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School of International Affairs

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adabiweekly@ada.edu.az

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AZERBAIJAN AND IRAN

An Interview with Nasir Hamidi Zare Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Azerbaijan

November 13, 2008
Baku, Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan in the World: What do you see as the central core of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Nasir Hamidi Zare: Bismillahi rehmani rehimi. Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan rest on a variety of political, cultural and economic factors, all of which give a broad range of opportunities for cooperation.

AIW: How have Azerbaijan-Iran relations evolved in the post-Soviet time? How would you rate their current level? What directions in bilateral ties have been most successful and where is additional attention needed?

Amb. Zare: The Soviet system could not meet the needs of the Azerbaijani people, and consequently they moved to re-establish their own independent state. Now that Azerbaijan is an independent state, Iran and Azerbaijan are developing relations based on their location and historical commonalities. Fifteen years is not a long time, but both Baku and Tehran have been working to promote the expansion of our relations.

AIW: How do you view the recent events in Georgia? Can it trigger the fatal erosion of the fundamental principle of the rule of law in international relations?

Amb. Zare: The recent conflict in Georgia reflects a continuation of the artificial clash between two poles of power in the world, with each side trying to improve its position at the expense of the other. I do not subscribe to the notion of bipolarity of the world divided between liberal and illiberal states. As Iranians, we are members of a flourishing part of the world which is not locked into that worldview.

AIW: How do you think the recent events in Georgia will affect the further development of relations between Iran and the countries of the South Caucasus in general and with Azerbaijan in particular?

Amb. Zare: As a diplomat from Iran, I am confident that these countries will move away from an ideological – bipolar - conception of the world and will develop their relations independently with all surrounding countries. That reflects, and is enabled by, the will of the people as expressed in elections through which they extend the legitimacy to those they elect.

AIW: What is your assessment of Turkey's recent initiative for the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform? Do you think it has better potential as a framework for peaceful negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia as compared with the Minsk Group?

Amb. Zare: Relations among countries should not reflect the desire of other powers to divide the world but should rest on the views of the people who want cooperation. The more choices people have in seeking solutions to their problems, the greater the chance that they will find one that works. Azerbaijan acting as an independent country has the right to make its own choice in this regard. Consequently, Azerbaijan, like Turkey and Iran, must respond on the basis of its own national interests.

AIW: What is the state of energy cooperation between Azerbaijan and Iran? What effect did the Georgian events have on this cooperation?

Amb. Zare: The conflict in Georgia may lead to a change in the flow of oil out of the Caspian basin. If anyone tries to monopolize those routes, all may suffer in the future. Azerbaijan and Iran now have the chance to create a new atmosphere of cooperation in this area, one that promotes security generally and energy flows as well. At the same time, both our countries need to develop industry and not just provide the West with energy resources.

AIW: What are the recent developments within the North-South corridor project, and what is the level of Azerbaijan-Iran cooperation within that framework?

Amb. Zare: By the gift of Allah, Iran is in a geographically advantageous position between north and south and east and west. It cannot be ignored because you cannot change geography. Azerbaijan should recognize that a north-south corridor between Russia and Iran is not only about transportation in a narrow sense but involves broader communication as well, including through fiber optic channels and internet. So, geography dictates its own rules, and recognition of these possibilities will help us expand our relations.

AIW: Do you see any hurdles that Iran and Azerbaijan will have to overcome in order to improve their relationship?

Amb. Zare: In general, I do not see any serious problem in our relations. Those that do exist are survivals from the Soviet past. The potential exists on both sides to tackle all problems, and we have so far been able to do that. Because the commitment on both sides is strong, when our presidents meet, they can speak in an open and friendly manner, something that helps solve all problems. Of course, other countries are not just observers of this process: they try to play tricks. But we are Muslim brothers, good neighbors, and historic relatives, so we will not go against our mutual interests.

AIW: What in your view ought to be the next steps in relations between Azerbaijan and Iran?

Amb. Zare: Our joint economic commission will have its next meeting in Baku. I hope that this session will lead to an increase in the volume of trade and to new cooperation agreements both between the two governments and among private sectors.

AIW: Given your own experience, what advice would you give young Azerbaijanis beginning their careers in diplomacy?

Amb. Zare: I would recommend that young diplomats adopt an independent and critical view, one that is shaped by their own observations rather than by what others attempt to pour into their minds. Young diplomats must study the world carefully, learn to distinguish between what is truth and what is not. Believe in your own people and government, and work as a representative of your government for the benefit of your people and humanity as well.

IS IRAN THE MAIN BENEFICIARY OF THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN WAR?

Paul Goble
Director of Research and Publications
Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy

During and immediately after the conflict, some commentators in Moscow and Tehran speculated that the Russian government had intervened in Georgia in order to prevent the United States and Israel from attacking Iran. Whether there was any truth to those suggestions is unclear, but it is certainly the case that Iran has

benefited from that conflict more than almost anyone else, exploiting the war to increase its role in the South Caucasus, ties with the Russian Federation, and gain greater freedom of action not only in the Middle East but in Europe and Asia as well.

Because of the disruptions the Russian-Georgian war caused in the transportation networks in the Caucasus, Iran became a more attractive route out for Caspian basin oil, with Azerbaijan and other countries now willing to consider using it despite continuing American objections. Baku has announced that it will ship some of its oil via Iran in the future, something that gives Tehran added influence not only in the Azerbaijani capital and in Central Asia but also in the capitals of European countries who want to buy that oil.

Moreover, because the so-called five day war shook to their foundations existing geopolitical calculations in the region, Russia and Armenia used its aftermath as an occasion to press for Tehran's involvement in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Those two countries also sought to push for Iranian inclusion in Turkey's proposed stability platform, something the US opposes but that some in Ankara are now ready to consider.

Even if Moscow and Yerevan are not successful in either case, Iran is acquiring a new status as a country many in the region want to have on their side. That will mean that its leaders and their representatives in the region will have a greater role first informally and then later more formally, whatever Washington may do. And as a result, in the South Caucasus, Iran is certainly a big winner from the conflict.

From Tehran's point of view, an even more important consequence of the conflict is yet another increase in ties between Iran and the Russian Federation. First, as part of its continuing efforts to draw Iran to its side, Moscow continues to supply Iran not only with nuclear technology but with some of its most advanced military equipment, moves that some in the region think may be a prelude to a request by Moscow to set up military bases in Iran. That is highly unlikely, but the very fact that it is being mentioned suggests just how close the relationship now is.

Second, Moscow is pushing for the formation of a "gas OPEC" that would allow Russia and Iran, the two leading natural gas producers in the world, to restrict production and raise prices in much the same way as OPEC had been doing with oil, and would reinforce Russia's effort to promote a north-south transportation and communications network between the Russian Federation and the Persian Gulf. That would not only tie Iran to Russia but would also increase Russian influence in the Caucasus while reducing or possibly even blocking American and European efforts to promote east-west ties from Central Asia through the Caucasus to the Black Sea and beyond.

And third, the Russian government in the wake of the conflict in Georgia has stepped up its efforts to promote the idea that Iran should become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and that that grouping should become a security counterweight to NATO and other Western institutions. If that happens, Iran's role by virtue of its size and location would be immense, and it is entirely possible that Tehran would end by having a potentially greater influence over Moscow than Moscow over Tehran. At the very least, Iran's role in this region will grow, and that is yet another way it has been a beneficiary of a war it did not start or participate in.

But perhaps the most important consequence of the Russian-Georgian war lies elsewhere. By distracting attention from Iran's nuclear program and by reinforcing the growing divide between Moscow and the West, the conflict has given Tehran far more room to manoeuvre. No longer is every Iranian action considered solely in terms of its nuclear efforts and no longer is it viewed by many as the outcast it had been, a change that has been underscored by statements of US President-elect Barak Obama that he is prepared to talk to the Iranians without preconditions.

If the Americans are willing to do so, few others – except for the Israelis – are going to feel under any continuing constraint not to. That is especially likely to be the case with countries like China and the Central Asian states whose regimes are now often classified as "authoritarian capitalist," a rubric developed over the last few years in order to avoid employing an older and harsher term to the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin. Iran's involvement with them, an involvement in which power politics and economics rather than democracy and human rights will be the central themes, will at least for a time increase the chances for Iran to be accepted and have influence where it was earlier treated as an outcast.

In that way too, Iran is the big winner of this war, even though it was not a combatant and even though it did not even clearly chose sides. But that reality raises another question, one that as yet has no clear answer. Will Iran's rising influence lead it to become a more traditional type of regime, swearing off such activities as support for international terrorists and other sub-state actors? Or will it lead Tehran to believe that it can now use these things with far greater impunity than in the past?

There are compelling arguments for and against each, but again, the fact that such questions are now being asked represent the clearest possible confirmation that Iran has so far taken advantage of the war in Georgia far more successfully than anyone else and that it is set to play many roles as a regional and even world power that the United States and Israel unsuccessfully sought to prevent.

IRAN'S GROWING ROLE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Gulnara Inandzh
Director

International Online Information Analytic Center *Ethnoglobus*

In the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war, Iran has assumed a greater role in the calculations of all the states of the South Caucasus as well as in the thinking of the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and the United States and Israel, on the other. Its location alone makes it a key player, especially given the disruptions in trade routes that the war has caused. And its growing power – including its moves toward the acquisition of a nuclear capability if not nuclear weapons – means that it can no longer be ignored.

But precisely what role Iran will be able to play depends not only on its own resources but also on the attitudes of other players, and they are much divided. On

the one hand, Russia and Armenia would like to see Tehran brought into discussions about the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and about the formation of the Ankara-proposed Platform for regional security. On the other, the United States and Israel hope to continue to isolate Iran and to use Turkey as their agent in the region, although it appears that the two have dropped any immediate plans to use force against it lest such actions further destabilize the entire region.

Whether Turkey will be willing to be used in this way, of course, is far from clear. It has its own economic interests in the region which are better served by a cooperative relationship with countries nearby rather than by following the lead of its traditional partners further away. And its government is now committed to a more independent foreign policy, one that means it may sometimes support Washington and Jerusalem and sometimes Moscow and Tehran.

But in addition to questions about Turkey's role in this situation, there is another factor at work. Many outside powers, and the United States in particular, have tended to ignore Iranian moves other than in the nuclear area. And consequently, Tehran has been able to expand its influence under the radar screen not only among Shiite groups across the Middle East but with other governments there that it has long been at odds with. And that is reinforcing its own view of itself as a major regional power.

These new realities appear likely to lead to a correction in the policies of the United States after Barak Obama assumes office. His personal background is generating great hopes for the resolution of Middle Eastern and Iranian problems, including in Tehran. President Ahmadinejad welcomed Obama's victory as a possible turning point in relations between Washington and Iran.

And there may be changes in the year ahead from within Iran. That country faces a presidential election, and at least some of the key leaders in the country are unhappy with the aggressive approach Ahmadinejad has adopted toward Israel and the United States. Consequently, Iran may prove more open to a new approach, especially if its leaders believe that an end to their diplomatic isolation in the West will pay dividends in the region, such as an invitation to be a participant in discussions about the resolution of local conflicts.

One of the wild cards in this situation is the possibility that the United States and Israel will try to play the Azerbaijani card against Tehran. Nearly a third of Iran's population consists of ethnic Azerbaijanis. Most of them are well integrated into Iranian life: indeed, the supreme ruler Ayatollah Khamenei is an Azerbaijani. Baku has been reluctant to cooperate with any Western projects in this regard, but the danger exists that efforts by the US (broadcasting) or Israel (agricultural cooperation) could lead the Iranian government to revise its approach to the Caucasus.

And Israel's interest in developing contacts with the 20,000 Jews of Iran, combined with its close relations to Baku could also play a role in changing Iran's approach, possibly in quite unpredictable ways in the coming months. Interestingly, the Jewish community in Azerbaijan is also keen to make its contribution to the further developments in the region. In this context, the following appeal of the chairman of the religious community *The Jews of Azerbaijan*, Director General of the Jewish educational complex Habad or-Avner, and the chief rabbi of the Ashkenazim Jews of Azerbaijan Meier Bruk to Iran's ambassador in Baku, Nasiri Hamidi Zare, is a

logical extension of the actions of the other Jewish organizations in the broader region:

“The development of relations between the two countries has always been based on mutually profitable and vitally necessary conditions and as a rule the principles of public diplomacy have provided the foundation of these ties... In the Islamic Republic of Iran are living a sufficiently large Jewish community, and according to reports by its members, all the conditions for fruitful activity exist....” Also, the Jewish educational complex Habad or-Avner whose construction began in 2007 in Azerbaijan is envisaged to have an intake of Jewish students from the entire region, including Iran.

In this situation, because it enjoys good relations with both, Azerbaijan has the chance to serve as an intermediary between the West and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran and other Muslim countries, on the other; or it might be expected to in one quarter or another, expectations that could drive policies as well.

A CHRONOLOGY OF AZERBAIJAN’S FOREIGN POLICY

I. Key Government Statements on Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy

President Ilham Aliyev tells Italy’s *RAI International* television that the Moscow declaration by the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia does not contain any provision that blocks Baku from using force if necessary to recover its occupied territories (<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=96878>).

President Ilham Aliyev tells a roundtable on “Azerbaijan in the 21st Century – A Strategy of Success” that Baku’s relations with Moscow are dynamically developing as a strategic partnership. He also says that the liberation of Azerbaijani territory currently occupied by Armenia is a precondition to stability in the Caucasus (<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=96265>).

President Ilham Aliyev says that recent reports about Azerbaijan by Freedom House and Transparency International are not objective but instead promote specific political interests often at odds with those of Azerbaijani government (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138371.html>).

Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov says that opportunities for cooperation between Azerbaijan and the United States in the military sphere are increasing (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137139.html>).

The Azerbaijan foreign ministry says that the French foreign ministry has distorted the meaning of the Moscow Declaration by talking about “the people of Nagorno-Karabakh.” Such “a people” does not exist, Baku says. Instead, there are Armenian and Azerbaijani communities there (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137218.html>).

The Azerbaijan foreign ministry says that Baku recognizes the right of nations to self-determination but believes that its implementation must not violate the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137192.html>).

II. Key Statements by Others about Azerbaijan

French President Nicolas Sarkozy sends a letter to President Ilham Aliyev saying that France will do all it can to secure "a peaceful and just resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138518.html>).

Turkish President Abdullah Gul in announcing plans for a Baku summit of the Turkic Language Countries next year says that "those who at one time said that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline would not be built... today see that oil coming from Baku to Ceyhan is being sold to the entire world" (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137753.html>).

Vasily Istratov, the Russian ambassador to Azerbaijan, says that "the Moscow declaration is the road map for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," the basis for further negotiations between the two sides. But he stresses that Nagorno-Karabakh itself cannot take an equal part in any future talks (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137488.html>).

According to the Turkish news portal *haberaktuel.com*, Ankara will open a consulate general in Ganja in 2009 as part of its plan to set up 13 embassies and 12 consulates general (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138466.html>).

III. A Chronology of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy

30 November

Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov receives his Turkish counterpart Ali Babajan to discuss Ankara's proposal for a Platform of Stability and Cooperation in the Caucasus (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138345.html>).

Mohammad Younis Ganouni, the speaker of the National Assembly of Afghanistan, arrives in Baku for a three-day visit (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138574.html>).

29 November

President Ilham Aliyev meets with his Turkish and Turkmenistan counterparts Abdullah Gul and Gurbangulu Berdymukhammedov in Turkmenistan to discuss pipelines and other economic and political issues (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138682.html>).

28 November

President Ilham Aliyev arrives in Turkmenistan and has a one-on-one meeting with Turkmenistan President Gurbangulu Berdymukhammedov; he also visits the mausoleum of Turkmenbashi (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138529.html>).

Vasily Istratov, the Russian ambassador to Azerbaijan, says that Moscow's proposal for the joint Russian-American operation of the Gabala radar station "remains in force" (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138561.html>).

Alan Waddams, the European Commission's representative in Azerbaijan, says that Baku has been moving toward Europe for 200 years and, with the EU's Eastern Partnership program coming into force, will get to Europe ever closer (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138535.html>).

26 November

President Ilham Aliyev meets in Rome with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to discuss bilateral cooperation and the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. On the same day, the president meets with Italian businessmen interested in investing in Azerbaijan (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138184.html>).

Azerbaijan and Libya sign a protocol regulating bilateral cooperation in energy, trade, agriculture, education, health, tourism, and youth and sports (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138299.html>).

25 November

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin and US Ambassador to Moscow John Beyrle meet to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and other conflicts in the South Caucasus (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138186.html>).

The presidential strategic studies centers of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have a conference in Almaty on prospects for cooperation between the two countries (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137617.html>).

The co-chairmen of the US Helsinki Commission, Congressman Alcee L. Hastings and Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, send an open letter to President Ilham Aliyev calling on him to reverse Baku's plans to end the broadcasting of the Voice of America and RFE/RL in Azerbaijan (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/138047.html>).

24 November

President Ilham Aliyev receives the Henrietta Fore, the director of US foreign assistance and administrator of the US Agency for International Development (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137925.html>).

23 November

Azerbaijani parliamentarians take part in the 31st plenary session in St. Petersburg of the Inter-parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States to discuss expanded cooperation and exchange of experience in a wide range of fields (http://www.echo-az.info/archive/2008_11/1939/politica06.shtml).

22 November

President Ilham Aliyev receives Prince Andrew of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and stresses the dynamic development of bilateral

ties between Azerbaijan and the UK
(<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137817.html>).

Vagif Sadykhov, deputy foreign minister, receives Sada Cumber, special representative of the United States to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, who says that Azerbaijan can take pride in its traditions of religious tolerance
(<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137777.html>).

Azerbaijani parliamentarians take part in an international forum in the Ukrainian capital devoted to the 75th anniversary of the Terror Famine
(<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=96245>).

21 November

First Lady Mekhriban Aliyeva goes to Istanbul to take part in an international symposium on the role of businesswomen in the course of global change
(<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=96279>).

Gudsi Osmanov, Azerbaijan's consul general in St. Petersburg, visits Bashkortostan and says ties between Baku and Ufa can develop further as sister cities (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137650.html>).

20 November

Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov meets with his Swiss counterpart Micheline Calmi-Rey during his visit to Switzerland
(<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137547.html>).

The monitoring committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) says that "the presidential elections in Azerbaijan met international standards and the requirements of the Council of Europe"
(<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137484.html>).

Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov takes part in a GUAM coordination session in Kyiv (http://www.echo-az.info/archive/2008_11/1937/politica05.shtml).

19 November

Azerbaijani parliamentarians take part in the four-day conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic Language Countries in Istanbul
(<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137180.html>).

Defense Minister Safar Abiyev receives Greece foreign ministry's special representative, Ambassador Nikolaos Kalantzianos, whose country will chair the OSCE in 2009 (<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=96048>).

18 November

David Kramer, US deputy assistant secretary of state for European Affairs, meets with the leaders of Azerbaijan's political parties in Baku (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137160.html>).

President Ilham Aliyev receives Swedish employment minister Sven Otto Littorin who thanks the Azerbaijani leader for opening an embassy in Stockholm and promoting bilateral ties (<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=95992>).

Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov says that "the resolution of the [Nagorno-Karabakh] conflict is in the interests of Azerbaijan and Armenia and perhaps of Armenia to an even greater degree than of Azerbaijan" (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137133.html>).

The Azerbaijan foreign ministry warns the Norwegian embassy that Oslo's statement opposing the closure of foreign radio broadcasting in Azerbaijan does not correspond to the facts and is counter to the position of Azerbaijan (<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=95964>).

17 November

President Ilham Aliyev receives US Gen. Duncan McNabb, the commander of the US transportation command (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137082.html>).

Azerbaijan marks the 20th anniversary of the first protests against Moscow as its Day of National Revival (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/136970.html>).

Matthew Bryza, US deputy assistant secretary of state and co-chair of the Minsk Group, denies reports that there is a secret agreement between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan (<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=95747>).

The Azerbaijan foreign ministry states that "Azerbaijan and Russia have friendly and dynamically developing relations," that "no pressure in the relations between our states exists," and that "cooperation is intensifying" on a wide range of issues (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/137041.html>).

Note to Readers

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