

Azeri-Iranian relations continue to deteriorate

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Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran, strained for years, are worsening in face of US and Israeli war preparations against Iran. The regime in Baku is a key military and economic partner of Washington and Tel Aviv and is being built up as a bulwark against Iran and Russia in the Caucasus.

Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov's April 21-24 visit to Israel further worsened relations. It was the first official visit by an Azeri minister to Israel since Azerbaijan became independent, amid the collapse of the USSR, over two decades ago.

Due to the preparations for war against Iran pursued by the US and Israel for years, Azerbaijan has avoided holding formal discussions with Israeli government officials, despite close military and economic ties between the two countries.

Among others, Mammadyarov met with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon. At a press conference following the trip, Mammadyarov announced that it was "only a matter of time" before Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Israel.

Amid the escalation of the Syria war and the threat of intervention by NATO forces, which could lead to a conflict with Iran, the visit by Azerbaijan signals that it intends to strengthen its relations with Israel and the US both militarily and politically.

Azerbaijan could serve as a base for an attack on Iran from the north. The American and Israeli militaries have been building up the Azeri army and navy. In 2012, Azerbaijan bought weapons worth \$1.6 billion from Israel. Israeli companies will also advise the Azeri government regarding weapons production. Azerbaijan has reportedly also provided the Israeli military access to bases on its territory.

The secret services of the three countries work together closely. An anonymous source in Israel's Mossad secret service told Britain's *Times* newspaper

early last year that the Azeri capital, Baku, was "ground zero" for Israeli intelligence operations against Iran. The source also reported that the Azeri and Israeli militaries were "well acquainted" with one another. Iran has repeatedly accused Baku of being involved in the secret US war against Iran and the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.

Azerbaijan has for years been a key US ally in the "war on terror" and has, among other things, facilitated the northern supply network for US troops in Afghanistan.

Right-wing groups in Azerbaijan and politicians in Washington are increasingly stirring up ethnic tensions to serve as a pretext for military intervention. Up to 20 million Azeri-speaking people live in the north of Iran, twice as many as in Azerbaijan itself. According to various estimates, about a quarter of Iran's population is of Azeri origin.

Historically, the division of the ethnic Azeris occurred through the conquest of the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, which once belonged to the Persian Empire, by troops of the Russian Tsar in the Russian-Persian War of 1826-1828. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the ensuing independence of Azerbaijan, ethnic and national tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan flared up once again.

Last summer, a letter from Republican Congressman Dan Rohrabacher to then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton caused uproar. It called on her to support the fight "for the independence of South Azerbaijan from Iran and the possibility of union with the Republic of Azerbaijan". The Azeri parliament also discussed renaming the country "North Azerbaijan". So far, the government in Baku has distanced itself publicly from such demands.

On March 30, a conference in Baku entitled "The dawn of contemporary South Azerbaijan" called for the "independence" of the Azeri minority in Iran. The

conference was organized by the National Liberation Front of South Azerbaijan, a pan-Turkic organization of Azeri Iranians, including former government officials, academics and experts. Speakers at the conference called on Azeri-born Iranians to exploit Western pressure on Tehran “to build a state in the north-western province, which borders Azerbaijan”.

In response to the conference, the Iranian Foreign Ministry ordered the Azeri ambassador to Tehran and warned that such provocations “seriously” endangered bilateral relations.

A few days later, the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, which is close to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, published an article calling for a referendum on the accession of Azerbaijan to the Iranian Republic.

In April, the Iranian parliament began to draft a law providing for the annexation of Azerbaijan. A member of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party in Azerbaijan, Siyavush Novruzov, then said publicly that the treaty of 1828 actually suggested the annexation of north-western Iran by Azerbaijan.

Sections of the ruling elite in Turkey, the most important NATO ally in the region, also support the call for the independence of “South Azerbaijan” from Iran.

Azeris belong to the Turkic peoples, and the Turkish and Azeri languages are very similar. Turkey and Azerbaijan have close economic and political relations. In May last year, a “Southern Azerbaijan Evening” was held in Turkey, in which numerous politicians and intellectuals participated.

Earlier this year, it was announced that the Azeri-Iranian TV channel GünAz TV, currently broadcasting from the US, would resume its work in Turkey. In 2006, the station, which promotes the independence of Azeris in Iran, was shut down due to pressure from Tehran.

Another source of conflict is Iran’s relations with Armenia, with which Azerbaijan is still formally at war after the 1991-1994 conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. To this day, this conflict has not been resolved. Iran maintains close relations with Armenia, which provides food and other goods to the regime in Tehran, circumventing NATO sanctions. In the case of military escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia would most likely support Armenia.

In a June 11 editorial, the head of the pro-CIA think

tank Stratfor, George Friedman, criticized the White House for neglecting its relations with Azerbaijan. He stressed the strategic importance of Azerbaijan, which “is located between two forces that are hostile to the US: Russia and Iran”. Friedman also referred to the experience of the Second World War—the attempt to conquer Baku and its oil deposits played an important role in Hitler’s war strategy against the Soviet Union.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the Western powers have concentrated their war policies and strategic alliances on the Middle East; the expansion of military conflicts also means the energy-rich Caucasus will undoubtedly play an important role.

As Friedman suggests, the US and Israeli build-up of Azerbaijan is not only directed against Iran but also against Russia. The Kremlin also fears that military intervention by the Western powers in Syria and Iran will destabilize the entire Caucasus and Central Asia, and that the ethnic conflicts fuelled by imperialism will spread to Russian territory.



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