

ISRAELI BULLET MIGHT RICOCHET IN JAVAKHK

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✘ Keghart.com Team Editorial, 23 December 2011

While there's a broad consensus among international and regional experts that a joint Israeli/US ✘ attack on Iran could result in a wider Middle East conflagration, not enough attention is being paid to another possible consequence of such an attack: wars in the South Caucasus. In addition to the expected explosion between Azerbaijan and Armenia/Artsakh, Georgia, Turkey and Russia could also lit the fuse to make the roar of the winter guns louder in the South Caucasus

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Here's the domino theory of possible/probable sequence of events: If Israel and the US attack Iran (it's widely believed that some of the incursions would be from Azerbaijan and Georgia), Baku would take advantage of the larger conflict and attack Artsakh. This would draw Armenia into the conflict as protector of fellow Armenians in that republic. If Baku attacks Armenia, Russia might be compelled to defend ally Armenia, especially if Turkey directly or indirectly aids Azerbaijan.

These developments could also precipitate a new war between Russia and Georgia, according to Moscow's authoritative "Nezavismaya Gazeta" newspaper (Dec. 15, 2011) as Russia tries to recover its land bridge to South Caucasus. Georgia has blocked the only land transportation route for Russia's military base 102 in Gyumri, Armenia. The base, crucial to Russian global strategy and vital for Armenia's survival against Turkish threats, now relies on Iran for fuel supplies. A war on Iran would halt the supply of Iranian fuel to the Russian military base and to Armenia. A new Russian/Georgian war would also seriously diminish the value of the Kars-Akhlakalak-Baku Railway and hurt Azeri/Georgian/Turkish economic and strategic interests. It might also encourage the long-suffering Javakhk Armenians to demand autonomy or separation from Georgia.

On Nov. 28 a small group of Armenian activists held a march to the Georgian Embassy in Yerevan and handed a letter to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. The letter demanded the release of Javakhk activist Vahagn Chakhalyan who has been in jail for three years. A copy of the letter was sent to President Serge Sargsyan. Armenians say the Javakhk activist has been jailed on trump-up charges. They also say Chakhalyan is regularly beaten, deprived of minimum sanitation and is not allowed visits by relatives. At the demonstration, Yerevan Armenians (including MPs, historians, artists, Artsakh War veterans and generals) declared "only armed struggle can save Javakhk." It's

impossible to determine how widespread this call to arms is locally or in Javakhk.

It's no secret that Georgia, taking advantage of Armenia's isolation and dependence on Georgia for export/import land route, wants to drive out Javakhk Armenians from this slice of historic Armenia or gradually assimilate them. Approximately 70% of Armenian trade transits via Georgia, not to mention the bulk of Armenia's energy supplies. Despite long-time Armenian contribution to Georgian economy, culture, religion and even royalty (the Pakradunis/Bagratians), Georgia has rarely been a friend of Armenia. Our northern neighbor has become more open in its hostility following the withdrawal of the Russian military from Akhlalakak bases a few years ago. Georgia also perceives advantages in a permanent conflict between Armenia and Turkey/Azerbaijan which would enhance its importance in the region.

Aware of Tbilisi's not-so-secret designs, Javakhk Armenians have resisted Georgian oppression. In the past decade Tbilisi has confiscated Armenian Church properties, refused to grant legal status to the Armenian Church in Georgia and earlier this year the head of the Georgian Church insulted Catholicos Karekin II during the latter's fence mending visit to Georgia. Tbilisi has geographically isolated the impoverished region (to worsen the economic conditions) so as to encourage Armenians to leave or assimilate. Tbilisi has arbitrarily arrested Armenian leaders and banned the admission of Armenian newspapers or books from Armenia. Georgian authorities claim if Armenians want to end their isolation they should learn Georgian. However, MP Shirak Torosyan, the Javakhk-born chairman of Javakhk Patriotic Union in Armenia, has said that arrangements reached between the Georgian and Armenian education ministers to restore the hours of classes of Armenian language and literature in Armenian schools were not respected by Tbilisi. Armenian cultural, youth and political organizations are being closed. Georgian classes have replaced part of the Armenian language classes. Georgian authorities tell Armenians "learn Georgian; you'll get a job." This is a hollow premise. Armenian students, who a few years ago, took a four-year course in Georgian at the Georgian Institute in Kutaisi, have a 99% unemployment rate, according to Nork Karapetyan, head of Javakhk Democratic Movement. As a result of Tbilisi's racist policies, Javakhk Armenians are living in an economic, cultural and political vacuum.

Meanwhile, Turkey is trying to establish itself in the region through billions of dollars of investments. Journalists Artsrun Hovhannisyan and Vahe Sargsyan have said that the Turkish government's policy is aimed at changing Javakhk demography from Armenian to Turkic and Azeri. They see the policy as a Turkish Trojan horse into Georgia. The Kars-Akhlalakak-Baku railway is perceived by Armenians as part of the plot to further isolate Armenians and empty Javakhk of Armenians. Turkey wants to increase the percentage of Mskhetian Turks and Azeris in the area and drive out the 300,000 Armenians of the region to Armenia. Not too long ago there was only one Azeri village in Javakhk; now there are seven.

Because of its difficult position, the Armenian government hasn't complained to Tbilisi. However, Giro Manoyan of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation has strongly condemned Georgian policies.

MP Torosyan, who is also a member of the Powerful Fatherland Party, says nobody wants to help Javakhk Armenians. In 2010 the Human Rights Report of the US State Department whitewashed the oppressive Georgian policies and overlooked the plight of Armenians living in Georgia probably because Tbilisi has become Washington's new pet.

Considering the horrible political, economic, cultural conditions in Javakhk, it would be no-brainer to speculate that if there's another war between Russia and Georgia, exasperated Javakhk Armenians might declare independence (like Artsakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia) or at least demand autonomy. A few weeks ago an Armenian observer of Georgian politics said that Armenians in Javakhk had missed two earlier opportunities for self-determination—during the war in Artsakh and during the 2008 Russian-Georgian War. But Javakhk declaration of independence, during the war in Artsakh, would have been disastrous for Javakhk: Armenia, preoccupied with its survival, wouldn't have had the means to support such an initiative. Besides, fighting a war on opposite fronts can be suicidal. Similarly, Armenia, still threatened by a bellicose Baku and Turkey, couldn't have supported Javakhk independence during the Russian-Georgian War. However, a third "opportunity" could seem irresistible to the desperate Javakhk Armenians--no matter whether Armenia materially support them.

