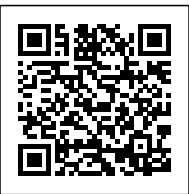


TALYSHISTAN IS WAITING IN THE WINGS

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By Prof. Z. S. Andrew Demirdjian, Los Angeles, 25 May 2021

In the Trans-Caucasian region, Azerbaijan is the most "blessed" state with multiplicity of minorities who usually enrich the kaleidoscope of a country's culture as is the case with the United States. According to the most recent census, there are over 150 identifiable minorities of different ethnicities living in Azerbaijan. Twenty-two are located in compact settlements in different regions, making the country look like a colorful Persian carpet.

However, this kind of "blessing" could be a curse in disguise, especially for a state that flagrantly suppresses human rights for the sake of forced nation-state building. Some of the minorities aspire for independence so as to exercise their rights as indigenous to the land. This could trigger an explosion at any time when the opportunity presents itself. The biggest non-Turkic minorities are the Talysh, Lezgins, Tsakhurs, Avars, Tats, Molokans, Ingilys and Udis.

Let us see how Azerbaijan has dealt with its second-largest minority...the Talysh people (after the Lezgins). Naturally, any internal strife in Azerbaijan will have implications for Armenia and the region. While Azerbaijan excels in revenues and military budget, politically it is heading to implosion by some of its militant minorities. Although ethnic groups consider themselves Azerbaijani citizen, they cling ardently to their ancestral distinctive cultures as reflected in their domestic life, crafts, food, music, traditions, aspirations for freedom and independence to mention a few. Most of these minorities are indigenous to various parts of Azerbaijan as is Talyshistan.

Azerbaijan's ethnic-unrest time bomb is coming from a number of minorities who aspire to 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 the international border between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Post the collapse of the Soviet Union, some of the former Soviet republics became battle grounds for the minorities which want to free themselves from the yoke of arbitrarily appointed states after the dissolution of the union in 1991. One of these battles involves the drive of the Talysh people for independence from Azerbaijan. Talyshistan is an unofficial designation meaning the land of Talysh people.

The Talysh are an Iranian ethnic group who are indigenous to the region between southern Azerbaijan and northern Iran. They speak the Talysh language. Agriculture and cattle breeding are the traditional occupations.

According to the population census Azerbaijan conducted in 2009, the Talysh population was 112,000. The Talysh dispute the figure and say their community totals 500,000 people.

The historical repression of identity and the inability to indulge in their culture and speak their language has rendered most of the Talysh people near hopelessness. The Talysh fear retaliation if associated with the separatist Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic.

Community leaders have warned members that the Talysh population is declining and their language is on its way to extinction within 25-35 years since it is not being transmitted to the Talysh children.

There are two major Talysh national movements which subscribe to two schools of thought among their leaders and activists: one is the Russian- backed separatist movement called the "Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic" (aka Talyshistan) formed in 1919 to strive for independence, and the other is the National Talysh Movement (NTM) of 2007. It wants Talyshistan to become autonomous.

After the Soviet regime was established in the region, the Talysh people of Azerbaijan dreamt of the restoration of the Talysh-Mughan Republic which was declared in the summer of 1919, but it was ruthlessly destroyed by Ottoman troops. From 1936 to 1938, Talysh nationalists were exiled to Siberia, and Talysh schools were closed.

The Talysh gained international prominence in 1993 when Russia- backed separatist movement called the "Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic" (aka Talyshistan) led by Alikram Hummatov 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 the Azerbaijani forces just after three months of independence when Heydar Aliyev, the former communist leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, became Azerbaijan's first president.

Hummatove was imprisoned in Azerbaijan as a political agitator and then exiled. But the flame for independence has not been extinguished. In 2013, Hummatove made a number of speeches in Armenia and Artsakh, challenging Azerbaijani unity and rekindling the wish of his people for self-determination and independence from Azerbaijan.

The National Talysh Movement (NTM) was established in 2007 by the Talysh leaders who had been in exile in the Netherlands. The members of the organization include those who supported the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic such as Hummatove . The mission of the movement is to have an autonomous region within Azerbaijan rather than struggle for independence as was intended in the past.

The two Talysh national movements are in a state of wait and see. Meanwhile, there are a number of activists, including Fakhrauddin Aboszoda, who are trying to keep the flame for freedom burning and who have shown radical approach to the realization of the Talysh dream of independence.

In an article titled "Scandal in Azerbaijan: Did Talyshistan Belong to the Azerbaijan Republic?" Aboszoda answered his own question in the negative by stating that "Every Talysh must be certain that in the not too distant future Talyshistan will become an independent state!" The article was posted on the Russian LAREX Web site on January 28, 2015.

Aboszoda was one of the vociferous leaders involved with the self-proclaimed Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic in 1993, which is located in the southeastern corner of Azerbaijan. In earlier

articles, the Talysh activist has spread the idea that Azerbaijan was a pseudo-empire and that it must be "decolonized". His proposition has even influenced the thinking of researchers at the Kremlin affiliated think tank called the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Tensions rose once more as the Azerbaijani government has begun implementing the change from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet for Azeri Lezgin and other languages. The change drew vehement protests 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.

Azerbaijan's obvious attempts at forced assimilation of the minorities reignited the flame for independence for a short time. However, the fear of retaliation from the ruling class of Azerbaijan has made many of the minorities, such as the Talysh people, keep silent about their dissatisfaction and their yearning for freedom.

The Talysh and the Lezgin movements, although smoldering, are not dead. They can be reactivated externally through clever means to champion again for independence from Azerbaijan. If Armenia's position were reversed with Azerbaijan, the Azeris would have stoked Armenia's minorities to rise up for independence. When the grieving minorities are motivated and when there is unrest within, Azerbaijan will be weakened, or at least be disoriented by the awakening of their multiple frozen conflicts for freedom.

Armenia should accelerate encouragement and assistance to minorities which have been subjected to discrimination, forced assimilation, and downtrodden by the ruling class of its neighbor. How can Armenians help these mistreated people in Azerbaijan? How can Armenians keep the flame of liberty and freedom burning in Talysh people's heart and soul?

I. Armenia and Artsakh should adopt an open door policy in giving asylum to Talish dissidents, activists, and leaders where they could live and work and at the same time plan to implement strategies for their people in gaining independence from the repressive regime of President Ilham Aliyev.

II. Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora should collaborate in organizing conferences (including zoom meetings) in Armenia, Artsakh, and around the world where there are sizable Armenians on the history and culture of the Talysh people in the name of scholarship and preservation of endangered ethnic groups.

III. To keep the fire burning under the Talysh activists and people, Armenian studies centers around the world should periodically invite speakers to lecture on the history, culture, aspirations, and the plight of their people in Azerbaijan. The native speakers become highly motivated when they see that outsiders are interested in their quest for justice.

IV. The Armenian and Artsakh governments should award special medals to Talysh leaders who have attempted to liberate their people from the untenable rule of Azerbaijan. For example,

Hummatov, would be a great candidate to receive an award for his efforts at protecting the identity of his endangered people in Azerbaijan.

V. On a global basis, Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity should also honor those who champion for their people in the hope of obtaining independence with a recognition award (non-monetary). This annual international humanitarian award would be appropriate to bestow also upon leaders, such as Talysh activists.

VI. Armenia, Artstakh, and the Diaspora should provide seminars to train the Talysh activists on how to find and benefit from international organizations dedicated to helping mistreated minorities. Directly or indirectly, the minorities, especially the prominent ones, such as the Talysh, the Lezgins, the Avars, the Kurds and others should be encouraged and motivated to stand up for their rights in a regime where forced assimilation has been carried out for many years. The Talysh people are waiting in the wings for the opportunity to become a free and independent people in their ancestral homeland. The international community should lend them a helping hand.

The minority quest for freedom in Azerbaijan would also serve the Armenians. Creating strife among the enemy is a tried and tested way of weakening it. Discord within ones enemy would undermine its ability to fight outside adversaries. Azeri artilleries and attack drones kill noncombatant Armenian villagers now and then. Why not hit Azerbaijan's Achilles' heel to weaken and disorient it?

The desire of Azerbaijan's minorities for independence constitutes the soft underbelly of Azerbaijan's government. We are not proposing the Machiavellian strategy of divide and rule. Every nation which believes in the sanctity and dignity of human race must do its share to do the humanitarian act of saving an ethnic group from extinction.

Armenians helping other minorities in repressive Azerbaijan to stand up for their rights is a noble gesture of generosity, of compassion, of dignity in the arsenal of human values such as love of other human beings. No matter from what motive or perspective the act is viewed, independence would mean the survival of Talysh people's collective culture and heritage in their own ancestral lands as they are waiting in the wings for the realization of their sacred dream of establishing the Republic of Talyshistan.

There are no comments yet.