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**Religious Aspects of the Iran-Azerbaijan Conflict:
Is There a Danger of a New Hybrid War?**

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Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have become unprecedentedly strained over the past month. Iranian military forces are mobilizing across the Iran-Azerbaijan border. At the same time, a new Turkish military contingent was deployed in Azerbaijan and joint military exercises were held in the territory of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.¹ Officials from both countries were engaged in an unfriendly rhetoric. It is unlikely that this tension between Iran and the Turkey-Azerbaijan military alliance will escalate into an open, large-scale military confrontation, but, nevertheless, there is the opinion that the Iranian state will continue hybrid warfare in Azerbaijan through the support of political and religious groups in the medium and long term based on the examples of other countries.

Iran's Hybrid Wars in the Middle East

It is not a novelty for Iran to create and support pro-Iranian paramilitary groups outside the country, in Shiite-populated regions. Although Shiite Muslims are a minority among the Muslims of the world, Iran's political leadership is quite effective in using limited resources to gain influence in Shiite-populated regions. The most famous and influential of Tehran's many projects is the Lebanese military-political union, Hezbollah, which has a significant influence in southern Lebanon which the country's central government is unable to neutralize.² Iranian-backed Houthi militia are also actively involved in the Yemeni civil war and control much of the western part of the country populated by Zaidi Shiites.³ Iran supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad and pro-government Alevi groups in Syria such as Shabiha.⁴ Iran's influence is also significant in Iraq where numerous pro-Iranian Shiite groups operate.⁵ It is noteworthy that these groups actively participated in the fight against the Islamic State in the central and western part of the country which granted them an actual immunity. There is also the pro-Iranian Shiite group among the Shiite Khazars living in Afghanistan called the Al-Fatemiyoun Brigade, although, it has so far only been involved in the fighting outside Afghanistan.⁶ The Saudi government has repeatedly accused Iran of encouraging separatism in the north-eastern part of the country, in Shiite-populated areas.⁷ Moreover, Iranian influence is present even in Nigeria; in addition to proactive missionary work, even subversive

¹ G. Esfandiari (2021). "Explainer: What's behind Fresh Tensions on the Iran-Azerbaijan Border?" Radio Liberty Europe. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-azerbaijan-military-drills-border/31488035.html>

² Reuters (2021). "Explainer: How Hezbollah Widens Iran's Middle East Reach." Accessible: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-hezbollah-widens-irans-middle-east-reach-2021-10-15/>

³ B. Riedel. (2017). "Who are Houthis, and Why We are at War with Them?" Accessible: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>

⁴ W. Fulton, J. Holliday and S. Whyer. (2013). Iranian Strategy in Syria. Accessible: <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria>

⁵ Q. Abdul-Zahra , Z. Karam. (2021) "A Growing Challenge for Iraq: Iran-aligned Shiite Militias". Accessible: <https://apnews.com/article/iran-middle-east-baghdad-tehran-iraq-ebcc325e288b8dad431c713283eab70c>

⁶ S. Ramachandran. (2021), "The Shia Fatemiyoun Brigade: Iran's Prospective Proxy Militia in Afghanistan." *Terrorism Monitor* 19 (6). Accessible: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-shia-fatemiyoun-brigade-irans-prospective-proxy-militia-in-afghanistan/>

⁷ N. AlSaied. (2021). "Sectarianism and Ideology: The Cases of Iran and Saudi Arabia." Middle East Institute. Accessible: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sectarianism-and-ideology-cases-iran-and-saudi-arabia>

organizations have been established there.⁸ In addition to supporting Shiite or pro-Shiite religious groups, the Iranian state has been also seen to buttress Sunni paramilitary groups. An example of this is the Hamas movement in Palestine, in the Gaza Strip, which has an asymmetric confrontation with the state of Israel.⁹ All of this is an incomplete list of the Iranian state's use of political Shiism and hybrid warfare tactics and indicates that Iran has an extensive experience in setting up underground military-political groups outside the country.

Political Shiism and Azerbaijan

Although there are no accurate statistics on the Sunni Shia ratio in Azerbaijan, researchers estimate that 60% of the population considers themselves Shiites while 40% are Sunnis.¹⁰ Shiism is widespread among ethnic Azeris, as well as ethnic Tatars, and Talysh. In present-day Azerbaijan, only one Muslim religious organization is allowed by the state, the Caucasus Muslims Department, headed by Allahshukur Pashazade. Pashazade presides over both Shiite and Sunni Muslims.¹¹ Nevertheless, there are several informal Shiite organizations operating within the territory of Azerbaijan that have ties to Iran. As far back as the early 1990s, during the rule of Abulfaz Elchibey, pro-Iranian organizations such as the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, the Imam Khomeini Support Committee and the Islamic publishing house Al-Hoda operated in Azerbaijan.¹² During the active phase of the first Karabakh war, Iranian charities were involved in the process of resettlement and humanitarian assistance to refugees, accompanied by the religious education of the younger generation.¹³ Already during the rule of Heydar Aliyev, a rather active group of Shiite believers, whose leaders had received religious education in Iran, gathered around the İçerişehër mosque in Baku.¹⁴

Every government of Azerbaijan has been very careful about Iran's religious activities. Even during the rule of Heydar Aliyev, members of the Shiite organization Hezbollah were arrested from time to time. This organization was accused of the murder of the famous Azerbaijani historian, Zia Buniatov.¹⁵ However, the biggest challenge for the modern-day Azerbaijani state as a result of political Shiism happened in the town of Nardaran, near Baku. A clash between local Shiite activists and Azerbaijani law enforcement officers in the town of Nardaran resulted in the deaths of five activists and two police officers on November 26,

⁸ H. Tangaza. (2019). "Islamic Movement in Nigeria: The Iranian-inspired Shia Group." BBC. Accessible: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-49175639#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20IMN%3F,Shah%20in%20a%20popular%20uprising>.

⁹ I. Levy. (2021) "How Iran Fuels Hamas Terrorism." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Accessible: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-iran-fuels-hamas-terrorism>

¹⁰ R. Sattarov. "Islamic Revival and Islamic Activism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan." In *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union*. Ed. G. Yemelianova. p. 148

¹¹ Ibid., 159

¹² R. Sattarov R. "Islamic Revival and Islamic Activism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan." In *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union*. Ed. G. Yemelianova, pp. 173-174

¹³ Ibid., pp. 173-174

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 192-193

¹⁵ *Vestnik Kavkaza* (2021). "In Memoriam: Ziya Bunyadov. Part 2." Accessible: <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/articles/society/23883.html>

2015. A raid followed and law enforcers arrested more than ten Shia activists, including the leader of the Muslim Unity movement, Taleh Bagirzade. It is noteworthy that after the independence of Azerbaijan, Nardaran became a kind of Shiite religious outpost where a large part of the population strictly follows the Shiite interpretation of Sharia law and local spiritual leaders are focused more on the neighboring Iran than on the official religious structures of Azerbaijan.¹⁶ In addition, the media often writes about the underground Shiite military-political organization Huseynyun in Azerbaijan whose creation is also connected to the Iranian special services. So far, this organization has not carried out any reverberating action.¹⁷

Until now, the Iranian state has been largely focused on its eastern and southern neighborhoods. The only region about which Tehran has always been careful was the post-Soviet space; namely, Central Asia and the South Caucasus region. Apart from bilateral trade and diplomatic relations with the respective countries, the Iranian state was avoiding any drastic action vis-à-vis these countries. All this can be explained by two reasons: first, Iran views the post-Soviet space as a sphere of influence of its strategic ally - the Russian Federation. Consequently, in the face of a complicated geopolitical situation and sanctions, it is vital for Iran to have good relations with Russia. The second reason why Iran avoided taking drastic steps in the Caucasus was the lack of knowledge about the region. After Iran finally lost influence over the modern-day Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 18th century, and had zero access to those countries amid the 70-year-old Soviet Iron Curtain, the Iranian state had the deficit of an in-depth knowledge about the ethnic and religious composition and socio-economic context of the Caucasus region. However, after recent events, several factors have emerged due to which Iran will try to engage more actively in the internal affairs of the South Caucasus countries, especially that of Azerbaijan. First of all, official Tehran is concerned about the military-political cooperation between Baku and the Israeli government. With Israel facing a sharp confrontation with Iran and Israel's new Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, repeatedly pointing to a possible military operation against Iran's nuclear facilities, the existence of an Israeli ally along its northern border makes Iran restless.¹⁸ Although the Azerbaijani authorities have repeatedly stated that they will not make their territory accessible to Israel for aviation in the event of an escalation of the conflict, Iran still views the Israeli-Azerbaijani bilateral relations with great caution. The second factor that attracts Iran's attention is the increased cooperation of Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Iran-Turkey geopolitical rivalry has been going on for centuries and the strengthened positions of its northern rival should not be acceptable for Iran.

As mentioned above, an open military confrontation between Iran and Azerbaijan is unlikely. Iran's succeeding in Azerbaijan's domestic political field and forming strong opposition groups is also improbable. Today, the administration of Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan is without rivalry and neither the electoral system of the country nor the socio-political reality allows the formation of new competitive

¹⁶ Refworld (2017). "Azerbaijan: Torture and Travesty of Justice in Nardaran Case." Accessible:

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5899dc714.html>

¹⁷ O. Ahmed. "The Huseynyun: Iran's New IRGC-Backed Movement in Azerbaijan." *Middle East Monitor*. Accessible:

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211009-the-huseynyun-irans-new-irgc-backed-movement-in-azerbaijan/?fbclid=IwAR0w-D2BOn50VhwSu6i618xdJULYJw5IEfD7EG2RI-QqQBhV9e1Ju0-vCLO>

¹⁸ USIP (2021). Israeli Prime Minister Bennet on Iran. Accessible:

<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/aug/25/israeli-prime-minister-bennett-iran>

forces. This is especially true when it comes to a theocratic Iran whose regime is sharply unacceptable to the secular population of Azerbaijan. Iran's establishing a foothold in the ethnic minorities of Azerbaijan is also unlikely. Lezgins and Avars living in the north of the country are Sunni by faith and have almost no socio-cultural ties with Iran. As for the Shiite Talysh people, who speak the language of an Iranian group living in the south of the country, their level of integration into Azerbaijani society is quite high and the likelihood of sparking separatist sentiments is rather low. Therefore, hybrid warfare and the formation of underground Shiite military-political groups in Azerbaijan are the only tactics left for Iran.

Iran's Hybrid War and Georgia

Although, the census of Georgia does not incorporate the division of Muslims into Shiites and Sunnis, we know that about half of the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia are Shiites. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the theological link between the Shiites of Georgia and Iran was restored and dozens of young ethnic Azeris left Marneuli and Gardabani for the theological schools of Komi and Mashhad. Most of the graduates of these schools are Akhunds of their village mosque. There are several Shiite organizations operating in Georgia that do not hide their close ties with Iran. The largest of them is the organization Ahlul-Beit in Marneuli. There are also many graduates of Iranian schools in the Muslim Division of Georgia. However, it should be noted that Shiite organizations operating in Georgia distance themselves from violence and coexist peacefully with both Sunni and Christian populations.

If the Iranian special services decide to create Shiite organizations inside Azerbaijan, it may have a negative impact on Georgia. It is possible that in the absence of a language barrier and the visa-free regime between Georgia and Azerbaijan, the Iranian special services might start recruiting Georgian Azerbaijanis and use them for their own purposes against neighboring Azerbaijan. Moreover, since the activities of foreign religious organizations are less restricted in Georgia than in Azerbaijan, Iran may use this factor to its advantage and launch an active campaign targeting the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia. However, it should also be noted that Iran is unlikely to create any new political-religious project for the Azerbaijanis of Georgia because, most likely, Iran views the Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli as an extension of Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

The geopolitics of the region have changed significantly after the Karabakh war. The recent tense situation between Iran and Azerbaijan suggests that Iran may employ similar tactics against its northern neighbor that were used against Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. In such a case, these processes will directly or indirectly affect Georgia and its ethnic Azerbaijani population. It is difficult to say how events will unfold but one thing is clear - Azerbaijan's foreign policy precipitates greater activity from Iran.