'Western Zangezur', that is, Syunik. This intent was confirmed by Ilham Aliyev in a speech a few days later.

'Yes, Western Zangezur is our ancestral land', he said. 'We must return there and we will return.'

If war between the two countries erupts, it is doubtless that Azerbaijan and Iran will both be losers and the only ones to profit will be third parties.

While such speeches are made for mostly populist purposes and intended for a domestic audience, they are also perceived very seriously in Tehran. Losing a connection with Armenia means losing easy access to the region while having to deal with a newly emboldened Azerbaijan heavily backed by Iran's archenemy Israel.

A war between Azerbaijan and Iran?

Tehran is treading carefully while sending a pointed message to Baku. The Islamic Republic wants to reaffirm its national security red lines, establish a credible level of deterrence, and reassert its undeniable regional role, which has been tarnished amid recent security developments in the region.

Ultimately, the destabilisation of its northern borders is undesirable for Iran, which suffers from massive sanctions and is involved in multiple geopolitical and military ventures in the Middle East. But knowing the difficult position Tehran has found itself in, Azerbaijan is not afraid to respond defiantly.

Despite the rising tension, there are serious diplomatic developments ahead. Tehran will soon host a trilateral meeting between the Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Iranian foreign ministries. Until then, the diplomatic

corps in Iran and Azerbaijan remain in regular communication with each other.

There really is no other way. If war between the two countries erupts, it is doubtless that Azerbaijan and Iran will both be losers and the only ones to profit will be third parties.

For ease of reading, we choose not to use qualifiers such as 'de facto', 'unrecognised', or 'partially recognised' when discussing institutions or political positions within Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. This does not imply a position on their status.

This article originally appeared on OC Media.



Rovshan Mammadli
Baku

Rovshan Mammadli is a Baku-based columnist and fact-checker.