IMPLICATIONS OF "SOUTH AZERBAIJAN" INDEPENDENCE

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The Azeri organizations that express irredentist sentiments of self-determination, have already delineated the boundaries of a territory for the ethnic Iranian Azeris and call it "South Azerbaijan". South Azerbaijan is mostly populated by Azeris. What are the implications of a "South Azerbaijan" to Armenia and Artsakh?

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Iran covers 1,648,195 sq. km. (636,372 sq. mi) and has 79 million inhabitants. South Azerbaijan represents about 30 percent of Iran's area. It's bigger than the Republic of Azerbaijan (86,600 sq. km. or 33,436 sq. mi).

To some extent, Azerbaijan and Iran share the same history, religion, and culture. Azeris are Turkic people from Central Asia, while Persians are native to Iran. The territory of what is recently called the Republic of Azerbaijan was only separated from Iran after the Russo-Persian Wars (1804-1813) and (1826-1828). The Qajar Dynasty (1785 to 1925) of Iran, a family of Turkic decent, was forced to cede what is now Azerbaijan, alongside Georgia, Dagestan, and Armenia to Russia under the terms

of the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay.

Iran and Azerbaijan are the only states where the majority of the people are Shia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan were soured due to the armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh. Iran backed Armenia, which infuriated Azerbaijan and Iran's Azeris. However, since the advent of President Hassan Rouhani's administration significant efforts have been made to strengthen Azerbaijan-Iran ties. Rouhani was so accommodating that Ilham Aliyev said after one of their meetings: "Common history and culture have resulted in unbreakable bond between Iran and Azerbaijan." In May 2015, the ambassador of Iran to Baku announced that Iran did not recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, further boosting Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Presently, Azerbaijan and South Azerbaijan enjoy a fluid border as though the two were one free, independent, and sovereign nation.

There is a strong Azeri movement which argues for independence from Iran. One of the largest groups is the Azerbaijan National Resistance Organization (ANRO). This and other groups, such Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (SANAM) spearheaded by Mahmoudali Chehrgani, are championing for independence from Iran. They profess the disintegration of Iran to be imminent. They frequently organize conferences in Turkey and elsewhere for plenary sessions. ANRO is in agreement with other groups in northwestern Iran over the right to self-determination. The rationale presented by ANRO is predicated on the contention that Iran's estimated 22 million Turkish-speaking Azeris face severe "discrimination and deprivation" of language and other cultural rights.

In 2014, Babek Chalabinyanli, the ANRO spokesperson in Washington, D.C., stated that the organization is engaged in "a civil and non-violent struggle" with the express purpose of "protection of Azerbaijan's historical territorial integrity and gaining the right of national self-determination." Central to the main argument is the contention that Azerbaijani Turks in Iran are denied the right to education in their native language and their region suffers from abject poverty and rampant unemployment, while the natural resources from the region are "looted" by the Iranian government and that their regions are bypassed when it comes to government investment. Activists complain that Iranian Azeris do not have the freedom to use Azeri names for their children and businesses.

There are also activists in Azerbaijan who endorse an independent South Azerbaijan. When historian Abulfazl Elchibey, leader of Azerbaijani Popular Front, the ultra-nationalist pan-Turkic adherent, came to power in 1992, he blasted Iran as a "doomed state" and predicted that within five years or so South Azerbaijan would be reunited with Azerbaijan.

The nationalist movements of South Azerbaijan picked steam after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Karim Asghari, ANRO's foreign relations officer, predicated that an independent South Azerbaijan ceding from Iran will change the political landscape and parameters of the region.

The independence of South Azerbaijan will not be in the interest of Armenia and Artsakh. Iranian

Azeris want to unite with Azerbaijan, making its territory, population, and army three-fold larger. Baku does not want to rock the boat with Iran right now just as Armenia does not want to make waves with Georgia over Javakhk.

The implications of South Azerbaijan's independence are a double whammy for Armenia. Azerbaijan will instantly grow into a giant state. The annexation would spell a bigger territory, bigger population, bigger economy, bigger army, and a bigger headache for its isolated neighbor.

It will come as no surprise that the United States, Turkey, Israel, Georgia and most Muslim nations side with Azerbaijan. It is also well known that the United States and Israel are less than friendly with Iran. When the political winds change direction South Azerbaijan would be helped by these nations because of its oil and other resources. Israel is also interested because the territory has the largest population of "Mountain Jews".

Another important implication has to do with the Azeri political hold on Iran. Slowly and surreptitiously the power would transfer into the hands of the Azeris. If an ardent Azeri is elected president of Iran and he or she has aspirations for Azeri independence, the tide would turn in favor of South Azerbaijan's people.

Many of the imams and mullahs in Iran are Azeri Turks including the late Ayatollah Ruhalla Khomeini who took back Iran to fundamental Islam. Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, is also of Azeri descent (a Turk). Many Azeris are and will sooner or later ascend high political positions and influence the policies of Iran. The "Azerization" of Iran would bode disaster for Armenia.

Landlocked and blockaded Armenia has now land transit through Iran and Georgia. If South Azerbaijan becomes independent, it would alter the transit situation. South Azerbaijan will side with Azerbaijan and install a blockade on Armenia. Without the land transit through Iran, Armenia will become a geopolitical peninsula surrounded on three sides by enemies. Georgia will be the only isthmus to the outside world. But Georgia is an unreliable neighbour. Tblisi has stated that anyone who bothers Azerbaijan will be at war with Georgia. Georgia has asked Armenia to “return” Artsakh to Azerbaijan.

Since in politics anything can happen, Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora should formulate plans to find ways to overcome possible strangulation by its enemies.

Let's assume that South Azerbaijan becomes independent in the near future is farfetched. But there is still a time bomb for Armenia: Persian Iranians are migrating to the West. Coupled with their low fertility rates compared to that of Azeri Iranians, in less than 30 years, Persian Iranians will become a minority. The political power will shift to the Iranian Azeris. Consequently, South Azerbaijan or Iran dominated by Azeris will side with Azerbaijan and make conditions for Armenia and Artsakh untenable.

We either put our act together in numbers--yes, in numbers--and swim or sink individually. Let us come up with solutions far in advance of a possible bite by this monster which has a record of attempts to annihilate us.

The coalition of Armenia, Artsakh and the Diaspora should first "MRI" the situation and then strategize in two major ways: Internally and externally. Internally, Armenians have to form a transnational supra-structure to bring together different Armenian Diaspora organizations and to coordinate activities with Armenia and Artsakh in a national emergency. Furthermore, they must make the homeland strong militarily and economically to thrive in the face of virtual isolation.

Externally, Armenians have to launch a pre-emptive attack on Azerbaijan against Baku's increasing provocations at the line of contact and to capture, this time around, enough territory for passage to Derbent (Dagestan) to create a lifeline route to Russia. With Azerbaijan's repeated peace treaty violations, Armenia now has a prima facie case for casus belli (reason for war). While such an aggressive act seems counterintuitive, a pre-emptive strike may prove to be necessary for the survival of a beleaguered country which is regularly threatened by Baku.

Armenians should persuade Kremlin to initiate the return of Kars and Ardahan to Armenia before any military conflict erupts between Turkey and Russia. After all, it was Russia which ceded Armenian Kars and Ardahan to Turkey. Moral obligation dictates that Russia should repeal or denounce the unlawful treaties that Armenia refuses to recognize. In this way, Armenia would have the life-giving "oxygen" of land access to the Black Sea. We should also remind Russia that Armenia has been an ingenuous and trustworthy partner for ages. If Armenia falls, Russia's underbelly becomes vulnerable.