



The Caspian

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Abstract

An analysis of what may become the next flash point in the Middle East, this article focuses not only on the Islamic Republic of Iran and its complex relationships with its neighbors in the Caspian Sea Basin but on its dealings (past and present) with Russia, which seeks to block Iran's ambitions in the area.

Convinced that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is headed for a military confrontation with the United States, IRI President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has devised a strategy of building a number of regional alliances to “resist the American Great Satan.” He has paid three visits to South America in two years to unveil investment plans of more than 10 billion dollars for a range of projects, including the manufacturing of military hardware, in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Bolivia, countries where the governments share IRI’s anti-American ideology. He has also cemented IRI’s alliance with Syria and a dozen or more radical Islamist groups in the region, including the Lebanese branch of Hezbollah (Party of God) and Hamas, the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Last year Ahmadinejad also succeeded in getting an invitation from the Shanghai Group to its annual summit to press IRI’s demand for full membership. The group brings together Russia, China, Kazakhstan, and the four Central Asian republics in a common strategy against Islamist terrorism. Ahmadinejad, however, hopes to transform the loose alliance into a more organized bloc to “resist American hegemonist ambitions.”

The IRI leader’s strategy has also targeted the Persian Gulf, where a massive American military presence represents a permanent threat to his regional ambitions. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad hopes that he can keep the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in check with a mixture of propaganda and military threat. His calculation is that the IRI’s radical anti-Israeli posture will ensure the sympathy of the so-called Arab street, which, in turn, would force the petro-monarchies to resist American pressures to join any scheme to contain, let alone roll back, the Khomeinist revolution.

Ahmadinejad is also convinced that the IRI would emerge as the dominant power in both Afghanistan and Iraq where, he believes, the United States will begin to wrap up its presence quickly once the Bush presidency ends in 2009. As for Turkey, Ahmadinejad believes that joint opposition to the emergence of Kurdish mini-states in northern Iraq would be sufficient to bring Ankara and Tehran together for the near future. In fact, last September Turkey and Iran signed a security agreement and set up a joint border monitoring commission with the express aim of curbing the Kurds. Since then the two neighbors have opened their territory to each other’s military in hot pursuit of secessionist Kurdish groups operating from bases in Iraq. Another goal of Ahmadinejad’s current strategy is to secure the leadership of the nonaligned movement (NAM), the loose and now largely moribund grouping of more than 100 nations brought together by various shades of anti-Americanism. Ahmadinejad has proposed to host the next NAM summit in Tehran with the implicit hope of securing its presidency for

himself. (The summit is expected to be held in 2009, when Ahmadinejad will be seeking a second four-year term as president of the IRI.)

There is one area, however, where his strategy has run into trouble: the Caspian Basin. Situated to the north of Iran, the Caspian Sea is the world's largest body of inland water, covering an area of 143,244 square miles and a depth of 3,363 feet. Four of Iran's 30 provinces—Ardebil, Gilan, Mazandaran, and Golestan—have a total of 422 miles of coastline on the Caspian. Four of Iran's 15 neighbors—Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—also have coastlines on the Caspian Sea, and Georgia, Armenia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan can also be regarded as part of the broader Caspian Basin region. Taken together, the five countries with coastlines on the Caspian Sea account for almost 23 percent of the world's known oil reserves. (This includes Iran's own reserves, amounting to almost 11 percent of the global total.) Were the IRI to succeed in establishing a leadership position in the region, it would be in a better position to play the "oil card" in any putative conflict with the United States and its allies. So far, however, Ahmadinejad's efforts to gain a leadership position in the Caspian Basin have produced little result.

The tension that lies in the background of the IRI's relations with its neighbors in the Caspian came to the fore last June when Tehran hosted a conference of the region's foreign ministers. It was trumpeted as a major diplomatic coup for President Ahmadinejad's strategy of building a series of regional alliances against the "Great Satan" and its allies. The conference ended in Tehran in almost total failure. Worse still from the participants' perspective, the gathering provided an occasion for some sharp exchanges between Manuchehr Motakki, the Islamic Republic's foreign minister, and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilmar Muhammad-Yarov.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1992, the geostrategic importance of the

Caspian has increased dramatically. As already noted, the sea and its littoral contain significant oil reserves plus huge reserves of natural gas. Once a quiet backwater shared by Russia and Iran and known mainly for its caviar-bearing sturgeon fish, the Caspian has become a coveted prize in the undeclared but no less intense three-cornered race for influence pitting Russia, the Western powers, and China against one another. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, made this clear at the Tehran conference by reminding everyone that his country was the only one of the five littoral states to have the military wherewithal to defend it against "the greed and ambitions of hostile outsiders," a coded reference to both the United States and China.

The Islamic Republic had hoped that the conference would do three things: Set a date for a summit of the littoral states, conduct a preliminary debate on an Iranian proposal to fix the legal status of the Caspian, and issue an unequivocal declaration of support for Tehran's controversial nuclear program. None of that happened.

No date was fixed for the summit, primarily because Russian President Vladimir Putin is reluctant to visit Tehran and meet Ahmadinejad. Having resisted Iranian pressure to visit Tehran for the past eight years, Putin is even less inclined to do so now that Ahmadinejad is in charge. The conference took note of the Iranian proposals but decided to postpone debating them until an unspecified date. There was also no unqualified support for the Islamic Republic on the nuclear issue that has led it into a direct clash with the United Nations Security Council. The participants expressed support for Iran's right to develop a nuclear industry for peaceful purposes but insisted that it abide by the two resolutions that the Council had already passed on the subject.

Before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Iran and Russia shared the Caspian under a treaty signed in the nineteenth century. The treaty proscribed Iran's military presence

in the Caspian and stipulated that the sea's marine resources be exploited exclusively by Russia, which would give Iran a share. A subsequent treaty, signed in 1921, gave the Soviet Union the right to land troops in Iran if and when Moscow decided that it faced a threat from Iranian territory. In 1952 the Iranian parliament nationalized the Caspian fisheries, ending the Russian monopoly over caviar production. Efforts by the Soviet government to persuade Iran to grant to the Soviet Union oil exploration concessions in the Caspian were vetoed by the parliament despite the fact that the outgoing government of Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam had reached an agreement in principle on the subject in talks with Stalin. In 1979 IRI Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi announced the abrogation of all of Iran's treaties with Russia and the Soviet Union concerning the Caspian. Moscow, however, declared the move illegal, insisting that the treaties remained valid.

With the end of the Soviet Union, three new littoral states appeared on the map: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. These newcomers did not recognize the Russo-Iranian treaties, triggering a debate on the future status of the Caspian.

Kazakhstan, which has the largest coastline on the Caspian, wants the sea to be divided into five sectors in accordance with the length of the coastline of the littoral states. Under such a scheme Iran would end up with only 10 percent of the inland sea. Russia endorses the Kazakh formula as far as the Caspian's underwater resources are concerned but recommends that the sea be treated as a single unit in other domains such as navigation, environmental protection, and tourism.

The Islamic Republic's proposal is to treat the Caspian as a single unit jointly managed, developed, and defended by the five littoral states. If accepted, the proposal would give Iran 20 percent of the Caspian, twice that warranted by its coastline.

The two remaining littoral states, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, have not issued clear positions. Nevertheless, both have opposed the Iranian proposals and shaped their policies on the assumption that the Caspian will be divided into five segments according to the length of each state's coastline.

With the demise of Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's president for life, Ashgabat is likely to change its traditional policy of keeping Tehran sweet. The new Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow has indicated his desire to open the reclusive regime and seek closer commercial and political ties with both Europe and the United States. One of President Berdimuhamedow's moves was to freeze an agreement to grant the IRI a no-contest contract on natural gas exploration and production in the Caspian. The Islamic Republic has watched with a mixture of envy and apprehension as the major American and European oil companies have arrived in the region to help develop the Caspian's oil and gas resources. Western investment since 1993 is estimated at around \$10 billion. Not a single cent has gone to Iran. Of the dozen or so oil and gas pipelines planned to link the Caspian resources to world markets, not one will pass through Iranian territory despite the fact that it represents the shortest route to the open seas.

According to sources in Tehran, the clash between Yar-Muhammadov, the Azerbaijani minister, and Mottaki concerned two issues. The first was the Russian suggestion, first raised during the G-8 summit in Germany last May, to build an antimissile shield in Azerbaijan, directly designating the Islamic Republic as the key threat to both Europe and Russia. The second cause of the clash was Baku's claim that Tehran is creating a network of "terrorist sleeper cells" in Talesh, a region of Azerbaijan bordering Iran and the Caspian. The irony is that Talesh has a Sunni Muslim majority, whereas Shiite Muslims form a majority in the rest of Azerbaijan. Iran as a predominantly Shiite Muslim nation might have been expected

to back its Shiite coreligionists in Azerbaijan. Baku is concerned that Tehran might be trying to promote secessionism in Talesh in the hope of creating a client ministate for itself on the Caspian. Tehran, however, claims that its support for Taleshi particularism, not to say outright secessionism, is a response to Baku's policy of sheltering Iranian Azeri secessionists.

These groups, often led by anti-IRI exiles, including some who reside in the United States, have already held a number of conferences in Baku, demanding that the four Iranian provinces of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardebil, and Zanjan be detached from the IRI and turned into an independent state where Azeri speakers are the majority. (The four provinces account for some 16 million people, almost a quarter of IRI's total population.) Another Baku-backed group, led by former Azerbaijan President Abulfazl Ilchibey, campaigns for a united Azerbaijan by attaching the four Iranian provinces to the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Ilchibey and his group are believed to enjoy some support from the Turkish military and its pan-Turkist political allies.

The root cause of uneasy relations between Tehran and Baku, however, must be sought in the Islamic Republic's support for Armenia in the conflict over the enclave known as Nagorno-Karabagh. The tiny enclave, sandwiched between Iran and what was then Soviet Azerbaijan, has an ethnic Armenian majority. Nevertheless, when Stalin gave his stamp of approval to the final shape of the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, Nagorno-Karabagh (known to Armenians as Arthakh) was attached to Azerbaijan rather than neighboring Armenia. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Armenian nationalists, led by the protofascist Dashnak party, invaded the enclave and chased away Baku's administrative and police personnel. In what was an early example of "ethnic cleansing," they also expelled the ethnic Azeri minority of the enclave, accounting for almost 300,000 people.

Throughout the crisis, the IRI, rather than support Shiite Muslim Azeris, threw its support behind Christian Armenians. The reason was that Tehran saw the new regime in Baku not as Shiite kith and kin but as a potential enemy because of the latter's desire to forge close ties with Turkey, Israel, and the United States. Over the years the IRI has forged a triple alliance with Russia and Armenia to block what it sees as American inroads in the Transcaucasus. The IRI's support is crucial for the survival of landlocked Armenia as a nation-state. Armenia also counts on the IRI's support for its de facto annexation of Nagorno-Karabagh, especially when Armenia is subject to a virtual quarantine by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The IRI has not refrained from using force whenever it has judged that Baku has stepped beyond certain redlines. On at least two occasions in 2001 and 2002, the IRI's navy intervened to dismantle oil installations in Azerbaijani waters in the Caspian with the claim that Iran's waters had been violated. In every case Azerbaijan backed down after it became clear that its Western allies, including the United States, were not prepared to help it resist Iranian pressure.

The IRI's relations with Turkmenistan have often been portrayed as ideal. The reason is that the Niyazov regime, the last Soviet-style despotic outfit in the region, needed the IRI's support in countering Western pressure on such issues as human rights and democratization. Niyazov won kudos in Tehran by handing over to the IRI a number of ethnic Turkmen Iranians who had fled to Ashgabat after the failure of an attempt to foment a revolt in northeastern Iran in 1980–1981. The strip of Iranian land that borders Turkmenistan along the Atrak River is mainly populated by some 2.2 million ethnic Turkmen, some of whom have always dreamed of attaching their territory to that of Turkmenistan to the north to create a Greater Turkmen Republic. As Sunni Muslims who speak their own distinctive languages, a member of the Altaic family of languages, the Turkmen are

also distinguishable from the rest of Iranians because of the color of their skin, their slanted eyes, and Asian physical features.

Niyazov, whose almost exclusive interest was the perpetuation of his cult of personality, was prepared to sacrifice his Turkmen kith and kin across the border in order not to antagonize the mullahs of Tehran. He also ignored the fact that the IRI changed the course of the Atrak border river, turning large chunks of Turkmen territory into desert. Niyazov also supplied cut-price natural gas to one of the IRI's largest power plants on the Caspian. In 2005 the IRI was rated as Turkmenistan's number-one trading partner, ahead of China and South Korea.

If President Berdimuhamedow seeks a more balanced foreign policy, as expected, the IRI's privileged position in Turkmenistan would be eroded. The new Turkmen leader is also expected to play a more positive role in Afghanistan by distancing himself from Tehran's strategy of playing various Afghan ethnic groups against one another. (Turkmenistan is a neighbor of Afghanistan and is regarded with sympathy by the ethnic Afghan-Turkmen known as the Char-Aymaq.)

For its part, Russia, another of Iran's neighbors on the Caspian, will do all it can to prevent rapprochement between the IRI and the United States. Putin makes no secret of his belief that keeping the United States out of Iran is a key goal of his regional policy. Russia has agreed to complete the building of the IRI's first and so far only nuclear power plant at Hellieh on the Persian Gulf. It has also used its diplomatic weight in the United Nations to soften sanctions imposed on the IRI. The Russian assumption is that if the IRI were to try something really evil in the region, the United States or Israel would deal with it. In the meantime, Putin believes that there is no reason why Russia should pressure the IRI to abandon its anti-American strategy.

At the same time, however, Moscow does not want Tehran to develop regional ambitions or play the religious card to foment trouble among

Muslims who account for some 18 percent of Russia's population or to gain influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russia was instrumental in getting Ahmadinejad invited to the summit of the Shanghai Group. But it has also vetoed the IRI's demand for full and permanent membership of the group. More important as far as the subject of this article is concerned, Russia has emerged as the key power anxious to contain the IRI in the Caspian Basin.

The root cause of the Islamic Republic's failure to break out of its diplomatic and political isolation is its insistence on pursuing a global strategy based almost entirely on ideological illusions rather than national interests. Since 1979, the Khomeinist regime, by exporting its revolution, has failed to win its neighbors' acceptance. At the same time it has refused to become like its neighbors by accepting the rules of the new postcold war global system. The IRI's ambition to become a regional "superpower" and lead a new Islamist bloc of nations to challenge what it sees as a "Crusader-Zionist" world system has created a great deal of tension in the Caspian Basin region, tension that has already provoked a number of conflicts and could, given certain circumstances, lead to a series of wars.

What is surprising is that the Bush administration, now in its final phase, has failed to develop a counterstrategy for the Caspian Basin. As a result, the issue is likely to force its way onto the foreign policy agenda of the next administration in Washington in unexpected ways. With all eyes fixed on the Persian Gulf, the possibility that the Caspian may be the future flash point in the region has not received the attention it deserves.

About the Author

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