

Bush courts Azerbaijani President as Part of Build-Up against Iran

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Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev is to meet President George W. Bush on April 28 in Washington. The surprise invitation extended to Aliyev is wholly due to Azerbaijan's geographical proximity to Iran, Washington's next likely military target.

Aliyev presides over one of the most corrupt economies in the world. An ongoing fraud trial in New York has provided evidence of enormous bribes and shakedowns at SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state oil company, in the late 1990s. Aliyev was the vice president of SOCAR at the time of these alleged scandals.

The ruling Aliyev clan, first under the presidency of Heidar Aliyev, and then since 2003 his son Ilham, has yet to preside over a free and fair election. Since their failure to win the corrupt 2003 election, Azerbaijan's political opposition has hoped the Aliyev regime would be weakened by its international pariah status. By inviting Aliyev to Washington the Bush administration has burst these presumptions. The invite was extended just one month after a US State Department report strongly criticised the suppression of human rights in Azerbaijan under Aliyev.

Whilst the Azerbaijani ruling elite has rejoiced at the invite, some commentators in Baku have suggested that Aliyev is less than delighted—not least because he is likely to be told in no uncertain terms that his government must side with Washington in hostile actions against Iran. The Eurasia Daily Monitor posed the question, "Aliyev's Invitation to the White House: A Blessing or a Curse?" whilst C.J. Chivers suggested in the New York Times that the visit meant that for Washington "Oil and location trump all other concerns."

Since it came to power in the early 1990s the Aliyev clan has been courted by both the Clinton and Bush administrations. Not only does the country possess considerable reserves of oil and gas, but its proximity to the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caspian Sea makes it especially valuable. The recently opened Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline which transports Caspian oil to Western markets circumnavigates both Russia and Iran at the insistence of Washington. A similar route is followed by a gas pipeline currently in construction and close to completion.

Domestically, Azerbaijani government officials have sought to ridicule suggestions of their recruitment into a military coalition against Iran. Azeri Foreign Minister Araz Hasanov recently told television reporters, "The reports are untrue. Moreover, how can this happen in the absence of such a coalition?"

But Azerbaijan has little room for manoeuvre. Aliyev's ministers speak reassuringly of the

Azerbaijani and Iranian peoples sharing a common Shia Muslim culture, but regional political analyst Zafar Guliyev told the Day.az web site just after the invite was made public, "I think they [the Americans] will try to get Azerbaijan's approval for using their territory against Iran. To get Azerbaijan's participation in the coalition is as important as it was during the Iraq campaign."

Guliyev explained, "For the time being, the Azerbaijani government did well balancing in its foreign policy, but there are moments when choice is inevitable."

In March, Assistant US Secretary of State Daniel Fried stated that Washington was feeding the Azerbaijani government information concerning their plans for Iran "because Azerbaijan has the right to be aware about it." Fried added that he looked forward to the two countries reaching consensus on the issue.

The Azerbaijani government already cooperates with Washington's so-called war against terror by providing troops for the occupation of Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo. The Aliyev regime has supported the military encirclement of Iran by granting US forces over-flight rights above Azeri territory. The Azerbaijani authorities are also assisting American armed forces with a Pentagon-sponsored modernisation of a former Soviet airfield that could be used by the US when completed.

Former United Nations weapons inspector Scott Ritter suggested in an article for Al Jazeera last summer that the US military is setting up the infrastructure for an enormous military presence in Azerbaijan that will be utilised for a land-based campaign designed to capture Tehran. He believes CIA paramilitary operatives and US Special Forces are training Azerbaijani forces into special force units capable of operating within Iran and mobilising the large Azeri ethnic minority within Iran.

The Azeri minority is based predominately in the country's northwest, what is called the Northern Tier of the Middle East, where Iran shares borders with Turkey and with the South Caucasus states of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The term Azerbaijan was the name given to the geographical area on either side of the Araxes River long before the designation of a distinct Azeri ethnic group.

While estimates vary, it is widely believed that the number of ethnic Azeris living in Iran is at least double the population of Azerbaijan itself, which numbers approximately 8 million. Sources close to Tehran speak of 15 million, while Azeri separatists claim 30 million.

Azerbaijanis are easily the largest ethnic minority inside Iran, outnumbering Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen and Baluchis. They are also considered by regional commentators to be the best integrated ethnic minority in Iran, sharing with ethnic Persians Islamic Shia beliefs. Iran's supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khameni was born in Khamenah, a city in the Iranian West Azerbaijan province. Khameni is half Azeri by birth and speaks the language.

Large sections of the Tehran bazaar are controlled by Iranian Azeris and in the upper ranks of the military ethnic Azeris are numerous. However, nationalist and separatist sentiment was given a large boost by the formation of an Azerbaijani nation state in 1991 when capitalism was restored in the former Soviet Union. Not wishing to see an Azeri state flourish and thereby bolster separatist Azeri tendencies within Iran, Tehran set out to destabilise Azerbaijan by supporting Armenia and maintaining the war of attrition in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This tilting towards Yerevan by Tehran pushed the government in Baku to more firmly move into Turkey's orbit and encouraged both anti-Russian and anti-Iranian policies. The Popular Front administration of Abulfaz Elcibey which ruled briefly between 1992 and 1993 pushed Tehran further in an anti-Azerbaijani direction by making pan-Azeri noises and claiming that Iran was a "doomed state."

Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran improved somewhat when Ilham's father, Heidar Aliyev, pushed out Elcibey. However, recent altercations between the two states over the carve-up of Caspian oil and gas have set relations back once again.

An Azeri separatist movement exists in Iran in the shape of the National Liberation Movement of South Azerbaijan (NLMSA). But it is unclear just how much influence or support it has.

A further advantage of using Azerbaijan for an assault upon Iran is the short flight distances for US military aircraft. Ritter believes that by flying out of Azerbaijani bases, American military forces can maintain a round-the-clock dominance of Iranian airspace.

A coastal road running alongside the Caspian Sea extends all the way from Azerbaijan to Tehran. In this regard, Ritter explained how US military planners have already begun war games calling for the deployment of multi-divisional forces into Azerbaijan. In addition logistical planning is at a well advanced stage regarding basing US air and ground forces within Azerbaijan.

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