

Growing tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan

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The already strained relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, which acts as an outpost of the United States and Israel on the Caspian Sea, have continued to worsen in recent days.

There was an intensification of the tone on both sides following the Eurovision Song Contest held in the Azerbaijani capital Baku this year. On May 29, Azerbaijan blocked a leading Iranian cleric from entering the country after Iranian Islamists dubbed the song contest a “gay parade.” There were protests against the other side in both countries during the competition. Both Tehran and Baku have since withdrawn their ambassadors.

On May 30, the Baku government also sent a note to Tehran asking the whereabouts of two Azerbaijani writers who have allegedly disappeared in Iran. The Russian media now write openly of a “diplomatic war.”

The reason for the strained relations is Azerbaijan’s close collaboration with the United States and Israel in their war preparations against Iran. Tehran has accused the government in Baku several times of being involved in the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, which most likely were carried out by American and Israeli intelligence agencies. Justifiably, Iran also feels threatened by the systematic military rearmament of Azerbaijan, which is being carried out by Israel and the US.

The states of Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Iran have been arguing for years over a border survey of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, whose territorial status for this reason has still not been established. Tahir Zeynalov, an analyst at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, told the online newspaper *Eurasianet.org* that Azerbaijan would have to defend itself against possible attempts by Iran to carry out oil exploration in an area that his country could claim “was ours.”

During the recent Eurovision Song Contest, two

Azerbaijani Coast Guard vessels patrolled the port of Baku, and there were leaked press accounts linking this maneuver to supposed threats from Iran. In response to this open provocation, Iran conducted military exercises near the Azerbaijani border with six navy ships.

The Azerbaijani military, and especially the Navy, have been systematically rearmed in recent years by the US. From 2010 to 2011, Azerbaijan’s military spending rose from 3.95 percent to 6.2 percent of GDP, or \$3.1 billion. In a telegram to the American government in 2009, published by WikiLeaks, Azerbaijan is described as “an important partner in the war on terrorism.” Azerbaijani rulers supported the wars against Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The telegram also states: “As part of its NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan, Azerbaijan has pledged to increase the capability of its naval forces to interdict transnational threats on the Caspian Sea, and to assist in the fight against terrorism. Toward this end, the Ministry of Defense has worked closely with the United States Department of Defense for the past two years.... Azerbaijani divers and naval commandos have received U.S. training, equipment.”

Azerbaijan is not only rich in oil and gas, largely exported to the US and the EU, it is also an important transit country for resources from the rest of the Caspian basin and Central Asia. The previously quoted telegram puts it very clearly: “One of the key U.S. interests here is the ability of Azerbaijan to continue to produce and export hydrocarbon resources from reserves located offshore in the Caspian Sea.”

Israel is also directly involved in the arming of Azerbaijan. In February of this year, Baku agreed to buy arms worth \$1.6 billion from Israel. The new weapons systems ordered from Israel include sea-based missiles and drones. Thanks to the support of the US and Israel, Baku now has a more heavily armed navy in the Caspian

region than even Russia.

According to a report by the American magazine *Foreign Policy*, Israel now has access to air bases on the border of northern Iran, from where air attacks could be launched on Tehran.

How far Azerbaijan is involved in the preparations for war against Iran was also shown last week in the *Washington Post*, in an article detailing the absurd suggestion of an alleged assassination attempt by Iran on US officials in Azerbaijan (see: “Washington Post airs another unlikely Iranian assassination plot”).

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton is expected in Baku on June 6 to meet with Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev and Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov. On the agenda will be the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a region over which Azerbaijan has been in conflict for years with its neighbor Armenia.

The territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh is an important motive for the support that Azerbaijan is now providing the United States and Israel. In the event of war over Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia and Iran would stand on the side of Armenia, while Azerbaijan would clearly rely on support from Washington.

The issue of Iran is also of central importance. According to the Azerbaijani online newspaper *AKZ.az*, experts expect that Clinton will discuss the “program for the war on terror and assistance to Azerbaijan” and “technical re-equipment of the Azerbaijani secret service.”

Turkey, which also supports a military intervention against Syria and is currently at the forefront in equipping the Syrian rebels, is sending four top military leaders in a public show of support for Baku, underscoring the longstanding ties between Ankara and the Turkic-speaking country. The Russian news agency *Regnum* quoted an anonymous source who is close to the Turkish military, saying: “With this step, Turkey wants to give Iran to understand that they will not leave Azerbaijan on its own.”



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