

Iran in the Early Days of the Karabakh Conflict

Babak Rezvani

The conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region is one of the most stubborn conflicts in the post-Soviet space; despite more than one decade of armistice, the opposing Armenian and Azeri parties are still nowhere near to a solution. The conflict started when the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh demanded a transfer of the autonomous province to Armenia. Soviet Armenia agreed, but neither Soviet Azerbaijan nor the Soviet Center did want to agree. The conflict escalated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Armenian separatists have proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (*Artsakh*). They have taken control over the former Nagorno-Karabakh region as well as the area around it that is ethnically cleansed of local Azerbaijanis and Kurds. No countries has recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, *de facto*, Armenia has incorporated the area into its own polity.

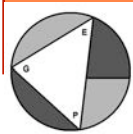
The role of regional powers is an interesting one. Russia tries to play the role of a mediator. It maintains good relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, but allegedly supports Armenia more than Azerbaijan. This is not very odd as Armenia is a smaller country, and unlike Azerbaijan, does not possess oil reserves. Turkey has sided with Azerbaijan, which is also not a strange position as it has troubled relations with Armenia due to the latter demands of recognition of Armenian genocide by Turkey as the successor of the Ottoman empire, and possible payment of restitutions. Iran's role is the least analyzed one. Allegedly the Western powers, and even Russia, try to isolate Iran and do not let it play an important role with regard to the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Certain news sources even suggest that Iran supports Armenia, which is not true. Officially Iran remains neutral in this conflict. Nevertheless, Iran does not recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and regards it as part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Iran maintains good trade relations with Armenia. However, this is not surprising, as Armenia is the only Caucasian or Central Asian state in which Turkey has been less successful in business than Iran.

A former Iranian official claims in a recent article that Iran has supported the Republic of Azerbaijan in the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh War. The article, written by Joshua Kucera (8 March 2013), reads as follows:

Iranian Official: We Helped Azerbaijan In Karabakh War March 8, 2013 - 4:04 pm, by Joshua Kucera The Bug Pit Azerbaijan Iran Nagorno Karabakh EurasiaNet's Weekly Digest

A top Iranian official has made waves in the Caucasus by claiming that Iran secretly helped Azerbaijan during the latter's war with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh in the 1990s. The official, Mohsen Rezaee, is in a position to know: he was the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards at the time. He told Sahar TV (translation by Oye Times):

"I personally issued an order ... for the Republic of Azerbaijan army to be equipped appropriately and for it to receive the necessary training," he said. "Many Iranians died in the



Karabakh War. In addition to the wounded, who were transported to [Iran], many of the Iranian martyrs of the Karabakh War are buried in Baku.” “Karabakh is a part of Islamic lands and the Republic of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity must be guaranteed through peaceful means.”

Iran, of course, is now fairly hostile towards Azerbaijan, and maintains good relations with Armenia. Armenians have claimed that Iran helped Azerbaijan during the war, but there has not been confirmation of this, nor have mainstream accounts repeated the claim. (The authoritative book on the war, Thomas De Waal’s *Black Garden*, while devoting several pages to Russia’s complex role in the war, doesn’t address Iran’s role at all.) Iran and Azerbaijan also have been quiet about this (if it is in fact true), though some opposition figures in Azerbaijan appear to have been supporting Rezaee’s allegations.

Rezaee is now a candidate for president, and it’s possible that this is a play for votes among Iran’s substantial ethnic Azeri population. It also could be a subtle power play by Tehran against Baku, suggests Alex Vatanka, an Iran scholar at the Middle East Institute who has written a lot on Iran’s relations to the Caucasus.

“Why come out now and say it? I can only assume that the Iranians know Armenia can’t really afford to allow this historical fact [if it is true] to harm present ties with Iran,” he told *The Bug Pit*. “On the other hand, Iran has a lot to gain from such news. If you are Tehran, and want to go over Aliyev’s head, what would be better to play than the ‘Islamic’ or ‘nationalist’ card and shape Azeri public opinion. I see it all as part of Tehran’s cold-hot approach to Aliyev’s government.”

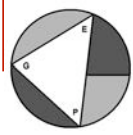
So far there doesn’t seem to be any official reaction from Baku.

UPDATE: A reader writes in to note that this is not actually the first time an Iranian official has made such a claim; an Ayatollah Said Hassan Ameli did so a couple of years ago, as well. (Kucera 2013)

I would like to make a few comments: Unlike what the (Armenian) article says, Iran did not only secretly but openly supported the Republic of Azerbaijan in keeping its territorial integrity in the Karabakh war. Iran turned neutral after Elchibey became aggressive towards Iran. Also Heydar Aliyev’s presidency could not harmonize the troubled relationship. The main reason was oil politics. Moreover, unlike what the article claims, Iran is not “fairly hostile” towards Azerbaijan nor has it very good relations with Armenia.

Armenia is not important for Iran, but on the other hand, Iran is of extreme importance for Armenia. Iranian tourism offers money to the resource-poor republic and the Armenian economy would have collapsed if Iran had closed down its borders with Armenia, the same way Turkey did. Of course, Turkey did not do Baku a favor. Turkey wanted to pressure Armenia in order that they drop their demands of recognition of the Armenian genocide.

This article suggests that the Iranian statement may be fed by nationalism. This is true but this is not the only reason: of course the Iranian people regard the population of the Azerbaijan republic as part of their own nation; their brethren separated by an imperialist



Russia. Iran can have normal relations with Armenia, but could not and cannot be indifferent towards the Karabakhi refugees. But another reason is that Iran will not recognize Karabakh the same way it cannot recognize Kosovo, Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Although not widespread, Iran does face separatist challenges in its Sunni-inhabited Kurdish and Baluchi areas. It is extremely important for Iran to defend the right of territorial integrity for all states. Still, the article is worth reading as it discusses one of the least spoken and nearly forgotten facts about the Karabakh Conflict and the Iran-Republic of Azerbaijan relations.

Reference

Kučera, J (2013). *Iranian Official: We Helped Azerbaijan In Karabakh War*. Eurasianet.org 8 March 2013, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66664> (accessed 2 May 2013).