LEZGISTAN: LURKING THREAT TO AZERBAIJAN

Posted on May 25, 2021 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

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When political boundaries are drawn without regard to indigenous peoples' claims on their homeland, later on the injustice gives rise to a protracted territorial integrity versus self-determination conflict. Territorial right by conquest is artificial, while territorial claim by the right of being indigenous is natural. Yet many countries deny the self-determination rights of their native minorities.

More often than not, minorities' numbers tend to dwindle over time due to discrimination, marginalization, forced assimilation, and downright persecution by the foreign ruling class that has occupied the territory. Such a case exists in Turkic Azerbaijan in the treatment of the Lezgins--one of the largest native minorities.

It has been said that if a minority wants change, it has to instigate it, exert unflagging effort, persist and determine to succeed. Do the Lezgins have what it takes to materialize their age-long dream of self-determination and the unification of their ancestral homeland?

The Lezgins are Caucasian people who have inhabited southern Dagestan since at least the Bronze Age. Lezgins live predominantly in southern Dagestan and northeastern Azerbaijan. They have their own language.

As the pink in the below map indicates, the Lezgins are more numerous in Dagestan rather than in the contiguous northeastern Azerbaijan. The Lezgins are predominantly Sunni Muslims.



The Lezgin population is believed to be around 700,000 of whom 474,000 live in Dagestan (Russia) while 226,000 of their kin live south of the border from Dagestan. They are a divided nation.

The Azerbaijan government census claims there are 180,300 Lezgins in the country, but according to Lezgin organizations, the population is 600,000 to 900,000. The disparity may be due to the fact that many Lezgins claim Azeri nationality to escape job and education discrimination.

To promote Lezgin rights, a Lezgin organization Sadval (Unity) was established in 1992. It's an irredentist movement with the express goal of creating a Lezgin state over lands in Dagestan and Azerbaijan inhabited mainly by Lezgins. Another Lezgin organization (Samur) in Azerbaijan advocates cultural autonomy.

The Lezgins have traditionally suffered from unemployment and a shortage of land to graze and cultivate crops. Lezgins became furious in 1992 when about 105,000 refugees from the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) War were resettled on Lezgin lands. Another issue that fuelled Lezgin anger was their placement on the front lines of battle in a war they opposed. Thus, issues of land, employment, language and the absence of internal autonomy have sparked the drive for self-determination. These and other inequities have increased the tension between the Lezgins and the Azerbaijani government.

The negative sentiments of the Lezgin people reached a crescendo during the war in Chechnya in 1994 when the border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan was closed. As a result, the Lezgins were,

for the first time in their long history, separated by an international border restricting their movement.

One of the main grievances of Lezgins against the governments in Moscow and Baku is the artificial division of their ancestral lands that occurred when the Soviet Union dissolved. The border between the USSR along the Samur River became an international border in 1991. The division was more than an inconvenience for Lezgin sheep herders who used to bring their flocks to graze in Dagestan for the summer and spend the winter in Azerbaijan. The newly-created border put a stop to the centuries-old tradition. Moreover, many of the traditional Lezgin burial grounds are predominantly in Azerbaijan further aggravating the frustrations over the division of their lands.

The grievances led to the Lezgin National Movement named "Sadval" which was established in July 1990 in Derbent, Dagestan, Russia (then Soviet Union). They demanded unification of the Lezgin territories in Dagestan and Azerbaijan because they had been denied the opportunity to develop their language and culture both during the Soviet reign and Azerbaijani rule. Later on, in 1991, the activists began to call for a nation-state formation for the Lezgin people, implying independence from Azerbaijan.

In 1991, another Lezgin movement called "Samur" was formed in Baku to demand unification of Lezgins into a single sovereign unit. Both movements also sought the removal of the tight border controls between Dagestan and Azerbaijan. The Sadval separatists have been more willing to resort to acts of violence to achieve their goal of unification of the Lezgin people into one state.

At first Baku tried to deal with the Lezgins diplomatically fearing a secessionist war. The mobilization of the Lezgins in Azerbaijan was at its highest in the mid-1990s and in 2020s. As a result of Baku's policy of forcibly drafting Lezgin men into the army for deployment in the Nagorno- Krabakh wars. However, Lezgis refused to fight against the Armenians in the first Artsakh War of Liberation perhaps as a show of solidarity with a fellow minority ethnic group wanting independence from the untenable Azeri rule.

In the late 1990s, Lezgin nationalists seemed to have shifted their focus from demanding independence to the maintenance of an open border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan, obtaining cultural rights for Lezgins in Azerbaijan, and improving the ecological situation north of the Samur River.

Tension between Lezgins and Azeris intensified as Azerbaijan began shifting its alphabet from Cyrillic alphabet for Azeri and Lezgin languages in 2001. The change drew vehement opposition from Lezgin activists who complained the move would further complicate cross-border contact with their brothers in Dagestan and compromise, if not kill, the Lezgin culture. The flame for independence was reignited for a short time.

As Azerbaijan refused to support the Lezgin unification drive, Sadval became belligerent. On March 19, 1994 it instigated a bomb attack in the Baku subway which resulted in the death of 27 people. Because of that operation, Azerbaijan classified Sadval as a terrorist organization. To denigrate

Armenia, Azerbaijani government claimed that there was ample evidence the Armenian Secret Service had participated in the creation of Sadval, and that it had provided Lezgin militants with funding, training, and weapons.

Although the situation is calm now in Azerbaijan, minority discontent continues below the surface. Russia tried to resurrect the Lezgin question in Azerbaijan at a Moscow conference in 2008. On May 14 and 15 the Russian Academy of State Service under the President of the Russian Federation hosted the conference with the main theme being "Cultural Heritage, Culture of the Lezgin People: History and Modernity." The gathering was organized by Russia's Ministry of Regional Development of Russia.

The conference agenda included several legitimate academic topics. However, upon closer examination of the conference proceedings, it appeared that the event was designed to be a propaganda platform to advocate the creation of an independent Lezgin state or Lezgistan with accompanying territorial claims on the Lezgin-populated areas of northern Azerbaijan. One of the documents circulated at the conference was a brochure entitled "Contemporary Problems of Lezgins and Lezgin-Speaking People," which was released jointly by the Federal National-Cultural Autonomy of Lezgins and the State Duma Committee on Nationality Affairs. According to the authors of the brochure, the delimitation of the state border between Russia and Azerbaijan is illegal and must be revised by incorporating northern regions of Azerbaijan into Dagestan with the purpose of establishing Lezgistan.

The Azerbaijani government reacted promptly by stating that the Moscow conference was an attempt to create a new source of separatism in Azerbaijan. Baku accused Kremlin of having embarked on a plan to reignite Lezgin's hope of self-determination by joining the two parts of Lezgin territories.

Although there was speculation that Lezgin demands for the creation of Lezgistan would result in a secessionist war similar to the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) struggle for freedom, these fears have thus far proved to be unwarranted, but they are looming on the horizon for the right moment to explode. The movement to create Lezgistan is a looming crisis for Baku.

There is a window of opportunity for the Lezgins when Russia's relations with Azerbaijan sour. If a leader like neo-imperialist Putin happens to be in power, the Lezgins dream may be realized just as it was accomplished with the joining of south Ossetia with north Ossetia.

There are over 195 independent sovereign states. According to UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), there are many millions of people who are denied a nationality. Kurds of Turkey are the prime example. As a result, they often are not allowed to have their own schools, speak their languages, participate in the government, and have freedom of movement to cite a few deprivations. By the year 2024, it is anticipated that there will be perhaps 2015 independent sovereign states in the world. Hopefully, Artsakh and Lezgistan will be among them. During the First Artsakh War, the Lezgins

refused to fight against the Armenians of Artsakh who were fighting to gain their freedom from Azerbaijan. This shows the Lezgis are principled people for they chose to be on the side of the righteous rather than ingratiate themselves to the co-religionist Muslim Azerbaijani government. So far, we do not know if the Lezgins refused to fight against the Armenians during the Second Artsakh War.

Lezgins are struggling to unify their homeland. Armenia should help the persecuted minority which faces an Azeri policy of forced assimilation. Now is Armenians' turn to return the noble gesture. Another reason is to heed Friedrich Nietzsche's strategy: "The best weapon against an enemy is another enemy." Azerbaijan will have to be disbanded by its minorities who have been deprived of their cultural heritage.

For Lezgins, the eagle symbolizes love of valor, family and homeland. It would be an honor for them to die on horseback in a battle for liberty and freedom. One of the unintended consequences of Lezgin uprising would be to encourage other minorities to join in the fight and dismantle the fake state of their common oppressor.



This design represents Lezgins' dream of the unification of the north and south of their homeland as an independent state.

There are no comments yet.