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## **IRAN AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

Not at any time or in any era has there been a single war that does not cause various kinds of changes (geopolitical, geo-ethnic, geo-economic, etc.). It is clear that the Karabakh war in 2020 could not be an exception, which at first glance looks like "a match prematurely interrupted by the referee due to weather conditions." Nevertheless, it has already changed the geopolitical status quo of the region. However, the status quo is not the only thing that it has managed to change; changes over time can be much tangible and noticeable. At this stage, we will not focus on the "referees and players", but on the audience, who usually have to draw certain conclusions. As it was expected, the Karabakh war-2020 significantly changed the geopolitical landscape in the region. Along its' northern borders Iran got "more" Turkey (after 100 years of waiting), and "more" Azerbaijan and over 30 million ethnic Azeris, inspired with the victory of their brothers within its borders. Iran has historically been related to the Karabakh issue. For many centuries after the division of Armenia into eastern and western parts and the loss of independence, the Karabakh Armenians were the mainstay of the military security of Persia. Karabakh as a part of Persia had its own relative autonomy, the region was ruled by the Khamsi melikate (i.e., the Pentateuch). In general, the situation in the region remains extremely tense. Imaginary calmness does not guarantee long-term stability. Also, it is difficult to say how long will last the Russian-Turkish "honeymoon" in the South Caucasus. The issue of the status of Karabakh also remains to be problematic, which has been already categorically rejected by Azerbaijan. Iran also cannot live long in doubt. After the United States and Israel, the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem can now become a potential threat to it.

**Keywords:** Iran; Turkey; Armenia; Israel; USA; Russia; South Caucasus; Geopolitics.

From the very beginning of the war, official Tehran took the most neutral position, but at the same time strongly emphasized the need to comply with international norms and principles. Of course, Iran's position was important, since Iran was the only country in the world that, before the conflict resumed, bordered both Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh as well. The position voiced by Iran was not bypassed by the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, who called his neighbor's opinion "fair."

However, quite harsh pro-Azerbaijani statements were made by Tehran: "This armed confrontation is not in our interests: Yerevan is our neighbor, and we are connected with Baku by religion, history and culture. We are worried about the fate of Azerbaijan, and we support its' territorial integrity. "Occupied regions should be released", said the adviser on international affairs of Iran's spiritual leader Ali Akbar Velayati. The statement of the spiritual leader's advisor (of Azerbaijani origin) sounds normal in principle. And if we take into account the fact that up to 30 million ethnic Azerbaijanis live in northern Iran, and the events in Nagorno-Karabakh are far from indifferent to them, this statement can also be assessed as pragmatic. However, the pro-Azerbaijani positions voiced by Tehran does not mean that Iran has taken practical pro-Azerbaijani steps. After the start of hostilities, the Iranian Azerbaijanis demanded to close the Iranian-Armenian border, but there was no reaction from Tehran's side.

As was expected, the Karabakh war-2020 significantly changed the geopolitical landscape in the region. Along its' northern borders Iran got "more" Turkey (After 100 years of waiting), and "more" Azerbaijan and over 30 million ethnic Azeris, animated with the victory of their brothers within its borders. Of course, Turkey has the lion's share in this. Turkey has proven that it knows how to support its brothers not only in words, but also in deeds, which cannot be said about another major regional player – Russia,

which has actually left its strategic ally Armenia, to the mercy of fate. (In any case, this is a common opinion among many people, including in Armenia).

The result was not long in coming, and the first serious incident arose, which took the form of a diplomatic scandal: Speaking in Baku at a military parade dedicated to the end of hostilities in Karabakh, Turkish President R. T. Erdogan cited a poem by Azerbaijani poet Bakhtiyar Vagabzade. As the Iranian media wrote, the Turkish leader read a fragment from the work "Araz-Araz", which is considered the slogan of the separatists who support the idea of uniting the Turkic peoples. The above provoked a serious protest in Tehran, and the Turkish ambassador was summoned to the Foreign Ministry for clarification.

Of course, we are not proving anything, but hypothetically it is quite possible that in the future the region may face much serious contradictions between the Turkish-Azerbaijani union and Iran. If such a conflict does arise, then on the side of the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance we will most likely see Israel, which is literally Iran's number one enemy. The participation of the United States is also possible, although, probably, in a more indirect way.

The Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership counts back many decades. Turkey was the first Islamic state to recognize the State of Israel in 1949. Since then, relations between the two countries have been volatile, although the issue of military cooperation has always been at a high level.

The end of the cold war has put both countries, but first of all Turkey, before new threats and challenges in ensuring their own security. As former Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin noted in 1993, the collapse of the USSR and the resulting vacuum of influence of extra-regional "centers of power" in the Middle East transformed Turkey from a "flank" state into a "front-line" state, facing multiple fronts.<sup>1</sup> Turkish generals played a major role in establishing new close contacts between Ankara and Tel Aviv. The main ideologists of the development of relations with Israel on the Turkish side were Deputy Foreign Minister Onur Oymen and Deputy Chief of the General Staff Cevik Bir. In their opinion, the strategic threats to Turkey's national security are now of a different nature than during the Cold War. And this requires new approaches to ensuring security, one of the main elements of which should be military-political cooperation with Israel. After all, it is the only secular state in the Middle East that adheres to pro-Western positions, Western values and democratic principles.<sup>2</sup>

The first agreement on military cooperation in an atmosphere of complete secrecy was signed back in 1996 in Tel Aviv. For the first time in the history of relations between these countries, it provided for the interaction of the armed forces in the implementation of military training programs, joint land, naval, air force maneuvers, the creation of a joint military-strategic research group, training flights of Turkish aircraft in the Israeli sky, and Israeli aircraft in Turkish, briefing of Turkish pilots, exchange of intelligence information, especially in the field of combating terrorism (in particular, joint monitoring on the borders with Syria, Iran and Iraq). In addition, Israel pledged to help Turkey re-equip and strengthen its borders with these three countries to defend against Kurdish rebels.

Despite the continuing disagreements between the political leaderships of Israel and Turkey on a number of fundamental issues (the status of Jerusalem, attitudes towards the Hamas group), the MOSSAD and the Israeli military intelligence service AMAN maintain close ties with the Turkish intelligence service MIT and the Turkish military. The facts of their close cooperation in Syria are noted, sometimes the MOSSAD shares with the Turkish command information about the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Both, officials and analysts from Turkey and Israel emphasize that the relations between these two countries is not a military alliance in its traditional sense, they do not contain *casus foederis*, i.e. fighting against one side is not a prerequisite for the other side entering the war or fighting. At the same time, they adhere to much similar positions and coordinate the main issues related to security. As noted by Turkish and Israeli researchers, the relationship between Israel and Turkey is a strategic partnership, but at the same time, this strategic partnership serves not only to maintain the balance of power, since each side has the necessary military power to single-handedly ensure its security at the regional level. This is a relationship between two "status quo powers" who do not want cardinal geopolitical changes in the region.<sup>3</sup>

At one time, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai named potential opponents and rivals of the Israeli-Turkish alliance by name: "If countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria think that they can use their forces

<sup>1</sup> Sezer, D. B. (1994). Turkey's Political and Security Interests in the New Geostrategic Environment of the Expanded Middle East. *Stimson Center, Occasional Paper*, Washington, July, 19, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Hickok, M. R. (2000). Hegemon Rising: The Gap Between Turkish Strategy and Military Modernization. *Parameters. The US Army War College Quarterly, Summer*, 106-111.

<sup>3</sup> Bir, Ç., Sherman, M. (2002). Formula for Stability: Turkey Plus Israel. *Middle East Quarterly, Fall*, 29.

against Turkey, then they should keep united forces. With the support of these forces, no one in the region can do anything with Turkey. I discussed the strategic situation with US Secretary of Defense W. Cohen. We discussed these same strategic issues with Secretary of State Albright and the US Chief of the General Staff. We are able to jointly confront any threat in this region ...<sup>1</sup>"

It should be noted that both the Israelis and the Turks indicate that in military terms, the main goal of their strategic partnership is not in joint hostilities, but in preventing military aggression against each of these countries.

Israeli-Azerbaijani relations, which have reached their highest level in recent years, look no less impressive. Official Baku has always used relations with Israel to demonstrate its uniqueness among other Muslim nations, including those that, like Azerbaijan, are secular. These relationships, sometimes called special relationships or even alliances, are in a sense culturally based. Tens of thousands of Jews have been living in Azerbaijan since ancient times. Almost the same number of citizens of Jewish-Azerbaijani origin live in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Military-technical cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan allowed Baku to re-equip the Azerbaijani army with advanced weapons and military equipment. Over the past five years, Israel has provided Azerbaijan with 43% of the supply of new weapons. In response, Baku supplied Tel Aviv with 40% of the oil consumed by the Israelis.

During the visit of Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu to Baku in December 2016, the parties signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of defense and security. It was agreed that Israeli military specialists and MOSSAD (Israeli political intelligence) personnel would stay in Baku on a permanent basis.

From that moment on, Israeli-Azerbaijani military-technical cooperation began to gain momentum. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) occupy the first place among Israeli military supplies to Baku. Over the past 12 years, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces have been almost completely equipped with Israeli UAVs, and only in the last year the situation began to change somewhat towards the diversification of foreign sources of drones. On the eve of the next war for Karabakh, Azerbaijan received from Turkey a batch of Bayraktar TB2 UAVs and Turkish-made STM Kargu multicopters.

The Azerbaijani army is also armed with Israeli assault rifles "Tavor TAR-2", submachine guns "Uzi", light machine guns "Negev", anti-tank missile systems (ATGM) "Spike" and "LAHAT", operational-tactical missile systems "LORA", multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) "Lynx", 155-mm wheeled self-propelled artillery units (ACS) "ATMOS-2000", 120-mm self-propelled mortars "Cardom" and "Spear Mk2 – 47".

Israel has delivered to Azerbaijan a number of modern radars, air defense missile systems "Barak-8", border boats and corvettes. The Israeli company Elbit has modernized Russian-made Azerbaijani T-72 and T-55 tanks, as well as BMP-2. Tel Aviv's cooperation with Baku in this area has a wider range and is not limited to the above-mentioned weapons.

Naturally, such a high degree of military cooperation with Israel could not but affect the Karabakh war. Additionally, there is an opinion that the Israeli leadership has long dreamed of using Azerbaijani territory for conducting its own reconnaissance and sabotage operations against Iran. Naturally, based on the data presented, such an opinion really has a right to exist. By the way, the MOSSAD has already created in Azerbaijan an electronic station for monitoring military facilities in Iran.

In conclusion, we can say that the situation in the region remains extremely tense. Imaginary calmness does not guarantee long-term stability. Also, it is difficult to say how long will last the Russian-Turkish "honeymoon" in the South Caucasus. The issue of the status of Karabakh also remains to be problematic, which has been already categorically rejected by Azerbaijan. Iran also cannot live long in doubt. After the United States and Israel, the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem can now become a potential threat to it.

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