

Flare-Up in Nagorno-Karabakh: The Iranian Dimension

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Brief Analysis

New hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan are forcing Tehran to balance domestic demographic concerns and its desire to expand military ties with Yerevan.

Because it shares borders and generally good relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran has a great interest in seeing the two countries defuse their latest surge in hostilities over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region and return to the status quo. At present, however, Tehran seems too preoccupied with other issues and too powerless to influence the conflict. Its Foreign Ministry has long lacked the skills required to mediate such disputes—its last ceasefire effort was in 1992, and that agreement was dead in the water from the moment it was signed. Likewise, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is not eager to get involved militarily, at least for now. The question, then, is how Iran will react if the hostilities persist—or if they open new opportunities to further its interests.

For example, Tehran worries that if Azerbaijan were to recapture large swaths of Nagorno-Karabakh with active support from Turkey, the situation could foment serious dissent among those Iranian Azeris who harbor a strong sense of ethnic identity or separatist views. Azeri-majority areas in northwest Iran have already seen protests and calls for closing the Norduz border crossing with Armenia, which would bar shipments of goods and the passage of Russian military trucks. In response, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's local representatives issued a rare joint statement supporting Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, a clear attempt to defuse Azeri unease at home. Similarly, the Iranian Foreign Ministry's October 5 statement calling for an immediate ceasefire also emphasized the importance of "respect for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity," urging Armenia to withdraw from "occupied territories of Azerbaijan" without specifically naming Nagorno-Karabakh. (Yerevan's forces also control

parts of Azerbaijan that lie between the breakaway region and Armenia's borders.)

Such statements align with Iran's growing eagerness to enhance its strategic relations with Baku, not least because the two countries share more than 200 kilometers of maritime boundaries in the hydrocarbon-rich Caspian Sea that need to be delimited. In February 2018, Iranian defense minister Amir Hatami visited Azerbaijan to discuss closer cooperation between their defense industries. A year later, the chiefs of each country's armed forces exchanged visits to further strengthen those ties, and February 2020 saw the second meeting of their joint military commission. The two militaries have also explored closer training ties and student exchanges, in addition to conducting occasional joint naval drills off the shores of the Caspian, where both of Iran's naval academies reside. Moreover, Iran does not hide its intent to become a major arms supplier to Baku—in September 2018, it began participating in the Azerbaijan International Defence Exhibition (ADEX). The lifting of UN arms restrictions on October 18 **will open additional opportunities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-the-arms-ban-ends-implications-for-irans-military-capabilities>)** to deepen all of these military ties.

At the same time, however, Tehran has occasionally felt compelled to deviate from its traditionally good relations with Azerbaijan in order to criticize the country's growing military and security ties with Israel. It has even indirectly accused Baku of allowing Israeli drones to spy on nuclear facilities deep inside Iran. In 2014, the IRGC claimed to shoot down one such unmanned aerial vehicle near the Natanz enrichment plant almost 600 kilometers from the Azerbaijan border—though images released by the Corps indicated that the UAV was in fact an Iranian model.

Tehran's claims aside, Azerbaijan is indisputably one of the biggest buyers of Israeli weapons, including reconnaissance drones, loitering munitions (i.e., drones armed with warheads), antitank and anti-aircraft missiles, artillery rockets, and precision-guided semi-ballistic missiles with ranges up to 400 kilometers. The loitering munitions and LORA, EXTRA, and Lynx ballistic missiles have been extensively and effectively used in the latest hostilities.

As for the conflict's other main combatant, Iran's military ties with Armenia are more low key but enjoy a longer history. For example, Tehran has long used Armenian front companies to bypass international sanctions on arms and aviation transfers. In 2008, the United States accused at least one Armenian firm with close ties to the political elite in Yerevan of buying Russian arms for Iran. The suspected purchase occurred in 2003, and the arms eventually turned up in the hands of Shia militias fighting U.S. forces in Iraq.

More recently, former Armenian defense minister Vigen Sargsyan led a high-ranking mission to Tehran in February 2017 to discuss military ties. And in July 2020, Iran's ambassador in Yerevan further pursued the subject in a meeting with current defense minister David Tonoyan.

POTENTIAL MILITARY INVOLVEMENT?

If Russia does not intervene in the conflict, the continuing effectiveness of Turkish and Israeli systems may gradually tip the balance toward Azerbaijan, perhaps helping Baku's forces seize enough territory in the south and north to cut Nagorno-Karabakh off from Armenia. Despite its interest in preventing such an imbalance, Iran is highly unlikely to supply Armenia with any significant weapons systems **such as ballistic missiles (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-flaunts-new-missile-and-jet-engine-technology>)**. Yet it may allow Russian weapons to reach Armenia if Moscow decides to send them, most likely by air. And in the longer term, Iran might help Armenia develop its own missile and drone industries.

The Nagorno-Karabakh dispute has been no stranger to drone activities over the past decade, but the deadly exchanges seen in the latest eruption are reinforcing the efficacy of UAV warfare and precision weaponry. Azerbaijan relies mostly on Israel and Turkey for its drone fleet, but Armenia's small UAV industry could benefit from Iran's extensive experience in that field. Nagorno-Karabakh's own forces acquired Iranian Shahed-123 drones

years ago, as seen during a 2011 military parade in Stepanakert. This system is the same type that the IRGC has used in recent years for surveillance missions in Afghanistan and Syria; the IRGC Navy has also fielded an armed version.

Even so, Iran is well aware of the major disparity between its Azeri and Armenian communities, which constitute 16-24 percent and 0.2 percent of the country's population, respectively. For this reason, and assuming the conflict persists, Iran's future military engagement with Armenia will most likely be covert, perhaps with IRGC-Qods Force advisors helping the country organize its planned "auxiliary militia" using the experience they gained in Iraq and Syria. Finally, the performance of Israeli loitering drones and guided ballistic missiles in Nagorno-Karabakh is giving Iran definitive evidence of their potency, raising the specter of further proliferation in the region.

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