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The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and Its Implications for Iran

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has put the Islamic regime of Iran in a difficult position. While the government is trying to be neutral, other regime elements have openly taken sides in the conflict.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has flared up once again, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people. Although the issue revolves around the nexus where territory, identity, and authority meet, wider international rivalries could have serious ramifications for the clash.

The Islamic regime of Iran is a relevant actor in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, as it shares borders with both countries. During the recent fighting, [several rockets have hit Iranian soil](#).

The Supreme Leader's response

Keyhan, a newspaper close to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, initially refrained from taking sides in the conflict. The paper reported simply that the conflicting parties were blaming each other for the aggression and that the Minsk Group had been unsuccessful in bringing about peace.

However, on October 5, *Keyhan* published an interview with Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's adviser on international matters, in which he took Azerbaijan's side in the conflict. Velayati described the Nagorno-Karabakh region as "occupied territory" belonging to Azerbaijan and said the Islamic regime would help Baku reclaim it.

Velayati added, however, that “the occupied territories should not be liberated at the cost of shedding the blood of the people.” Instead, he proposed negotiations as the definitive solution to the conflict, though previous negotiations have failed. He claimed that Israel, the US, and France are contributing to the tensions and invited Turkey to work with Iran for peace.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a Shiite-majority country that shares history and culture with Iran, especially the Iranian Azerbaijani provinces. On September 30, four of Khamenei’s representatives in Iranian Azerbaijan issued a [statement in support of Azerbaijan](#).

The clerics declared that Azerbaijan’s “move to recapture the [Nagorno-Karabakh] region is completely legal according to *sharia* and in line with four Resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.” The statement aligns with Khamenei’s views, though he himself has not uttered a word about the clashes.

In 1993, Khamenei [criticized Armenia](#) for occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and claimed that Armenians oppressed the Muslims there. When Heydar Aliyev, the then leader of Azerbaijan, visited Iran in 1994, Khamenei [claimed](#) it was the religious duty of the Azerbaijani people to defend their country.

The Islamic regime’s policy began to shift in the 1990s, however, as Azerbaijan became friendlier toward the West. While the Supreme Leader continues to believe Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan, he has allowed his government to approach Armenia.

When Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan visited Iran in 2019, Khamenei [encouraged](#) closer economic cooperation between the countries. During the visit, Khamenei emphasized that Armenia and Azerbaijan must solve their conflict through negotiations.

The government’s reaction

The Iranian government has echoed Khamenei by encouraging negotiations. The day the clashes started (September 27, 2020), Iranian FM Muhammad Javad Zarif [tweeted](#) that the regime “calls for an immediate end to hostilities and urges dialogue to resolve differences.”

On September 28, government spokesman Ali Rabiei said the Islamic regime of [Iran, together with Turkey and Russia](#), could join together to help the conflicting parties find a peaceful solution to the dispute.

President Hassan Rouhani has likewise urged both sides to stop the hostilities. On September 30, [Rouhani](#) told Pashinyan in a phone conversation that

foreign involvement in the conflict would prolong the dispute and complicate the situation.

The government has rejected all claims that it is transporting military gear to Armenia from Iranian soil. This denial was a reaction to the circulation of videos on social media showing trucks carrying covered loads across the Iranian border and into Armenia.

On October 10, both [Rouhani](#) and [Zarif](#) supported the Russia-brokered ceasefire between the countries. The government expressed concern over ceasefire violations and continues to urge both parties to refrain from violence.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards' reaction

While the government has been trying to present the regime as neutral in the conflict, several news outlets close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) identify Azerbaijan as the instigator of the conflict and frame the clash as a threat to the Islamic regime.

Mashregh News wrote that “focusing on the arrangement of their forces...in the border areas as of this morning [September 27], it is the armored forces of the Azerbaijani army that have entered the disputed areas with the support of Azerbaijani artillery and offensive helicopters.”

On October 2, *Mashregh News* published an [analysis](#) arguing that Azerbaijan is a threat to Iran. It presented Azerbaijan as an ally of the West and Israel and claimed that Baku has allowed Israel to use its soil for operations. Moreover, it asserted that Azerbaijan has claims on the Iranian Azerbaijani provinces, and that Nagorno-Karabakh is a buffer zone between Iran and Azerbaijan. The analysis goes on to say that if Nagorno-Karabakh “is captured by Aliyev's forces and the [*takfiri*] terrorists sent by Erdoğan, there will be a serious threat to Iran in terms of national security and territorial integrity.”

Fars News Agency offers a less anti-Azerbaijani line than *Mashregh News*. However, in a report about Tehran's “neutral” position on the clashes, *Fars* named Azerbaijan as the instigator.

Fars has [reported](#) on Turkey's deployment of jihadi terrorists from Syria to the South Caucasus in support of Azerbaijan and frames the conflict as a wider conspiracy against the Islamic regime. The agency reports that Ali-Hashem, Khamenei's representative in East Azerbaijan province, [blames](#) Israel for being the “director” of the conflict.

Both [Fars News Agency](#) and [Mashregh News](#) further implicate Israel in the conflict by reporting that Armenia accuses Azerbaijan of using cluster bombs purchased from Israel. *Fars* also implicates the US government in the conflict. In at least three news reports ([1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)), it claimed that the US embassies in Baku and Yerevan knew about the impending crisis and advised American citizens to avoid the region two days before fighting erupted.

Tasnim News is clearly pro-Azerbaijan. For instance, it [interviewed](#) an Iranian expert on the Caucasus region who claims Azerbaijan has the right to force Armenia out of its “occupied territories.” *Tasnim News* also cites Israeli and American influence in the region as the cause of the conflict. It interviewed two clerics based in the Iranian Azerbaijani provinces who blame Israel and US for the dispute. [Javad Shabestari](#), member of the Assembly of Experts, claimed that all parties must be careful not to work in the interest of Israel or the US. [Hassan Shojaei](#), member of the Majlis, said Israel and the US do not want peace in the region.

No IRGC commander has publicly expressed the official view of the Corps.

Implications of the conflict for the Islamic regime

Azerbaijan has close relations with the US, Israel, and the EU. It provides [40 percent](#) of Israel’s oil consumption, and the EU considers Azerbaijan a strategic partner with an important role to play in making Europe less dependent on Russian energy resources. Azerbaijan is also allied with Turkey, which is pushing for Pan-Turkism in the Caucasus—including the Iranian Azerbaijani provinces.

The Islamic regime therefore perceives Armenia as an ally with which to create a power of balance in the region (with Russia of course playing a pivotal role). Armenia is a member of the military alliance Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is dominated by the Kremlin, and the Islamic regime understands that cooperating with Armenia will bring Iran closer to Russia.

[Trade relations with Armenia](#) are also significant for the regime. Because of the US sanctions, Tehran perceives all countries that are willing to trade with it as important. This especially pertains to neighboring countries, including [Azerbaijan](#). However, between 2019 and 2020, trade relations between the Islamic regime and Azerbaijan have [declined](#), making Armenia a more attractive ally.

With that said, it is Azerbaijan that has close historical and cultural ties with Iran. The Republic of Azerbaijan was part of Iran before Tsarist Russia forced Iran to give it up, and the majority of the people in Azerbaijan are Shiites.

These complications explain why the Islamic regime has no clear policy on the conflict.

The Supreme Leader has remained silent while his representatives have shown support for Azerbaijan—support that should be understood as primarily a means of easing pro-Azerbaijani and pro-Shiite anxieties within Iran. The government has declared that it is neutral in the conflict and strives for sustainable peace in the region.

IRGC commanders have also stayed silent, but news outlets close to the Corps have taken contradictory positions. This suggests that there are differences of opinion on the conflict within the ranks of the IRGC.

The regime must make a choice

The Islamic regime is in a complicated position in which two principal interests contradict one another. Supporting Armenia could strengthen the position of the Islamic regime in the region, but to do so would imply that Iran is turning its back on Azerbaijan, a Shiite country.

Doing nothing is not an option. The regime does not want to allow Ankara to increase its influence in the region to Iran's north. Turkey's deployment of jihadists to the region constitutes a serious threat to Iran and the Islamic regime. This could explain why Tehran wants to involve Turkey and Russia in resolving the conflict.

The regime will attempt to use the conflict to pull both Ankara and Moscow closer to Tehran. Iran and Turkey have established an increasingly close [relationship](#), and the regime will strive to make it even stronger. Turkey has been a good economic partner for Iran, and both are hostile to Saudi Arabia and Israel.

What will the Islamic regime decide to do?

A principal doctrine in the foreign policy of the Tehran regime is its perception of itself as the *Umm al-qura*, or mother of all Muslim cities. This doctrine is likely to prompt a pro-Armenian approach.

The *Umm al-qura* doctrine, which was developed by Muhammad Javad Larijani in his book *Magholati dar estratagi-e melli* (1990, Issues on National Strategy), helped the regime convert its foreign policy from idealism to

realism. In short, the doctrine claims that if the regime falls, there will be no one left to defend Islam and the Shiites. The regime must therefore prioritize its own security and strength no matter what the cost. The Islamic regime's survival is more important than the lives of some Muslims.

Accordingly, it should be expected that the regime will support Armenia, at least to the limited extent that states in the region can influence the conflict. This will likely take place both during and after the fighting. This support will probably be provided covertly in the form of providing Armenia with civil and war materiel as well as intelligence and diplomatic support. The Islamic regime will strive to avoid direct confrontation with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

However, Tehran's support might become more overt depending on how the conflict develops. Will Turkey continue to deploy jihadists to the region? How will the US, the EU, and Israel react? How involved will Russia get? All these factors will have an impact on the Islamic regime's decisions.

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