

GREATER CONFLICT AT THE ROA DOORSTEPS

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Keghart.org Editorial, by Khajag Aghazarian, 25 October 2021

The most recent military and political escalation between Iran and Azerbaijan conceal strategic interests that go beyond Southern Caucasus. The highlight of this new tension happened on 12 September 2021 when the Azerbaijani police started checking Iranian trucks on the Goris – Kapan highway and charging the truck drivers US 130\$ to be released. Furthermore, Azerbaijani officials declared on several occasions that Iranian trucks are transporting goods to Artsakh and that these trucks might also carry military material and weapons to the Armenians. Iran steadfastly denied these allegations. This incident might sound to be a minor provocation by Azerbaijan if it is taken out of the larger context of the regional security and military concerns and the decades old, complicated Iran – Azerbaijan relationship.

Iran was one of the first countries that congratulated Azerbaijan for its “military achievements in Nagorno Karabakh” as 2020 war was concluded, furthermore, Iranian high-ranking officials expressed on several occasions their enthusiasm in collaborating with Azerbaijan in reconstructing the “liberated areas”. All these positive signals were met with lack of enthusiasm from the other side. Iran was trying to delay a clash with Azerbaijan by showing friendly attitude and trying softly to twist its regional affiliations. The response was clear, Azerbaijan is not interested in developing friendly relations with Iran beyond trade and economic activities.

For the past 30 years Iran had been very cautious with Azerbaijan and even appeasing at certain intervals. Their relationship remained mutually suspicious and wary. Iran wants and tries to expand its “Islamic revolution” towards Azerbaijan, after all they are the only two countries in the world that are governed by its majority Shia's population, a reality that seems tempting for Iran but not an easy place where it can play its game. Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan on the other hand chose its allies meticulously and succeeded in becoming, mainly as of 2009, an intrinsic member in a military / security regional alliance that includes Israel, Turkey, Pakistan and Azerbaijan. This alliance made 2020 victory over the Armenians achievable for Aliyev, so he is not in a position to disengage with it.

Azerbaijan has obligations in that alliance, and it is returning a favor to Israel by letting it have a security and maybe military foothold just 500 kilometers away from Tehran and more dangerously from Natanz where the nuclear research facilities are located. This is the closest point of contact between these two belligerent countries and is perceived by Iran as a serious security concern due to its proximity for any airstrikes and fear of infiltrations of special forces or agents through the borderline to execute sabotage operations. On April 11, 2021, an electric power shut down caused serious damages to Natanz nuclear facility operations disrupting the work that was done in enriching uranium for the past 3 years. Iran accused Israeli agents, it was neither confirmed nor denied by Israel. On November 27, 2020 the chief Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated in Natanz through sophisticated remotely controlled weapon, again Iran accused Israel which refrained from commenting. During January 2018 Israeli agents succeeded to physically

infiltrate Iran's nuclear archives. Prime Minister Netanyahu detailed in a lengthy press conference the content that his government could obtain and proudly declared the success of Israeli agents in undertaking this operation deep in one of the most secured facilities in Iran.

Currently, Israel more than ever needs close and easy access into Iran due to the most recent developments taking place in its nuclear program. Since January 2021 Iran resumed enriching uranium after 5 years of halt abiding by the 2015 deal that it had reached with Western powers mainly the US. Withdrawal of President Trump from this deal in 2018 encouraged Iran to resume its nuclear activities alarming all parties especially Israel. It is already confirmed that Iran has its grips on the scientific knowledge as well as the facilities where it can enrich uranium to reach 90% purity which is required for developing a nuclear weapon. Since resumption of its nuclear activities in January 2021, Iran enriched uranium up to 20% a level needed to be utilized for medical and industrial purposes. Iran insists that its nuclear program is for civil and not military use. All parties involved in this standoff especially the US and Israel confirm that Iran is willing and capable of developing nuclear warheads. While negotiations are underway between the US and Iran to return to the 2015 deal Israel is alarmed and seeks guarantees to halt Iran's nuclear program even if through military operation. On October 18, the Israeli government allocated 1.5 billion US Dollars to be used for its intelligence and military operations against the Iranian nuclear program. Israel perceives nuclear Iran as a direct existential threat.

Azerbaijan is facilitating the frontline for any escalation in the near future and by doing so it is dragging a conflict that had been managed within the balance of power in the Middle East into Southern Caucasus. Iran's retaliations to Azerbaijani provocations fall within this context. By having Israel at its northern borderline, Iran will have weaker position in its negotiations with the US over its nuclear program not to mention the direct military and intelligence threats that this positioning entails.

Diplomatic and military tension between Azerbaijan and Iran will not deescalate anytime soon. What has been taking place for the past few weeks will continue until Iran and the US reach a compromise over their return to the 2015 deal. In the meantime, the Republic of Armenia has no interest in getting involved in this conflict, it should continue adopting neutrality by reaffirming on return to negotiations and reaching settlement through peaceful means. RoA is the most vulnerable country in the region and so can easily become the fertile stage for proxy wars that may involve Iran, Israel and of course Turkey, Russia and Azerbaijan.

Comments



Jirair - 2021-10-25 16:57:12

The conflict between Iran and Turkey is not religious. Those two countries have been competing and fighting for political and military dominance for more than 500 years. "Religion" is used to inflame nationalists and fundamentalists in both countries. Do you think Abdul Hamid II or the Young Turks or Ataturk., Ismet Inonu, etc. gave a hoot that most Iranians are Shiite rather than Sunni? Do you think the last Shah or his father cared that Turkey is Sunni? To repeat, the reasons for the various Middle Eastern conflicts are: oil; the strategic location of the Middle East, the expansionist Israeli presence; people's demand for democracy/improved economic standards/end to corruption, There are other reasons such as Erdogan's recent ambition to dominate for regional dominance.



ANGELA BARSEGHIAN - 2021-10-25 14:57:16

The Middle East, and Iran, Turkey, and all countries obsessed with religion, where people are ruled, enslaved, abused, harshly treated, due to alleged religious laws, such as sharia law, etc...will never see peace. Religion is being translated into politics and vice versa. Since all people were forcefully, barbarically enslaved in the name of religion, forced to adopt religions foreign, or unknown to them, to distinguish, divide, discriminate, and abuse people...and people were thus divided on the basis of fear, lies, barbarism...Pagan Armenians were barbarically forced to adopt Christianity, as were all others...Religion was not peacefully and voluntarily enforced onto people. In the name of religion people were drawn against each other when in reality, wars were engaged to steal, pillage, and conquer other people's belongings...I have a feeling that mankind will destroy itself to death and will have to start from ground zero again. No religion, no divisions, no lies, no wars between people based on religion, politics, or ideology...



Jirair - 2021-10-25 14:14:37

Linda gives too much weight to religion as a factor in the endless conflicts of the Middle East. Middle East conflicts seem to go on forever for the following reasons: the strategic importance of the region to the West and the East. Israel is another factor. Its colonial presence and occupation of Arab Palestine is opposed by Arabs. As a result, there have been four major wars. In addition, Israel invades, intrudes into, spies upon, foments trouble and sabotages Arab and Muslim countries. See its impact on the recent invasion of Azerbaijan of Armenia. Other reasons for the interminable Middle East conflicts? Oil, absence of democracy, poverty, inequality in Arab societies, religious intolerance, etc.



Linda Minier – 2021-10-25 03:24:21

Conflicts in the Middle East seem to be never ending., WHEN WILL THE MIDDLE EAST SEE PEACE. Netanyahu is gone from the government for the moment and there is still this unnecessary control by one religion. When will there be PEACE in the Middle East seems to be a never-ending story? Too many egos and a big desire to be religiously in control and dominant in the region. What will future generations think of the behavior of today's so-called adults in the region.