

Analysis

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Summary: Beyond a growing commercial relationship, Turkey is trying simultaneously to promote broad-based cultural cooperation that draws Turkic peoples in Azerbaijan and other South Caucasus nations closer. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabagh represents a singular challenge for Turkish policy toward the South Caucasus. In Baku, particularly, voices demanding a military solution are growing louder. But would Azerbaijan receive support from the millions of ethnic Azeris living in Iran? The “Azeri factor” is certain to remain an influence on Turkey’s relations with Iran, but this does not mean that Turkey has an “Azerbaijan card” to play to enhance its political leverage.

Turkey and Greater Azerbaijan: A Card to Play?

by Dr. Nadir Devlet

On the surface, Turkey’s relations with the countries of the South Caucasus seem clear enough. Its relations with Azerbaijan are excellent, and the two work in partnership on many issues. Georgia maintains a close relationship with Turkey, and the two share a busy border marked by prolific and growing trade. Only Armenia remains a problem mostly because of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabagh.

The political, economic, and cultural relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have flourished for the last two decades. When five independent Turkic states emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey immediately recognized all of them. Among these, the closest geographically and linguistically was Azerbaijan. It seems quaint now, but when Turkish diplomats first visited Baku, many returned with the impression that the Azerbaijanis were speaking “broken Turkish.” Despite ethnic and cultural proximity, ignorance of the Turkic peoples trapped in the USSR ran deep in Turkish society.

Time and circumstances have changed this reality. Today, when the president of Azerbaijan visits Ankara, or when

Turkey’s prime minister visits Baku, assertions that Turkey and Azerbaijan are really “one nation with two different states” are commonplace. Is this just rhetoric or is there something behind it? Turkish policy toward Azerbaijan is not just about promoting business and trade, which, though successful, are nowhere near the levels Turkey enjoys with, say, Russia or Germany. Beyond the growing commercial relationship, Turkey is trying simultaneously to promote broad-based cultural cooperation that draws these Turkic peoples closer. It seems keenly aware that buying from or distributing energy for these countries will not by itself create strong political partnerships. This is where ethnic, cultural, and linguistic kinship provide a special lift, facilitating discussions of political and diplomatic issues well beyond energy and business.

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabagh represents a singular challenge for Turkish policy toward the South Caucasus. An escalation of this conflict could impede or derail Turkey’s carefully orchestrated approach to the post-Soviet Turkic world. The ceasefire agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia 17 years ago is wearing thin, and there is no permanent solu-

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tion in sight. Both sides advance stubborn arguments, and both are building their military power. In Baku, particularly, voices demanding a military solution are growing louder. Public opinion sampling in Azerbaijan consistently registers Nagorno-Karabagh as the issue of most concern, with current polling showing that concern reaching nearly 70 percent. One can assume with some confidence that eventually Azerbaijan will have to act. If war breaks out, Ankara will have little choice but to support Baku. Failing in this, Turkey would lose its credibility not only among Azeris, but among other Turkic peoples and republics.

Today, the Armenian republic has a population of less than 3 million. More Armenians are living in diaspora than in Armenia: approximately 2.2 million in the Russian Federation, 1.4 million in the United States, 450,000 in France, and smaller concentrations elsewhere. Azerbaijan has approximately 9.5 million inhabitants, of whom 90 percent are ethnically Azeris. This large imbalance means that Armenia will be at a deep disadvantage without receiving foreign support. Russia may be eager to interfere in such conflict, as it did in Georgia, with the expectation of subduing Azerbaijan to gain a stronger hand in the region's energy competition. But this could not be done easily, and it would risk a larger conflict with Iran, or more precisely, with that part of Iran that is predominantly Azeri.

Iran's Azeri population is large and restive. The Treaty of Turkmenchai, which established the border between Iran and Tsarist Russia 184 years ago, remains in force, but it was severely threatened in September 1941 when the Soviet army intervened in Iran, prompting Iranian Azerbaijanis to seek independence. The Azerbaijan National Assembly was convened in December 1945, and its authority lasted until December 1946, collapsing after Soviet troops departed northern Iran in May of that year. But the experience with independence from Persian Iran has lingered and festered.

Azerbaijanis are the largest minority in today's Iran. There are many estimates of the size of Iran's population, the highest of which is 78 million, with Persians (Farsi-speakers) making up 61 percent, and Azerbaijanis 16 percent of the total. There are therefore close to 14 million Azeris in Iran, and their territory is contiguous to independent Azerbaijan. Other estimates place the population of Iran at 75 million, with Iranian Azeris at 24 percent. This

would mean a combined population of Azeris of close to 28 million. If one adds to these Azeris dispersed in Russia, Iraq, Turkey, and Georgia, a total population of near 30 million Azeris would not be implausible.

But here the analytical task becomes murky. The Azeris in Azerbaijan and those in Iran are ethnically the same people, but are they the same nation? The two parts of Greater Azerbaijan have been separated from one another for several hundred years. The ties that bind the two Azeri communities may not be as strong as the differences that divide them. Azeris in the contemporary independent Azerbaijan republic lived first under Tsarist then Soviet rule. Not surprisingly, its inhabitants are more secular than their cousins in Iran. Unlike in independent Azerbaijan, Shiite identity is very important factor in Iran; indeed it may be the most important "glue" holding together the Iranian state. The religious factor and the promotion of the Persian language among Iranian Azeris have assimilated some minorities into the Persian milieu. This has led some Iranian scholars to claim the Azeris are not really a Turkic people at all, that Azeri nationalism is really Iranian nationalism; just because some speak a different dialect, the argument goes, does not make them ethnic. (According to one recent inquiry 16.2 percent of Azeri children are said to know only Farsi, 13.5 percent are fluent in Farsi and know some Turkish, and 40 percent are fluent in both languages. In the family, 52 percent of parents speak Turkish, 41.8 Farsi, and 5.6 both languages.)

The most part, Iran does not discriminate against ethnic Azeris. They can hold high official positions, and their political and economic elite have long been well integrated. The best example is Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran (Vali-e faqih), whose father was an Azeri. He speaks broken Azeri but shows no interest in Azeri preferences or predispositions beyond this.

Nonetheless, Azeri assertiveness has grown in recent years. In the spring of 1998, a group of leading Azeri intellectuals appealed to Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Khatami, who was at that time the Supreme Leader, calling for expanded rights, especially in the cultural and language spheres. Iranian leaders dug in, arguing that once the state retreats on language rights, then minorities would demand to have their own flags, their own police forces, own currencies,



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and that eventually they would refuse to pay taxes to central government.

In May 2006, violent demonstrations broke out in a number of northwest cities after a cartoon published in a state-run newspaper compared Azeris to cockroaches. In May 2007, hundreds of Iranian Azerbaijani were arrested for demanding that they should be allowed to be educated in their own language. In reality, clause 15 of the Iranian Constitution allows bilingual education, but it has never been observed.

In one of the latest incidents, in September 2011, the people of the capital of the northwest province of Ardabil, and the Azeri region, protested the degradation of Orumieh Lake. Some 35 dams had been built on 21 rivers that feed the lake. The region was affected severely. Fourteen Azeri activists were detained after this protest. A similar protest was also organized in Istanbul.

Iranian authorities show no sympathy to any demonstration of an ethnic color. Among other precautions, authorities forcefully remove satellite dishes from homes, which many Azeris employ to watch Turkish television broadcasts. Turkish and the Turkic language used by Azeris are very close, allowing someone from Istanbul to communicate easily in Teheran. Turkish and Azerbaijan flags increasingly are displayed at football matches, and many young Azeris have taken to calling themselves “Turks” in solidarity with youngsters in Turkey and independent Azerbaijan.

Iran cannot take its Azeri population for granted, but neither does it appear to be an imminent threat to the state. When in 1992, Azeri President Abulfayz Elchibey, a former political prisoner known for his pro-Turkish nationalism, called for the creation of a Greater Azerbaijan, Iranian Azeris received this call coolly, perhaps because they doubted Elchibey’s seriousness. Somewhat later, Azerbaijan’s former Interior Minister Iskandar Hamitov mused that “Iran cannot attack Azerbaijan. If so, it will end with the creation of New Azerbaijan with its 40 million inhabitants.” These sentiments make for good sound bites, but there is little evidence to support the exaggerated claims that the two parts of Azerbaijan could easily coalesce.

The “Azeri factor” is certain to remain an influence on Turkey’s relations with Iran, but this does not mean that Turkey has an “Azerbaijan card” to play to enhance its political leverage. Cooler heads understand that encouraging ethnic separatism in Iran could easily stimulate a wave of Iranian nationalism. Yet Turkey’s strengthening ties to independent Azerbaijan cannot be totally discounted as an accelerant of the flame of ethnic kinship that burns just beneath the surface on both sides of the Iran-Azerbaijan divide.

About the Author

Prof. Dr. Nadir Devlet teaches at the International Relations Department of Istanbul Commerce University. He concentrates on 20th and 21st century political, social, cultural, economic situations, and security issues for Turkic peoples. He has also taught at Marmara (1984-2001), Columbia (1989-1990), Wisconsin-Madison (1996-1997), and Yeditepe (2001-2007) universities. He has more than 20 published books in Turkish, Tatar, and English as well as some 200 articles in Turkish, Tatar, English, and Russian.

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