



## What if Iran is Nevertheless Attacked? And What Are the Potential Roles of the Regional Players?

By *Levon Urumyan*

26 July, 2012

This question disturbs Iran and especially its neighbors for several months already. The magnitude of the issue at some point even eclipsed the crackdown in Syria. Now, whether the attack on Iran is inevitable is a matter of harsh debate. If attacked, will Iran survive or not, is a matter of an even harsher debate. Indeed, given the fact that Iran is far more powerful than Libya or Iraq were before their ruling regimes were toppled, and that Iran apparently has been developing its military industrial complex ever since to counter such a scenario, it represents quite a “tough cookie.” As a matter of fact, a far tougher one than it may seem from the first glance. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the situation deteriorates to the point of war.

For decades Iran, the only Shiite Muslim state in the world, has strived to reach the status of ultimate Islamic power of the Middle East. In this respect it always has faced competition from Sunni Muslim Turkey and Saudi Arabia. However, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran is pretty much on its own, while Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel enjoy the patronage of a superpower – the United States. Since then, the Arab world has become a battle ground between the Shiite and Sunni Muslim forces. Moreover, an entire plethora of policies in the form of sanctions have been aimed at the isolation and weakening of Iran. Naturally, such a state of the affairs hampers Iran’s regional ambitions. Moreover, as the “ring” has been tightening around Iran, in Tehran they have been monitoring the geo-political developments in the region. What is more, the Ayatollahs never suffered from a lack of memory: they remember well what happened to Libya and its leader after the country voluntarily abandoned its nuclear program decades ago. They clearly saw that the regime change in Libya was actively patroned by the West. They see how the West together with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and a group of Arab states of Persian Gulf region openly and one-sidedly support the Syrian anti-government forces among which, as it appeared, are Al-Qaeda led terrorists.

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Published by  
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Development**

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Based on this, it is not irrational to assume that Iran may strive to obtain nuclear weapons to avoid the tragic fate of Libya and Iraq and establish itself as a regional superpower. At the same time, it must be noted that for Israel it is a matter of life and death whether or not Iran obtains nuclear weapons because Iran has been openly supporting extremist/terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah that operate against Israel. Thus, if Iran gets its hands on nuclear bomb, there is no guarantee that it will not transfer it to Hezbollah and others that seek the destruction of Israel. Worse, Iran publicly has been consistently repeating on the highest official level that the state of Israel literally should be wiped out from the face of the earth.

For the sake of objectivity, it must be noticed that although there is still not a single solid evidence that Iran possesses or really develops weapons of mass destruction, still, the Iranian nuclear program raises legitimate questions. The international community has the right to demand greater openness from the Iranian ruling elite concerning the country’s nuclear program. In either case, it is absolutely against the interests of all the major players of the international community – including Russia and China – that Iran develops or comes close to the development of nuclear weapons, since such a development will completely ruin the geo-strategic balance in the region. As a result, all of Iran’s neighbors may strive to obtain nuclear weapons as well for the sake of restoring the balance. This unavoidably will spill into a total nuclearization of the regions of

Middle East and North Africa, and, why not, even Central Asia.

Meanwhile, there is an expert opinion voiced by George Friedman – a well known American political scientist and author, also, the founder, chief intelligence officer, financial overseer, and chief executive officer of an authoritative and internationally recognized private intelligence corporation Stratfor – that Iran’s nuclear program is not aimed at creating actual nuclear weapons but is a potent weapon of the country’s foreign policy. Moreover, the expert maintains that Tehran apparently is not even trying to create nuclear weapons, and may even follow North Korea’s example and never actually develop such weapons. Possessing a nuclear program, however, is a different matter. Iran knows that developing and possessing real nuclear weapons would put the country into unacceptable risk: even Moscow and Beijing will not tolerate this. For that reason, Iran exploits its nuclear program as leverage: it clearly draws the international attention and causes the West – the U.S. in particular – to take Iran as a serious regional key player and a factor in the international politics with all the following implications. Not to mention that nuclear program may potentially act as a bargaining tip, that is, an instrument of gaining concessions from the opposing side. Most importantly, the nuclear program that Tehran masters is merely a fragment within the foreign policy that the country maintains. Together with the nuclear program, Syria has been a paramount component within Iran’s Middle Eastern policy. In Tehran, Syria is viewed as a gate towards Iran’s “doorsteps,” despite that both countries do not share a common border. Apart from that, Syria has been the only true ally of Iran in the Arab world. To a large extent it is also through Syria that Iran influences Middle East. Not surprisingly, Tehran will do everything possible to keep the Syrian regime in power. Now, if the Syrian regime survives, this would be thanks to Iran, as well as the Russian-Chinese tandem. As a result of such outcome, Iran’s authority, influence, and, consequently, credibility as a regional power will rise colossally in the Middle East region and the whole Muslim world. As Friedman maintains, this brings to Iran’s ultimate goal: fundamental shift in the balance of power in the whole region. Such an arrangement will produce at least a threefold effect. First, Iran’s stance of a major Islamic regional power unavoidably will force the U.S. to treat Iran with greater caution, and eventually, abandon the plans of destroying it. Second, such arrangement will expand the legitimacy of the Iranian regime inside the country and beyond what it presently has. Third, by having greater influence over the entire Shiite world

of the Middle East and Persian Gulf, Iran will have the potential capacity to affect oil politics, which in turn might influence the distribution of oil revenues. Saudi Arabia and other pro-American Persian Gulf regimes will have to carry out a more flexible policy towards Iran’s greater stance in the region. Given all the above said, it is not surprising why the U.S. is so obsessed with toppling the current Syrian regime (Friedman, April 10, 2012).

As for Israel, its stance towards the Iranian nuclear program is fundamentally different from that of the U.S. Israel lives very close to Iran, while the U.S. does not. Thus, if the U.S. can afford a miscalculation regarding Iran’s nuclear program, Israel cannot. Such an arrangement makes Israel too nervous and, thus, unpredictable. This might push Tel-Aviv towards military adventurism, which, rather paradoxically, Tehran can exploit to the maximum benefit. For instance, if Israel, with or without any foreign assistance, strikes Iran, then it will only increase the degree of anti-Israeli sentiments, which are already very high in the region. Indeed, this may turn into a great opportunity for Iran to demonize Israel internationally to an even greater extent (Friedman, April 10, 2012).

It is no less important to point out that the results of a strike against Iran have all the chances to spill into an entire catastrophe of regional scale. Such regional war has the potential to “inflammate” the regions of Caucasus (both north and south), Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, because all these regions are full of frozen conflicts, tribal and religious enmity, and the like. In other words, the war against Iran has the full capacity to open “Pandora’s Box,” which, once opened, will lead to such disastrous results that no one will be able to “close” it for an unpredictably long time.

Meanwhile, among the UN Security Council (SC) permanent members, Russia is very vivid for its particularly harsh defiance against any military actions against Iran. Such a stance has very solid grounds and, thus, deserves the utmost attention and careful analysis. Among the great powers, Russia geographically is the closest to Iran. Such arrangement makes Russia quite vulnerable to the consequences of a regional war that may result from the possible strike against Iran. Russia sees the Iranian issue within the same scope it does the Syrian one. That is, Russia views the situation as the continuation of the long-standing march of the West towards Moscow. Indeed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite the subsequent declarations about partnership and friendship, the West headed

by the U.S. has been steadily crawling towards Russia throughout the last two decades. Obviously, the West has been performing military-strategic encirclement of Russia in the form of NATO expansion, the program of the installation of the so-called missile defense system by Russia's western borders, and the "colored" regime changes by Russia's periphery. The regime changes in Iran and Syria with the subsequent installation of puppet regimes that bow to the Western will, as it was done in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Libya, will make the encirclement of Russia even more overwhelming. More than that, for Russia, this not just a geo-strategic issue, it is merely an issue of survival, because Iran plays a key role in the Caspian and South Caucasian regions as a balancer that significantly tames down the Turkish influence in the regions. For Russia keeping this arrangement is of essential importance because it is mainly via Turkey that Israel and the U.S. have been projecting their influence in the regions with all the consequences for Russia and Iran. Furthermore, Armenia – the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member state and, thus, the only military-strategic ally that Russia has in South Caucasus – becomes even more vulnerable in the case Iran is hit. For Russia Armenia represents not only the sole military-strategic ally in South Caucasus. In Armenia Russia has a military base through which it ensures the balance in the region. Before the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia – in essence, another proxy war between Washington and Moscow – Russia used the Georgian airspace to deliver supplies to its military base in Armenia. After the war, Georgia closed its airspace for the Russian non-civilian aircraft, although the Georgian airspace is still open for the Armenian cargo aircraft that supply the Armenian army and possibly the Russian base with necessary equipment. However, the capacity of the Armenian cargo aviation is still insufficient. As a result, Russia apparently reached an understanding with Iran, and, thus, uses Iran's airspace to deliver strategic supplies to the territory of Armenia, although this route is quite lengthy and expensive. In this regard, it is worth to point out that Russia's reluctance to carry out such transportations via Azerbaijan's and/or Turkey's airspace is understandable, given these countries' rather "peculiar relations" with Armenia. Therefore, if Iran is nevertheless hit with further regime change that brings to power a leadership that as a consequence humbly agrees to play by the "script" written by Washington, Russia then has all the chances to be cut-off from Armenia. If such scenario materializes, the consequences will be catastrophic for both Russia and Armenia: Armenia will be virtually cut of from Russia, and the Russian military base that has been

guarding the Armenian-Turkish border will be destined to exhaustion. Thus, Armenia's defenses will weaken over time dramatically and it is highly possible that it may become an easy prey for Turkey and Azerbaijan. Of course, even in such case Russia can come up with preventive measures. For instance, it might send a clear warning message to both Turkey and Azerbaijan in the form of, say, gathering a large military force by Azerbaijan's borders and in the Caspian region as a signal that an attack against Armenia and/or an attempt to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) conflict by force will not be tolerated. Moreover, if things get really bad, that is if the attack on Armenia and/or N-K becomes immanent, it is not unlikely that Russia may possibly recognize the N-K with further security guarantees, as it did in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia when it became evident that their very existence is at stake, especially given that such guarantees correspond to Russia's geo-strategic interests. However, it must be repeated that although such a scenario is difficult to imagine in the current state of the affairs, it is not unlikely in principle. At least, it becomes quite logical from the strategic standpoint if nevertheless an aggression against Iran with further regime change occurs and cuts off Russia from Armenia, and it will thus endanger the very existence of the latter. In addition, it is not difficult to imagine that Russia may technically assist Iran in terms of providing military advisers and intelligence information, and maybe even military equipment. After all, the sanctions against Iran, including arms embargo, established by the UN SC in either way do not authorize an attack. Moreover, according to the international law, any state has the right for self-defense. Thus, Moscow may say that it supported the arms embargo not to make Iran defenseless against an aggression, and that the embargo was valid during the state of piece. In any case, Moscow may present the violation of an essential international law, such as arms embargo, as an acceptable price for preventing the violation of an even more paramount international law – the right of any nation in the world, whether recognized or unrecognized, for self-defense. More than that, Russia might well remind that despite the fact that UN SC Resolution 1970 established arms embargo over Libya, the West decided for its own self that the embargo should not concern the Libyan opposition, which as a result was armed to teeth, was able to overthrow the ruling regime, and brutally murder Col. Qaddafi and some of his family members without any trial. Given all the above said, it is not surprising that Russia so actively supports Syria, including the arms supply. Russia fears that the West might do with Syria the same thing it did with Libya. Of course, if Syria is subdued, then Iran will come next, and after

Iran, and it is not unlikely that further the South and even North Caucasus will be in the “menu.”

The Iranian issue cannot be viewed without the consideration of a particular state – Azerbaijan – that has the potential to become a key player in the South Caucasian and Caspian regions, and since obtaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been a pretender to the status of a regional power in the regions. Given that Azerbaijan borders Iran, Baku’s stance towards Iranian issue is essential. Thus, to project Baku’s moves, it is of key importance to observe the subject matter from the standpoint of Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. In order to do that appropriately, it is crucial to scrutinize the relations from the perspective of the entire two-decade post-Soviet history and geo-political developments within the South Caucasian and Caspian regions. Definitely, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has been attempting to establish itself in the regions as a major power, but with little success so far. Iran, the only Shiite Muslim country in the world, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, was relentlessly trying to gain political supremacy over Azerbaijan where the absolute majority of the population is Shiites. For Iran, this task was of geo-strategic importance. Traditional rivalry between Iran and Turkey has not been conditioned only by the desire to establish domination over the region of Caucasus, but also by the fact that traditionally Turkey allied itself with Israel and the U.S. – Iran’s mortal enemies. So, given the strong ethnic link between Azerbaijan and Turkey together with the former’s pro-American/Israeli orientation, it was essential for Iran to pull Azerbaijan out from the Turkish “orbit.” To do so, Iran tried to exploit the Shiite factor, but it had little effect: very soon it became crystal clear that in Azerbaijan the Turkic factor together with oil and gas business aimed at the Western market overwhelmed the religion. More than that, Baku’s political alliance with Ankara and Tel-Aviv grew into military-strategic one: Turkey and Israel came out as major arms suppliers to Azerbaijan. As a result, Tehran’s relations with Baku worsened over time to such a degree that nowadays they are in the state of a full-fledged cold war. Indeed, the confrontation between Baku and Tehran is not new. Tensions between the countries took a new turn 2001 when the division of rights to the Caspian Sea came about. To demonstrate its seriousness, Tehran even “dispatched military ships and aircraft to threaten two Azerbaijani research vessels exploring oilfields in the southern Caspian” (Weitz, June13, 2007).

At the same time, Azerbaijan granted its airspace for the U.S. warplanes, officially “for activities related to

the global war on terrorism (Weitz, June13, 2007).” In addition, Azerbaijan decided to grant the U.S. armed forces an “indefinite access” to a military facility the declared purpose of which is to counter an “Iranian missile threat to Europe and the United States” (Weitz, June13, 2007). In this regard, for the sake of objectivity it is essential to point out that there has been not a single evidence that Iran possesses missiles that can really reach out Europe, and, especially the U.S. Moreover, as it appeared, Azerbaijani territory was used by Pentagon to conduct virtual/computer-based war simulations for its own military purposes. This was confirmed by Azerbaijani Defense Minister Safar Abiyev, who while speaking at the U.S. embassy reception for U.S. Navy Day said that the military partnership between the two countries included the training of Azerbaijani military personnel by the U.S. military experts in the field of war games and computer-based simulations. The minister said that this would increase the Azerbaijani military capability in different war options (Kerimov, July 25, 2007).

In the same time, Baku has been exploiting the factor of Iran’s vast ethnic Azerbaijani (i.e. Turkic) population that comprises from around one-third to one-fourth out of the entire estimated 75 million Iranian population (Shaffer, 2000, p.473; South Azerbaijan, 2011; Nasibzade, p.2). This arrangement produced a rather paradoxical outcome: apart from Syria, the only friendly neighbour, and, in fact, natural strategic ally that Iran was left with was Christian Armenia – the single country in the region with non pro-Western/Israeli foreign policy orientation. Not surprisingly, lately Baku came out with statements in which Iran was accused in maintaining a pro-Armenian foreign policy orientation. Indeed, Iran’s foreign policy has been more and more leaning towards Armenia, and this is far from being accidental. For Iran, apart from the factors of the U.S., Israel and Turkey, there has also been a danger indirectly stemming from the unsolved N-K conflict. As mentioned earlier, there is a vast ethnic Azerbaijani population living in Iran. Large portion, if not the majority, of this ethnic Azerbaijani population is located in the north-western region of Iran that borders Armenia, Azerbaijan, as well as N-K. This region of Iran has been declared by the ethnic Azerbaijanis of Iran, as well as the Azerbaijanis of the Republic of Azerbaijan as “Southern Azerbaijan,” with the city of Tebriz as its capital and modern day Republic of Azerbaijan as “North Azerbaijan.” Moreover, an entire plethora of officials within the Republic of Azerbaijan have been proclaiming “Southern Azerbaijan” to be a historical part of a whole Azerbaijan. In this respect, it is worth to listen

to Nasib Nasibzade, the President of the Foundation for Azerbaijan Studies in Baku and Azerbaijan's Ambassador to Iran in 1992 – 1994 (Nasibzade, pp. 1-4). Well, one may interpret all this as an innocent and wishful thinking, but as it appeared, the Iranian leaders are far from being that naive. First and foremost, it must be clarified that historically before 1918 Azerbaijan was only and only the name of the northern-western region of Persia, that is, below the river Arax (Aras), and also known as Aturpatekan, and not the territory of the modern day Republic of Azerbaijan, which Persians/Iranians historically called Aran (Iran Chamber Society, 2011 – interview with Dr. Enayatollah Reza). Second, and most important, it is more than likely that if Azerbaijan solves the N-K conflict in its favour, that is, if it returns all the territories that it had controlled before the war, then, given its Turkish and Western/Israeli orientation, Azerbaijan's de jure or de facto NATO membership will be just a matter of time, with all the following consequences. Otherwise, without maintaining full control over its all de jure territories, NATO membership is impossible. This specific and very crucial condition is required by the NATO Membership Action Plan, which is a set of requirements that must be met by any country seeking membership in the alliance. By the way, this is the main reason why Georgia strived to retake Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force in August 2008. It is for this reason that Russia could not have allowed to have another NATO member state by its borders, and, thus, responded to Georgian surprise attack against South Ossetia with punitive action to deliver a clear message that it would not tolerate NATO expansion to the Russian borders any more. In this respect, Tehran's and Moscow's strategic interests fully coincide: neither of them wants to see a NATO state in the Caucasus. However, if Baku somehow regains the territories – including N-K – that it craves for, and, as a result, joins NATO, the consequences of such an arrangement will be far more catastrophic for Moscow and Iran than it may seem from the first glance. To be more specific, this will be not only about a possibility of bringing NATO bases and/or offensive military hardware to Caucasus that will target Iran, Russia and Armenia. After recovering territories that it had controlled before the conflict, and, as a result, regaining political strength, with NATO and Israel by its back, Azerbaijan sooner or later will aim its sight towards its long craved "South Azerbaijan" – the north-eastern territory of Iran, primarily populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis – with all the consequences. After that, with such an "international assistance" tearing that territory off from Iran is just a matter of time and technique: demonstration after demonstration,

followed by Tehran's tough reaction, then even more demonstrations, only now with claims for secession/independence, again, followed by Tehran's harsher reaction followed, of course, by an ever craved intervention and aggression by the "international community," as usual, only comprised of such a tool of "democratization" as NATO, headed by the U.S. and its allies. Let the Libyan scenario serve as a bright example of how this is done. It is not difficult to imagine how badly the U.S., Israel and their allies are drooling about such a possibility. By the way, it is noteworthy that Baku seems to be making the first steps in this direction: quite recently Baku announced that it is creating a new TV channel named "United Azerbaijan," the anti-Iranian purpose of which is not even masked (www.iran.ru; Raevski, 2012). The TV channel is meant to broadcast anti-Iranian propaganda, as well as bolster separatism among Iranians of Turkic ethnicity, primarily populating Iran's north-western province of Azerbaijan, as mentioned earlier. It is rather interesting to observe Iran's ethnic Azerbaijanis according to their political preferences, who can be divided into the following three distinct categories. First, it is the "national iranocentrists" consisting of a very influential group comprised of members of clergy, such as Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamanei, which constitutes the ultimate ruling elite within Iran, as well as, a vast array of influential politicians, and bureaucrats who do not mind the Turkification of Iran. However, they strive to establish Iranian supremacy over the Republic of Azerbaijan with eventual and complete absorption of the latter into a "United Iran." Second, a group comprised of intellectuals, industrialists and bureaucrats who believe that the most optimal scenario for their people is the establishment of a cultural or national-territorial Azerbaijani autonomy within Iran. The third group, comprised of relatively new political organizations and groups, is striving for complete secession of "South Azerbaijan" from Iran, with the eventual unification with "North Azerbaijan," that is the Republic of Azerbaijan. As a result, the group seeks the creation of a newer and bigger sovereign state – "Unified Azerbaijan" – with even greater "weight" in the region. The members of this group "believe that in order to achieve their national goals they should use all means possible, including military means if necessary" (Nasibzade, p.3). In this respect, it is essential to scrutinize the possible moves of both Iran and Azerbaijan regarding these three distinct groups of Iran's ethnic Azerbaijanis. To begin with, it is quite natural to expect that Baku will obviously support the radical third group – striving for the absolute secession from Iran and eventual unification with Republic of Azerbaijan into a newer

whole state by all possible means – in the first place. Baku may also actively support the more moderate second group: after all, the idea of an autonomy voiced by the group is not such a bad idea, since it can easily constitute the necessary first step towards the gradual but complete secession from Iran. Naturally, Baku will label the representatives of the first group striving for the “United Iran” as either “traitors,” or “enemies of Azerbaijan.” However, Iran might carry out some efficient countermoves to even out the odds. By exploiting the factors of religion and universal Iranian patriotism in the face of a mortal threat from the “vicious Zionist regime”, Tehran might succeed in using the greatly influential representatives of the first group to pursue the second group not to secede or divide the country into autonomies, thus, not to make the country an easier target. Indeed, when exposed to an external threat in the form of Israeli or Western force it is absolutely not a fact that all the members of the second group will run towards Baku, especially if the latter, nevertheless, decides to participate in the attack against Iran. Certainly, if Baku’s participation in a military campaign against Tehran materializes, it has the potential to disappoint many representatives from the second group, who after such a sobering slap might join the first group. In either case, Tehran is carefully monitoring the issue of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the Iranian north-west. It is not unlikely that Ayatollahs will “behead” the movement of third group of Iranian Azerbaijanis even before it reaches its full potential.

Meanwhile, the situation within Azerbaijan is not as cloudless as it may seem from the first glance: slowly but steadily the indigenous, that is, non-Turkic peoples of the country, such as, Lezgins, Talishs, Avars and the others tired of the decades long assimilation policy of Turkification together with the alarming degree of basic human rights violations practiced by Baku, are rising up, their voices are heard more and more loudly and often. Thus, it is quite possible that these minorities will be quite reluctant to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the regime that harasses them for many decades. In such state of the affairs it is rather possible that Russia might exploit the Lezgins and Avars, while Iran may exploit the Talishs – an Iranian people – divided between Iran and Republic of Azerbaijan.

Consequently, after comprehending this geo-political arrangement, it is not difficult to understand why Tehran leans towards Yerevan and not Baku, and why it is against the national security interests of both Tehran and Moscow that Azerbaijan de facto regains the territories that it lost control of by the

end of the N-K conflict. As it became crystal clear, in the 21st century it is not the religion that determines politics, but the reverse: it is politics that in case of a necessity exploits religion in its favour. In other words, in the 21st century religious solidarity in politics is nothing but a farce. Who knows, maybe it is for these very reasons mentioned above the rumours about the Tehran-Yerevan-Moscow axis are far from being a joke?

Nevertheless, war-mongering declarations from Baku about Azerbaijan’s readiness to wage war against Armenia and N-K in order to solve the N-K problem once and for all continue to flow. Baku has been persuading its citizens, as well as trying to convince the international community that it has the capability to decisively defeat both Armenia and N-K in a war that it can wage merely any time at its convenience. As an argument, Baku proudly demonstrates its colossal military budget and population that are estimated at about 3 bln dollars and about 9 mln people respectively, while pointing out how, in contrast, Armenia’s tiny military budget and population, estimated at approximately 600 mln dollars and 2.8 mln people respectively. Baku constantly spends vast amounts of money by purchasing weaponry mainly from Israel, Turkey and Ukraine. Now, when the Armenian high ranking officials or Armenian experts dismiss these claims and assertions, one logically may take all this for propaganda. Fair enough. What about prominent and internationally recognized, and, most importantly, independent experts who certainly cannot be accused in having a “love affair” with Armenia and its ruling regime? In this respect it is vital to point out one crucial and noteworthy event. Quite recently London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies has published a report called “The Military Balance 2012.” This report particularly demonstrates the real combat capabilities of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Namely, in their report the British experts specifically highlighted that although the Armenian army doctrine bears strong Russian influence, it nonetheless gained lots of useful experience from cooperation with NATO, specifically during military peacekeeping missions abroad, including support for the international coalition in Afghanistan. Moreover, such trend brought to the increase in the number of professional soldiers, even though the country still largely maintains a conscript army. Meanwhile, the British experts clearly revealed that despite the fact that the Azerbaijani military budget dwarfs that of Armenia, and that oil and gas revenues continue to grow, this superiority, in fact exists only on paper. The experts established that in reality, all this economic wealth, sophisticated weaponry purchased

from abroad, and even close military ties with Turkey “had not affected the combat readiness of the armed forces of Azerbaijan.” For instance, the air force, so critical for armed forces, still suffers from “a fairly low level of staff training and the technical condition of the weapons.” Moreover, the Azerbaijani armed forces are still stuck within the Soviet army model, with all the following shortcomings (Stratrisks, March 11, 2012; Baku Today, March 8, 2012). Similarly, Wayne Merry, another prominent expert, a former U.S. State Department and Pentagon official and now a Senior Associate at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC, in his analysis also confirmed this state of the affairs multiple times. In contrast to the British experts who merely provided simple statistics and presented the real picture, Merry also provides an in-depth geo-political analysis combined with a thorough scrutiny of the potential battlefield. To begin with, as the expert correctly noticed, there have been hardly any instances when great power diplomacies unanimously forced a victorious small nation to surrender its battlefield gains for the broader interests of the great powers. In the instance of N-K, it is the U.S., Russia, Europe (basically France), Iran and Turkey that have to unite against Armenia in favor of Azerbaijan for such a scenario to materialize. Obviously, the probability of this is zero: the U.S. and France have powerful Armenian lobbies, Russia traditionally has centuries long strategic-military alliance with Armenia, while Iran has far friendlier, and, in fact, strategic, relations with Christian Armenia than mostly Shiite, but Turkic, Azerbaijan. Only Turkey has a clearly anti-Armenian stance, and has been openly conducting one-sidedly pro-Azerbaijani policy. Thus Ankara is all alone: it has been trying hard, but there is no way that it can make Washington, Paris, Moscow and Tehran “dance” to its own tune. As a result, hopes voiced by some Azerbaijani politicians that by diplomatic means it is possible to force Armenia to surrender its wartime victory are a complete utopia. The expert, also, notes with regret that Azerbaijan is steadily leaning towards a military scenario rather than the realization of the grim reality: the war-mongering rhetoric dominates throughout the majority of the political spectrum. However, as the expert maintains, there is a complete lack of understanding that if Baku wages war again, it will “almost certainly lose again, and with even worse consequences than its defeat in 1994.” Of course, in Baku this bitter verdict instantly raises bewilderment: “How can this be true when we have shiny new weapons purchased with our gas exports?” Well..., first and foremost it must be clarified that being rich does not necessarily mean being strong, being well armed and being capable of professionally

conducting modern warfare is not necessarily the same thing either: if gas/oil profits could have been equated to military capability “neither Saudi Arabia nor the Gulf Arab states would require the military protection of the United States.” According to the expert, in order to recapture N-K by military force, Azerbaijani forces would need to overcome five objective factors that provide the N-K Armenians a colossal defensive strength in depth. First, it is the ground or terrain, in that N-K constitutes a natural highland fortress currently surrounded by the wide depth of field of the Armenian-held territories. According to the expert, even the mighty American army will face severe difficulties in capturing such a fortress, and this conviction also prevails in Pentagon. Second is firepower, in a man-made fortress of multiple overlapping fields of fire, employing the heavily-mined Armenian-held territories as killing zones before any attacker could reach the edge of N-K itself. Third, is about the reserves of ample weaponry and munitions so the attackers would run out of young men before the defenders would run out of ammunition, while N-K can certainly rely on extensive manpower reinforcement from Armenia. Fourth is the operational art of warfare in which the Armenians have a clear record of superiority over their Azeri adversaries that they would exercise in the inherently advantageous role of defenders of a skillfully prepared position. Not surprisingly that Merry, during his speech at John Hopkins University said that, “there is no secret that Armenia has an army, while Azerbaijan – only armed forces.” Fifth, the strategic depth in Russia, which in a showdown would support its permanent security partner, while the U.S. will have no more grounds to come to the aid of a failing Azeri offensive than it did in Georgia. Not to mention that, apart from colossal casualties, the gas and oil pipelines that Baku cherishes so much, since they constitute the countries main source of wealth, would be an easy target for Armenia, and will be eventually cut. Moreover, by waging war contrary to the strive of Minsk Group to establish peace, Baku, in fact, will also challenge the member states of the organization with all the negative consequences. Worse, because of reckless military actions, and, as a result, immense strategic blunders, the very existence of Azerbaijan Republic might be at stake: the united strategic interests of Armenia, Russia and Iran might well redraw the lines within Eastern Caucasus. Indeed, given that the strategic interests of Yerevan, Moscow and Tehran coincide, the same story has all the chances to repeat itself: just as during the N-K conflict, as long as Yerevan has Moscow by its side, there is nothing Ankara or Washington can do to prevent Armenia from victory in such a conflict,

especially if Azerbaijan is the initiator of it. Of course, no one suggests that Russia wants such conflict to occur. However, Armenia is a CSTO member state, and, thus anticipates Russian assistance if Azerbaijan decides to wage a war. In this case Russia will not hesitate to assist its only strategic ally in South Caucasus, since the failure to do so will undermine its stance as the dominant force within the CSTO and CIS. More than that, it might turn into a great opportunity for Russia to expand its influence in the region even further, thus marginalizing the U.S. and EU. As a result, for the American and European interests, Azerbaijan's reorientation to war is unacceptable. Lastly, it is worth to complete the scrutiny of this section with Merry's concluding remark of his strategic analysis where he rightly determines that "diplomacy – even that of great powers – is not itself a force in international affairs but a mechanism. Diplomacy formalizes and even rationalizes reality, but does not alter basic reality. Diplomacy can promulgate peace and avoid war, which are its prime goals. However, diplomacy ratifies the battlefield, it does not reverse the battlefield" (Merry, May 22, 2009; REGNUM. December 3, 2006; Вольный Журналист, July 6, 2006; and Blank, December 23, 2009).

In the meantime, while returning to Iran's nuclear program and Azerbaijan's probable role in the possible strike against the former, one may say that it is absolutely against Baku's national interests that Iran is hit, because as a consequence, the ethnic Azerbaijani population, comprising from around one-fourth to one-third of Iran's population, will rush to the borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to find refuge there. Logically, such a scenario may bring Baku to a catastrophic outcome. Nevertheless, in reality things may not necessarily turn out as plain as they seem to be. A comprehensive analysis of the geo-strategic reality of the South Caucasian and Caspian regions suggests that an outcome of an attack against Iran alternative to the scenario mentioned above, is also possible. Despite militaristic rhetoric in the form of war threats against Armenia and N-K, Baku apparently acknowledges the current geo-strategic reality in the region and that the return to the 1988 borders, i.e. when N-K was within Soviet Azerbaijan, is unrealistic at least. However, as already mentioned, Baku craves for "South Azerbaijan," and this feeling has been growing steadily throughout years. So far, officially Baku has not become a party within the anti-Iranian "coalition." Such development is not unrealistic and would be quite logical. After all, a compensation for the loss of some territories with the acquisition of newer, larger, and, most importantly, strategically more valuable ones, is not such a bad

idea. Really, if accompanied by such powerful allies as Turkey, Israel, and the U.S., there should be nothing to fear. The idea of merging "North" and "South Azerbaijan" into a whole new state, with greater population, resources, and thus greater strategic and political value can be very tempting. It can also constitute the necessary reward for Baku's involvement into the attack against Iran. Such a scenario becomes even more attractive, given that as a result of such merger not only greater territories will be gained: Armenia will get completely cut off from Russia. At the same time, the strategists in both Washington and Tel-Aviv acknowledge that Iran is far from being an easy prey. As a result, a "weak spot" in Iran's vast body should be found and actively exploited. To put it differently, Washington and Tel-Aviv will be looking for assistance from within Iran, that is, they will need an internal ally that would make the "job" overall easier. In this respect, it is quite realistic that this very ally may come in the form of the Turkic population of Iran – the ethnic Azerbaijanis – craving for "freedom," "independence," and the "unification" with their northern compatriots. It is worth reminding that with such an internal "assistance" and external "support" regimes have been toppled and changed for several times already. This is a comprehensively worked-out scheme of overthrowing regimes that dare to be insubmissive. This scheme already demonstrated its effectiveness in Libya, currently it is being actively employed in Syria. Although the latter is still holding on, mostly thanks to the massive support from Russia and China. If Syria is subdued, Iran is logically the next target. The mighty West apparently has certain limitations too: it can not take on both Syria and Iran at once.

At the same time, the idea of bombing Iran clearly seems to be on the wane. Even Washington and London are clearly demonstrating a certain degree of caution and reluctance in carrying out military operations against Iran. It even seems that Tel-Aviv with its militaristic rhetoric towards Tehran is gradually drifting towards "proud loneliness." If Israel nevertheless decides to strike Iran alone, there are serious obstacles on the way of the materialization of this scenario. One of the serious problems is that Israel and Iran do not have a common border. As a result, Israel will be forced to fly its strike aircraft over a third country before flying into the Iranian airspace. The choice of this third country becomes another problem too. Even if the government of this third country, be that Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or even Turkey, agrees to provide its air space for this operation, it is more than likely that Iran has already managed to locate its "ears" in there in the expectation of such a scenario. This



means that Israeli air force has great chances of giving itself up before coming close to Iran, which may bring the Israeli air force to a catastrophic failure. In addition, it appears that Israel does not have enough strike aircraft to effectively destroy all of Iran's nuclear facilities because the latter are too many and are scattered throughout Iran's vast territory and built in deep under the ground: even with the most advanced bunker-busting bombs it is highly questionable that Israel will ever succeed. Facing such limitations, instead of launching an aircraft strike operation Israel might carry out a ballistic missile strike against Iran. It is quite possible that the missiles might be fitted with nuclear warheads: it is an open secret that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Now, if such strike ever takes place Iran will naturally strike back with the missiles at its possession: again army operation on land is impossible because of the absence of border between Israel and Iran. Iran has been developing ballistic missiles with a range sufficient to reach Israel, such as the Shahab-3 missile. However, even then the Iranian missiles suffer from such serious problems as unreliability and inaccurate guidance system. Worse, Israel lately developed a sophisticated anti-missile system that has the potential to greatly reduce the effectiveness of the already obsolete Iranian missile technology. Nevertheless, it must be noted that given how geographically small Israel is, even a few Iranian missiles with conventional warheads may inflict enormous damage upon Israel: this is one of the reasons that so far cools down some hot-headed politicians in Tel-Aviv.

In conclusion, there is still hope that the situation will be worked out in both Syria and Iran exclusively by diplomatic means, and the language of wars and regime changes will be put aside. It remains to be seen whether it is the sense of reason or the lust for even greater superiority and domination, cloaked under the "noble" name of "democracy," "freedom," and "human rights" will prevail in this eternal battle of human kind against its own self.

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