



Tehran Turns Up The Heat (On Azerbaijan)

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With international pressure over its nuclear program mounting, and the recent collapse of its latest round of negotiations with the West, this might seem like a strange time for Iran to pick a fight with its neighbors. Yet on at least one front, that is exactly what it appears to be doing. Recent days have seen a marked downturn in the already-troubled relationship between the Islamic Republic and Azerbaijan, its neighbor to the northwest.

The cause was the convening, in late March, of a conference by the “South Azerbaijan National Liberation Front,” an umbrella group of Iranian Azeris and expatriates seeking independence for their part of Iran. At the gathering, held in Azerbaijan’s capital of Baku, speakers reportedly urged activists inside Iran to capitalize on Western pressure on the Iranian regime and “build a state in the northwest provinces bordering the Republic of Azerbaijan.”

The event caused a firestorm in Tehran. Azerbaijan’s envoy was promptly summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry and issued a public reprimand, broadcast on state television, regarding the “serious damage” that had been done to bilateral ties.

But the scandal didn’t end there. In early April, Mansour Haqiqatpour, chairman of the Iranian parliament’s influential National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, publicly called for a referendum on the feasibility of absorbing Azerbaijan, arguing that there is real desire in Azerbaijan for such a union. Days later, Hossein Shariatmadari, editor-in-chief of *Kayhan*, an influential hardline newspaper known to be close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, penned an editorial calling for an Iranian intervention to “save” that country’s Azeris—a sure sign that Iran’s clerical ruler approves of the idea.

Predictably, others have since piled on, arguing in favor of building public support for Azerbaijan’s absorption. Iran’s parliament has even begun drafting a bill to re-annex the country.

These moves aren’t without precedent. Ties between Baku and Tehran have historically been troubled. The discord dates back to the 1800s, when an expanding Russian empire managed to wrest control of most of what is modern-day Azerbaijan from Iran. The southern regions of the Azeri homeland, however, stayed under Iranian control—and expanded. According to official U.S. government estimates, Azeris today are Iran’s largest ethnic minority, making up nearly a fifth of the total Iranian population of 79 million. At some 13 million souls, that is significantly more than the entire population of the whole nation of Azerbaijan.

No wonder, then, that the Iranian regime is haunted by the specter of Azeri separatism. Simply put, it believes that a politically vibrant and economically prosperous Azerbaijan will feed latent separatist tendencies among Iran’s own large Azeri population, with potentially disastrous consequences for the Islamic Republic as a whole. So, over the past two decades, it has waged a persistent, clandestine campaign to destabilize the regime next door, with the aim of ensuring that Azeri separatism never gains enough traction to pose a threat to Iran’s own territorial integrity.

But of late, bilateral relations have gone from bad to worse. Among the reasons are Azerbaijan’s growing political ties to Israel, which have fueled suspicions in Tehran that—despite public utterances to the contrary—officials in Baku might facilitate an Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear program, should one take place. Local Iranian politics also play a part; with the country’s presidential elections now just two months away, the Iranian regime is seeking to forestall any possible domestic disturbances—and leery that its restive Azeri north might become a real flashpoint.

So it’s not surprising that the recent outbreak of Azeri separatism, even if just confined to political rhetoric from the comforts of Baku, has engendered such a violent reaction from Iran’s leaders. Worried over their political legitimacy ahead of national polls, and facing a mounting sense of economic siege brought about by Western fiscal pressure, the Iranian regime now has to deal with what is perhaps the thorniest domestic issue of all: keeping its diverse, and restive, population under wraps.