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THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH: CAN IRAN SUCCEED WHERE 'THE MINSK GROUP' FAILED?

Timur Saitov and Gallia Lindenstrauss*

On July 6, 2013, Iranian newspapers reported that Iranian President-elect Hassan Rohani announced that he intends to work towards expanding his country's ties with Azerbaijan (Tehran Times). This announcement was made in response to a congratulatory message received from Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Rohani after his victory in the June 14 election. Approximately two months previously, in May 2013, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad met Sheikh-ul-Islam Haji Allahshukur Pashazadeh, the Grand Mufti of the Caucasus in Azerbaijan. The outgoing president of Iran made a conspicuous effort to emphasize the close relationship and brotherhood prevailing between the countries, and his desire to expand cooperation between them. The declarations are of particular interest because of the tension that has prevailed between the two countries during the past several years because of the Islamic Republic's support of the Armenian position in the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region since the 1990s (Press TV, 18 May 2013). Several weeks previously, the Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani met with Azerbaijan's National Security Council Secretary, Ramiz Mehdiyev, and stressed the willingness of Tehran to serve as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan to help resolve the conflict (Press TV, 29 April 2013). Considering Iran's weak international position and the consequences of the economic sanctions, Tehran's efforts to move closer to Baku may be evidence of Iran's intention to strengthen its position in the region, *inter alia,* by mediating in this major Caucasian conflict. Despite the tension between Iran and Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijanis did not reject Iran's offer to mediate, and expressed openness to any proposal that might return the territories their country lost during the war in the 1990s (Nagorno-Karabakh and additional large territory surrounding that region).

The prolonged conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has ramifications for all neighboring countries, and especially Russia, Iran and Turkey. The question of this region's future status is a clear reflection of the contradiction between

two principles of international law: self-determination and territorial integrity. The Armenian majority in this region would like to succeed from Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan protests losing control over approximately 14% of the territory it possessed during Soviet times. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is the longest running conflict in the post-Soviet sphere and it has strategic importance for the Islamic Republic, particularly with regards to its relationship with Russia and the West. In addition, considering the varied ethnic composition of Iran and the percentage of Azeris under Iranian rule (estimates range between 20%-25% of the population), Tehran has an interest in maintaining stability along its borders, particularly that with Azerbaijan, lest any unrest spread across the border into Iranian territory. Furthermore, Iran is concerned about any secessionist intentions of its Azeri population and is making an effort to prevent any nascent thoughts of a "Greater Azerbaijan."

For the last 21 years, 'the Minsk Group', which functions under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), has managed the peace process to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The group is co-chaired by Russia, the United States and France. The only significant achievement that can be attributed to this forum is the cease-fire between the sides that was signed in May 1994. Ongoing monitoring along the cease-fire line by representatives of the group and periodic declarations about efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully through the current framework have become a ceremonial routine that is not promoting any resolution of the conflict. Iran is aware of the sensitivities, and senior Iranian officials have emphasized more than once that conflicts of this type should be resolved in the regional context. Iran stresses the need to do without external mediators and concentrate on those from the region, as part of its effort to push the United States, and any other player it considers a representative the West, out of the region. When Larijani related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2011, he stressed the inefficiency of the Minsk Group and declared that experience has taught that the intervention of foreign powers prolongs the duration of regional conflicts, meaning that conflicts should be resolved in a regional context because countries in the same region understand each other better (Trend, 28 June 2011).

As time goes on, solution to the conflict seems ever more complex. For example, the Armenian authorities are sending Armenian refugees fleeing from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh, a policy that the Azerbaijanis oppose (Today's Zaman, 10 February 2013). In addition, Armenia's intention to launch direct flights from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia's capital Yerevan does not contribute to reducing tension between the sides, since this appears to be an effort to deepen Armenian control of the region and to "normalize" it (Trend, 1 April 2013). Occasional provocations on both sides of the border occur from time to time and keep the issue on the agenda in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan, which does not see any progress towards resolution of the conflict, is increasingly arming itself, and has declared that if a solution is not found by diplomatic means, it will use military means to reclaim its territory. Despite Armenia's weakness and the fact that it is under an almost complete economic-transportation blockade (only Iran and to a lesser extent Georgia allow it access to the region and beyond), the existence of Russian bases in the country as well as the international influence of Armenian diaspora continue to fan the flames of conflict surrounding the control of the region.

The ongoing paralysis with regards to the conflict in the Caucasus has led a variety of observers to cast doubt on the ability of the Minsk Group to find a solution. More than once proposals have been voiced to change the composition of the group or to replace it with other mediators. At different times, Turkey, Iran, Belarus, Ukraine, the Czech Republic and other countries have been proposed as possible candidates for mediating the conflict. Ukraine is also the current chair of the OSCE and its representative has stressed that it will make every effort possible to resolve the conflict (Trend, 8 May 2013). Therefore, it would seem that the Azerbaijani government has high expectations from Ukraine and it expects that, as chair of the organization, it will not hesitate to propose the dissolution of the Minsk Group, and that even simply making that proposal will help in finding a solution. Azerbaijan explicitly blames the OSCE for taking a pro-Armenian stance regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. It criticizes the composition of the Minsk Group's chairmanship. France has a strong Armenian lobby that influences its position, while Russia takes advantage of the situation in Armenia to advance its interests in the region and maintain its influence in the Caucasus. It was because of Azerbaijani demand that the United States was included in the joint chairmanship of the group (even though the Azerbaijanis also have their concerns with regard to the US because of the strong Armenian lobby there).

Iran, like others, has doubts about the capability of the Minsk Group to mediate the conflict. In addition to its concern about possible unrest among the Azeri minority within its borders, as noted above, Iran is also worried that the intervention of foreign powers in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will bring them closer to its borders. Moreover, considering the progress Iran is making in its nuclear development program and the possibility that the US or Israel will attack it, events in Azerbaijan take on additional strategic importance. The continuation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one reason for the deepening relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel in recent years. Despite the desire Iran has expressed to play a central role in resolving the conflict, even Armenia which is quite dependent on Iran, has declared its loyalty to the existing mediation framework of the Minsk Group. Indeed it is Azerbaijan that is relatively open to the Iranian proposal, both because it believes that Iran has the ability to influence Armenia and because Azerbaijan is worried about possible Iranian interference in its energy exports, on which Azerbaijani economy is almost entirely dependent. Therefore, despite mutual mistrust, there is a (theoretical) possibility for a "package deal" between Iran and Azerbaijan that will include Iranian pressure on Armenia regarding Nagorno-Karabakh.

In addition to Iran, Turkey periodically offers itself as a mediator between the sides. In late 2012, it presented a practical proposal to the Armenians, in order to ease the transportation embargo the country faces because its borders are blocked by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Armenia is also isolated because of Turkish and Azerbaijani objections to its participation in regional projects such as those in the energy field. Against this background, the Turkish proposal included establishing regional transportation corridors connecting Europe and Asia that will pass through Armenia, in return for withdrawal from the occupied areas in Azerbaijan and compliance with additional principles presented by the Minsk Group in 2009 (Hurriyet Daily News, 23 February 2013). To date, Armenia has not responded to the Turkish proposal. Turkey's refusal to

acknowledge the Armenian genocide and its support of Azerbaijan's massive arming casts a dark shadow on Ankara's attempts to mediate between the parties. Furthermore, the initiative to establish a transportation route from Europe to Asia via Armenia benefits Turkey's ambitions in the region, so Ankara's proposal was perceived more as an attempt to realize the Turkish vision for greater influence in Central Asia than a gesture to Armenia.

Therefore the question remains, why despite the lack of results in the process for resolving this conflict have no changes been made in the operating framework of the Minsk Group over the years? In this context, the efficiency of the group may be less important than the complex geopolitical issues and strategic location of the conflict. None of the countries that are actively involved in the region has an interest in a premature solution since the continuation of the conflict (particularly when it is at low intensity) has certain advantages for them. On this basis it could be claimed that without a genuine change in the strategic environment of the region, it will remain very difficult to find a solution to the conflict regardless of the framework. Still, Iran's motivation to distance Azerbaijan from the West and to fracture its cooperation with Israel on one hand, and Azerbaijan's wish to see the return of its occupied territories as well as guaranteeing the uninterrupted flow of its energy exports on the other hand, could lead to some level of compromise between Iran and Azerbaijan, and Iranian pressure on Armenia that could possibly be the lever that leads to a breakthrough■

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*__Timur Saitov__ is an MA student in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University and an intern at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University. **Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss** is a research associate at INSS.

The Alliance Center for Iranian Studies (ACIS)

Tel Aviv University, Ramat-Aviv 61390, Tel Aviv P.O.B. 39040, Israel

Email: IranCen@post.tau.ac.il , Phone: +972-3-640-9510

Fax: +972-3-640-6665

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