



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## IRAN-AZERBAIJAN: ESCALATION UNLIKELY, BUT TENSIONS TO CONTINUE

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Iran-Azerbaijan tensions have flared in recent weeks in response to new border restrictions on Iranian truckers, military exercises and deployments near their shared border, and Baku's growing ties to Israel. While these tensions are unlikely to lead to open conflict in the near-term, Iran has threatened to use its newest proxy force—the Huseyniyyun (consisting of Azerbaijanis who adhere to Tehran's revolutionary ideology)—to pressure, and perhaps even undermine the Aliyev government if the latter crosses its red lines.

**Tehran's Concerns:** Always wary of its northern neighbor, Tehran's heightened concerns have been driven by Azerbaijan's territorial gains in its 2020 war with Armenia (which is supported by Tehran) over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and its effective use of Turkish and Israeli drones there. Iran also remains wary of the potential for rising Azeri nationalism within its own borders. Although well integrated into Iranian society — many Iranian leaders including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have an Azeri background — last year's conflict ignited Azeri nationalism which has spilled over into Iran.

In August, tensions flared when Azerbaijan temporarily closed a 21 km segment of the Goris-Kapan highway, Iran's only outlet for trade with Armenia; part of the road is now controlled by Azerbaijan following the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The Azerbaijan foreign ministry summoned Iran's ambassador to Baku accusing Iranian trucks of illegally entering parts of Karabakh now controlled by Azerbaijan. In an effort to impair Iran-Armenia trade and assert its sovereignty over areas won during the war, Baku established checkpoints and levied a road tax on Iranian truckers, and on 15 September, two Iranian truck drivers were detained and charged with smuggling and illegally crossing the Azerbaijan border.

Iran and Azerbaijan share a 700km border, part of which had been under Armenian control until it was lost to Azerbaijan during the 2020 conflict. Road access is an important economic line of communication for Iran's trade with Armenia and access to the Eurasian Economic Union. According to the UN, Iranian exports to Armenia in 2020 totaled US \$314.89 million; Iran is looking to expand this to \$1.2 billion in the near term, according to the *Tehran Times*. Iran is concerned that Azerbaijan, with Turkish backing, will permanently alter the map and further restrict access. Iran's parliament indicated that any change in the borders would be a red line; Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian echoed this sentiment, noting, "We certainly will not tolerate geopolitical change and map change in the Caucasus..."

As tensions over the border spiked, Azerbaijan conducted the first joint military exercise with Turkey and Pakistan near Baku in mid-September; the exercise followed a tripartite meeting of the three countries' parliamentary speakers in Baku in July. Tehran responded by conducting its own military exercise near the border with Azerbaijan on 1-2 October—followed by a force buildup. Highlighting its concerns about Azerbaijan's ties to Israel, Iran named the exercise the *Conquerors of Khaybar*, a reference to the 628 AD Battle of Khaybar between Muslims and Jews in the Arabian Peninsula.

Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev denounced the Iranian military exercise, stating ...”why now, and why on our border?” In response, Azerbaijan held another exercise with Turkey in the Nakhchivan enclave near the Iranian border between 5 and 8 October. Baku also shut an Iranian mosque in the capital which reportedly is affiliated with the Iranian embassy and houses the office of the representative of Iran’s Supreme Leader.

**The Jerusalem-Baku Axis:** Iran’s primary security concern remains the close ties between Baku and Jerusalem centered on Israel’s reported military presence in the country. Despite consistent denials by Azerbaijani officials, Israel allegedly has long standing covert military ties to Azerbaijan and although the full extent of their cooperation is unclear, it almost certainly includes joint intelligence collection. Moreover, the UK-based Arab news outlet *Elaph* recently cited an anonymous senior Israeli official who claimed Israeli F-35 stealth fighter aircraft are now permanently stationed in Azerbaijan. While it is unlikely that Israel would permanently base F-35 aircraft in Azerbaijan, use of Azeri airbases is plausible; as early as 2012 US officials noted Azerbaijan was allowing Israeli fighter aircraft access to an airbase.

Iran fears Israel could use Azerbaijan as a platform to attack its nuclear program; the much shorter distances theoretically would increase the viability of the strike option by expanding the amount of ordinance that could be placed on target and reducing the risk to Israeli pilots. Israel is believed to be conducting a sabotage campaign against Iran’s nuclear program to include the killing of Iran’s top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. There also have been reports of Israeli offensive operations against Iran from Azerbaijan; in July 2020 Iran accused Azerbaijan of allowing Israeli drones to use Azerbaijan airspace to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, a charge Baku denies. Israel is also believed to have spirited out Iran’s nuclear archive through Azerbaijan in January 2018.

Tehran has been vocal in its opposition to the Israeli military presence, calling Azerbaijan’s ties to Israel a strategic mistake.” On 30 September the Iranian Foreign Minister indicated Iran would not tolerate the presence and activity” of Israel in the country. Khamenei has weighed in as well. In early October, he noted countries near northwest Iran shouldn’t allow foreign armies that are serving their own national interests” to interfere in the region. Tehran has cast current tensions in this context noting that conflict between Baku and Tehran can only serve the interests of Israel.

These warnings come following comments by Israeli officials that it retains a unilateral strike option as doubts grow that Tehran is interested in returning to the limits imposed on its nuclear program by the JCPOA. In September, IDF Chief of Staff Kochavi stated the IDF has greatly accelerated” preparations for an attack against Iran’s nuclear program. Israel reportedly approved \$1.5 billion to purchase weapons and equipment to bolster its ability to attack, according to *The Times of Israel* on 20 October.

**The Rise of the Huseyniyyun:** To counter the perceived threat from Azerbaijan, Iran appears to be signaling it will employ a paramilitary force known as the Huseyniyyun or the Azerbaijan Islamic Resistance Movement.” Little is known about the group but according to Mashregh News — a Farsi-language outlet close to Iran’s security and intelligence organizations — it was officially created in 2017 following a meeting with the late IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. The organization’s founder, Azerbaijan national Hojjatoleslam Tawhid Ibrahim Begli, reportedly opposes Aliyev and told a group of Azeri religious students in Qom and Mashhad in 2016 that he intended to establish the Hussein Brigade.”

Recent pro-Iran social media reports pointed to the activation of the group, revealing a familiar symbol — a yellow background with a clenched fist holding a rifle reminiscent of the IRGC as well as Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemen’s Houthi movement, and various other Iranian proxy elements in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. To the extent it is a viable proxy group, Huseyniyyun almost certainly is intended to be used as

a lever to pressure Baku into terminating its close ties to Israel and to indicate that Tehran might try to undermine the secular Aliyev government if it crosses Tehran's red lines. Azeri media outlets suggest the organization is under IRGC control and that many of its members have been trained in Syria.

Meanwhile, Khamenei launched a Twitter account in Azeri on 23 October. His tweets have focused on pro-Palestinian and Muslim unity messaging in an apparent effort to appeal to Azeris who don't approve of the close ties with Israel. At the same time, Azerbaijani media reported the Azerbaijan government blocked six websites it claims were engaged in pro-Iran and religious propaganda. Youtube channels promulgating Iranian religious propaganda reportedly also have been blocked.

**Implications:** Drawing confidence as a result of its close ties to Turkey and emboldened by its military successes against Armenia, Baku appears unlikely to cave to Iranian pressure to downgrade its ties to Israel. The Azerbaijan-Israel relationship is mutually beneficial; Baku provides energy to Israel — Azerbaijan supplies up to 40 percent of Israel's oil purchases — while Israel sells Azerbaijan drones and high tech weapons, which helped Azerbaijan tip the balance of power with Armenia in its favor and recapture some of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory last year. Azerbaijan recently opened a trade and tourism office in Israel, a possible precursor to opening an embassy. Israel also sees close ties to Azerbaijan, a moderate Muslim state on Iran's periphery, as a strategic asset.

Iran is unlikely to have much success in its attempts to pressure the secular, largely pro-West Aliyev government. Support for secularism in society is high — in a 2010 Gallup poll, 49 percent of Azeris said religion was not an important part of daily life. Tehran has attempted to foment unrest in Azerbaijan in the past without much success, suggesting most Azeris are not interested in Iran's form of radical Islam.

Tehran and Baku appear to be looking to calm tensions; both foreign ministers publicly have expressed an interest in resolving the crisis and the two detained Iranian truckers were released on 21 October. The two countries probably will be able to resolve the border issues, the proximate cause of the recent escalation. However, tensions go much deeper and are centered on Tehran's perception of the strategic threat posed by Baku's close ties to Jerusalem and the Israeli military presence near Iran's northwest border. Iran also sees Azeri nationalism as a potential internal threat. During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, protests in support of Azerbaijan broke out in several Iranian cities, including Tehran, and Tabriz. Azeris are the largest minority in Iran — some estimates indicate as much as one-quarter of the population.

Tensions almost certainly will remain high and the conflict between Tehran and Baku is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. Absent an IDF attack on Iranian territory from Azerbaijan, however, the conflict is unlikely to erupt into an overt military clash; Iran would fear intervention by Turkey in support of Azerbaijan. Regardless, Tehran prefers to achieve its strategic objectives via indirect means strongly suggesting it will rely mainly on proxies and efforts to shape the information environment in order to pressure and perhaps eventually undermine the Aliyev government.

