AZERBAIJAN'S ACHILLES HEEL

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Z. S. Andrew Demirdjian, Ph.D., Los Angeles, 14 July 2016

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For more than a century the backbone of the Azerbaijan economy has been petroleum, which accounted for 10 percent of the country's GDP in 2005, and doubled to almost 20 percent in 2007 and continues to soar. In 2015, it climbed to 65.3 percent and is expected to decline to 53.5 percent in 2016 due to lower oil prices. These figures are maybe doctored by the government to reflect positively on Ilham Aliyev's administration. Regardless of the inflated figures, Azerbaijan is faring much better than its two neighbors due to its sitting on a heap of black gold.

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Presently, Western oil companies are able to tap deepwater oilfields untouched by the Soviets because of the latter's poor technology. According to many analysts, Azerbaijan is one of the most important areas for oil exploration and development. Proven oil reserves in the Caspian Basin, which Azerbaijan shares with Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Turkmenistan, are comparable in size to that of the North Sea, despite the fact that exploration is still in the early stages.

Since losing the Artsakh War more than 20 years ago, Azerbaijan has used its huge oil revenues on stockpiling its military weapons in the event of another war with the Armenians.

In 2014 Azerbaijan's defense spending hit $4.8 billion, not factoring how much the government spent on weapons purchased from Israel and Belarus. President Aliyev continues its strategy of distracting his subjects from dissatisfaction (lack of transparency, absence of equitable distribution of income, no freedom of speech, corruption) by fuelling hatred toward the victorious Armenians.

In November of 2015 Azeri Finance Minister Samir Sharifov said Baku's defense budget would increase 27 percent to $4.8 billion, (17.9 per cent of the government's expenditures), exceeding Armenia's total budget of $3.2 billion.

While in economic and military budget Azerbaijan excels Armenia, politically it is hamstrung by an Achilles' heel of afflictions. The striking malady of Azerbaijan is its ethnic composition. Azerbaijan is a poly-ethnic country where in addition to Turks, the country is inhabited by Talysh, Lezgins, Tsakhurs, Avars, Tats, Molokans, Ingiloys, Mountain Jews, Khynalygs, Buduqlus, Grysz, Udis, and others. Although they consider themselves citizens of Azerbaijan, each group clings to its distinctive culture as reflected in its domestic life, crafts, food, music, traditions, and desire for independence.

Azerbaijan's ethnic-unrest time bomb is coming from a number of minorities who aspire self-determination. Two of the largest, most daring, and vociferous ethnic groups are the Talysh and the Lezgins. The Talysh are densely populated along the Iranian border, with their capital in Lenkaran. Their lands are divided by Iran and Azerbaijan. During the Soviet era, particularly under Joseph Stalin, the Talysh suffered repression and almost extinction. Their culture and language were suppressed. They also did not receive formal recognition as a nationality.

The Talysh dispute official Azeri figures about the size of their community. According to the 2009 national census, the Talysh population is about 112,000 (less than 2 percent of the population), but Talysh leaders say there are 500,000 Talysh people. Baku has always marginalized its minorities who lived in the country long before the Seljuk Turks set foot in the region.

The Talysh gained international attention in 1993 when Russia backed the "Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic" (aka Talyshistan) separatist movement in southeastern Azerbaijan along the border with Iran. The group was led by Alikram Hummatove who became its first president. When international demarcations of territory lines were drawn, Talysh became a border-straddling people, half in Iran and half in Azerbaijan. The new republic was crushed by Azerbaijan after three months of independence when Heydar Aliyev, the former leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, became Azerbaijan's first president.

Hummatove was imprisoned and exiled but the flame for Talyish independence has not been extinguished. In 2013 Hummatove made a number of speeches in Armenia and in Artsakh, challenging Azerbaijani unity and rekindling the wish of his people for independence.

Another prominent minority in Azerbaijan are the Lezgins. They are predominantly in Lezgia in southern Dagestan and northeastern Azerbaijan with their capital in Kumukh. There are roughly half-a-million Lezgins, of whom probably half live in Dagestan. According to Azerbaijan, Lezgins number 178,000 while the Lezgin nationalists claim the number to be 700,000 or more.

One of the main grievances that the Lezgins have against Moscow and Baku is the artificial division of their ancestral lands that occurred when the Soviet Union dissolved. The normal border between Soviet Socialist Republics along the Samur River became an international border in 1991. The division was more than an inconvenience for Lezgin sheep herders who could no longer bring their flocks to graze in Dagestan for the summer and spend the winter in Azerbaijan. The loss of free passage over the Samur River prevented the herders' ability to migrate. Moreover, many traditional Lezgin burial grounds are predominantly in Azerbaijan further aggravating the frustrations over the division of their lands. The Lezgins have many more grievances regarding cultural and economic discrimination in Azerbaijan.

The grievances led to the Sadval (Unity) movement in 1990 to press for the unification of the Lezgin territories in Dagestan and Azerbaijan. In 1991 activists called for a nation-state for the Lezgins, implying independence from Azerbaijan. In 1991 another Lezgin movement--"Samur"--was formed to demand unification of Lezgins into a single sovereign unit. The Sadval separatists were more willing to resort to acts of violence to achieve their goal. In response, Baku began to draft Lezgin men into the army for deployment in the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Lezgins refused to fight against the Armenians perhaps as a show of solidarity with a fellow minority group.

In the late 1990s Lezgin nationalism seemed to be in the doldrums. The militant activities of the Sadval movement shifted focus from independence to the maintenance of an open border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan, obtaining cultural rights, and improving the ecological situation north of the Samur River. But tension began to rise in 2001 when Baku announced alphabet change from Cyrillic to Latin for Azeri and Lezgin languages.

The Talysh and the Lezgin movements, although smoldering now, are not dead. They can be reactivated externally by championing their independence movements.

Another large ethnic group in Azerbaijan which aspires independence is the Avars. In 1994 Azeri troops clashed with armed Avars in northwestern Azerbaijan.

There are several reasons why Armenia should support the independence movements of oppressed ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. How can Armenians help them? Here are some ideas to reflect on:

The coalitions of Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora--through the formation of a transnational supra structure--should spearhead the reaching out to the beleaguered minorities of Azerbaijan. Of the three, Artsakh would have the greatest influence due to its perceived credibility and effectiveness. These minorities would look upon Artsakh Armenians as the experts in breaking away from the tyranny of Azerbaijan and successfully maintaining the democratic republic of Artsakh for almost a quarter of a century.

To keep the fire burning for Talysh and Lezgin independence movements, Armenian studies centers around the world should invite speakers from these minorities to lecture on the history, culture, aspirations, and the plight of their people in Azerbaijan. Although the University of Yerevan does sometimes organize speaker events, large-scale and well-promoted congresses and conferences are needed to make an impact. The speakers and the groups they represent would be better motivated when they see that outsiders are interested in their quest for justice. These events should be undertaken for academic scholarship, political agenda, and expediency.

Conferences should be organized around the themes of the fate of the minorities in the "empire" of Azerbaijan since that country is made up of many ethnicities whose homelands were conquered and absorbed by the Turks into what is called the Republic of Azerbaijan. These minorities should take action before they share the fate of the Caucasian Albanians (the Udis). The Udis are the indigenous Christian people of Azerbaijan. Due to forced assimilation, only two villages in Azerbaijan and one village in Georgia remain.

The Udis population has dwindled from millions to 3,500. To escape discrimination and joblessness, they are now moving to Russia and to Western Europe, leaving behind the old and the sick in their villages.

The Armenian coalition of Armenia, Artsakh and the Diaspora should hold events with pomp and circumstance to honor the independence-loving activists as champions of freedom. The minorities in Azerbaijan are hungry for sympathy and understanding from the outside world and people who would recognize their history, culture, and experiences under the misrule of the Azeris.

The frozen conflicts, once reactivated, would begin to champion for reforms and even for independence. The different minorities should bond together. A single wolf would be inconsequential in hunting down a large prey, but a pack would bring down a huge buffalo.

From a political point of view, a country with too many dissenting minorities is in trouble. The desire of Azerbaijan's oppressed minorities for independence is Baku's Achilles' heel. It offers the Armenians the opportunity to help these minorities while weakening the belligerent Baku regime.

That Azerbaijan's domestic difficulties are volatile is an understatement. Hardly a day passes without demonstrations taking place in Baku. The time is ripe for Armenians to proactively take advantage of the situation.

Directly or indirectly, the minorities, especially the more prominent ones, such as the Talysh and the Lezgins, should be encouraged and motivated to stand up for their rights.

These two and other minorities' strife for their rights constitute the soft underbelly of Azerbaijan's government. We are not proposing the strategy of divide and rule. Helping minorities stand up for their rights is a noble mission. A civil war in Azerbaijan could be waged for civil rights and ethnic freedom. His hands full with uprisings, Aliyev will have no choice but to leave Armenia and Artsakh live in peace.

The Armenian Diaspora must organize international forums, conferences, workshops to educate and inspire the minorities of Azerbaijan. Talysh struggle for freedom, that deeply vulnerable heel of the Azerbaijan is one of the best political and humanitarian opportunities to chain the authoritarian beast in Baku from getting stronger and more vicious by the day.

The reality of the Armenian/Azeri conflict dictates the use of the brain rather than the bullet to overcome the beast. Azerbaijan should be fought on multiple fronts. Logic says that a distracted enemy is more vulnerable than when it enjoys societal peace, tranquility, and harmony.

People and groups in Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora who are interested in organizing symposia, conferences, workshops, etc. to raise awareness, appreciation, and the advancement of minorities in dominant cultures in the Caucasus, contact the author through Keghart.com .