
KARABAKH WAR AN INCREASINGLY SERIOUS POLICY CHALLENGE FOR TEHRAN

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by Paul Goble

Though Iran professes neutrality in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, calls for an immediate ceasefire, and offers to mediate between the warring sides (see EDM, October 21), Tehran's political elite is sharply split on how to respond to the fighting in the South Caucasus. Their diverging approaches are driven by both foreign and domestic considerations. On the one hand, Iran is deeply worried about the growing influence of Turkey and Israel, two of its traditional foes in the region. And on the other hand, it is concerned that Azerbaijan's advance may lead some of the around 20 million ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran to shift their loyalties away from Tehran and toward Baku. For now, this is an unlikely development to be sure. But it is one that, nonetheless, inspires fear within the Iranian government and lies behind much of what the Islamic Republic has been doing amidst the fighting on its northwestern border.

Officially, Nikita Smagin of the Moscow-based Russian Council of International Affairs writes, Tehran recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan; but in reality, each new sharpening of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict shows that Iran wants only one thing: the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh not enter a sharper phase and thus pull in outside powers, including, quite possibly, itself (Profile.ru, October 28). The Iranian government is not ready to choose sides, the expert says; but it finds itself pushed and pulled in various directions, with these motivations increasingly exacerbated by domestic concerns.

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