

AZERBAIJAN IN INTERNATIONAL FOCUS

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On October 18, 1991, just two months after the abortive coup against the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, the Supreme Council of Azerbaijan adopted a declaration of independence which was affirmed by a nationwide referendum in December, when the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. During this turbulent transitional period, the independence of Azerbaijan actually attracted little attention among the world public. But the war with Armenia, during which the country lost control of nearly twenty percent of its territory, meant its name was soon elevated from the frontlines to the headlines, among the Western media in particular.

Azerbaijan's popularity, and thus publicity, further rocketed when during the late 1990's energy issues became a primary concern of international politics. Actually, the importance of Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves is a well-known fact and there is no need to over emphasise this. Its importance has even been recognized by popular culture. Coinciding with discussions on the need to provide multiple transport options for Caspian exporters, and Azerbaijan in particular, was the 1999 James Bond film, "The World is not Enough," which made intriguing references to the notorious Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project. But what instead needs to be underscored is Azerbaijan's significance in terms of energy safety and supply in the present world. Given the fact that Europe's growing energy needs are considered an effective foreign policy stick by certain countries as well as the ongoing instability in the Middle East in general, and the Gulf region in particular, there is no doubt that Azerbaijan is one of the West's most reliable partners in this regard.

Azerbaijan's Armenian-Occupied Territories

Behind the foreign policy of any country, there are undeniably a great variety of parameters that play significant roles but in Azerbaijan's case, the single most important one is of course its Armenian occupied territories. In reality, this is not only a bilateral problem but one that also has serious regional ramifications. First and foremost, it diminishes the importance of the Southern Caucasus which has in better circumstances served as a useful bridge between the East and West, or Europe and Asia.

Unfortunately, the Armenian occupation has continued for more than 15 years and, I regret to say, the indifferent and sometimes hypocritical approach shown by the international community has strengthened Armenia's ongoing non-conciliatory standpoint. I think that it is important here that we take a look at some of the manifestations of this indifferent and hypocritical attitude.

Any dispute, be it between individuals or states, can only be solved through compromise.

At present, the Armenian people's desire for change and compromise is a very clear-cut fact. The street demonstrations that took place subsequent to the presidential elections in February precisely exemplify that phenomenon. Just a couple of days after the results were announced, the Armenian opposition, under the leadership of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, declared that the elections had been rigged. To judge whether the elections were indeed rigged is of course not the business of any outsider, this author included. By bringing it up I hope to draw readers' attention to how these allegations and street demonstrations were met by the international community.

During the initial days, the events attracted the attention of both the Western media and the capitals. Soon, however, this interest melted away. Yet the thoughts and ideas Ter-Petrosyan expressed during his election campaign were of grave importance, because they clearly demonstrated that an Armenian politician was for the first time initiating a process of self-critique and introspection. His messages with regard to the future of the region and Armenia's relations with either Turkey or Azerbaijan were indeed promising. He was reported to have maintained, for instance, that "as a result of the criminal policies of the current [Armenian] government, Azerbaijan has only toughened its position and will not seek compromise." This process needed to be encouraged by the international community and the Western countries in particular. At least, it was an important sign of willingness for compromise.

But could someone please enlighten me on what has transpired since? Who can now recall Petrosyan's just protest? What happened to the international community's sensitivities with regard to the concept of free and fair elections? On that point, let me pose a very simple but naive question: If it were not Armenia but another ex- Soviet country, what would have been the response of our dear Western friends?

I believe my disappointment is also shared by a considerable number of Azeri politicians. Instead of a place of calm, the region has become a zone of instability. Let me share an anecdote in that regard: During my visit to Azerbaijan in January, I was having a chat with a senior Azeri authority. I was interested in how he saw the

* The substance of this article is basically derived from a speech made at the international conference held in Baku, Azerbaijan on May 23, 2008 and titled "Azerbaijan 2008: Paths to Modernization".

presidential elections in Armenia. In particular, I wanted to know what he thought about the likelihood of Levon Ter-Petrossian being elected. "I wish he could be," he simply said. He then added that approximately one tenth of Azerbaijan's annual budget was spent on the military but that they would prefer to direct that money towards solutions to the problems Azeri people are facing every day. Isn't that a promising line of thinking?

I am pretty sure that our common sensical Armenian friends are of the same opinion. Consider this: Armenia's population is normally 3 million, but 1.2 million of these people have moved abroad. The number of Armenians who are illegally working in Turkey today is believed to have exceeded 60,000. What might the reasons behind this setback be? Is it not the inevitable outcome of the Armenian regime's non-conciliatory mentality?

The Turkish Standpoint

A distinguished U.S. strategist once described change in foreign policy with the following words: "A radical change in foreign policy resembles the all-of-a-sudden manoeuvring of an aircraft carrier. Don't expect it to happen that fast."

As you know, Ankara's closure of its border with Armenia has been the focal point of our Western friends' persistent criticism directed towards Turkey's Armenia policy and has even found a place in every European Union document related to its membership bid. They question why Turkey insists on supporting Azerbaijan and why Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh are mortgaging Turkey's policy options. Wouldn't it be more realistic, they say, to open the borders with Armenia, especially at a time when Turkey is aspiring to become a member of the European Union? I encounter such questions very frequently, but find them rather naive. It is like asking the US why it supports Israel.

Our Armenian friends, in turn, vividly claim that the Turkish authorities in Ankara "insist on maintaining the last closed border in Europe as a tool to exert pressure on Armenia and to punish Armenians for defending their rights and not renouncing their past." They thus want the Western countries to exert pressure on us to open our border with Armenia.

In the Turkish view, the Armenian occupation is first and foremost a matter of ethics. Besides, we should also not forget that Ankara decided to close the border in April 1993 essentially in response to Armenia's ambivalence over the recognition of its common border with Turkey, as well as Armenian aggression directed toward Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. That being said, expecting Turkey to make a unilateral gesture such as the opening of the border is the same as expecting an aircraft carrier to make a sudden, radical manoeuvre.

The overwhelming majority of Turks actually fear that Turkey's unilateral opening of the border would eventually lead to a situation resembling that on the tiny island of Cyprus, in the past mainly characterized by Greek Cypriot leader Tassos Papadopoulos' non-conciliatory approach. In a similar way, they maintain, such a decision would strengthen the Armenian regime's belief that there is no need for compromise for either the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations or a resolution to either the Karabakh dispute or the Armenian-occupied Azeri territories. Thus, Turks, by and large, expect the Western countries, those in the European Parliament or the U.S. Congress in particular, to show the same sensitivity they self-sacrificing as well as zealously do to the Armenian allegations of "genocide" to the ongoing Armenian occupation of Azeri territories as well. They question why our Western allies have failed to help the Armenian public foster conditions in which taboos such as the "occupation" or "Greater Armenia" can be discussed freely or Armenian politicians, as part of attempts for a "win-win" situation for each side, are not forced to compromise.

Democracy

Before wrapping up, I also want to focus on the way the majority of our Western friends' approach most developing countries, Azerbaijan included, in respect to democratic accomplishments. This is a task that promptly brings to mind the U.S. experience in Iraq, a country the neo-cons in the Bush administration thought they might treat as a laboratory, or a blank page to be filled as they wished. They believed democracy and a free market economy in Iraq, regardless of the authentic internal dynamics of the Iraqi people, could be established through a revolution above, or as a part of social engineering, even within a very short period of time. One of the numerous unforgettable post-U.S. invasion episodes mentioned in L. Paul Bremer III's memoirs, titled "My Year in Iraq," in fact speaks for itself.

In May 2003, Bremer arrived in Iraq as the U.S. presidential envoy and in July President Bush appointed him as the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, a post resembling that of a proconsul. With a group of young but enthusiastic U.S. assistants, he immediately embarked on "helping to put Iraq back together." It was a difficult job. Daily economic issues and security in particular required urgent action. The new Iraq needed a modern economy. Having these concerns in mind, he asked his top economic adviser, Peter McPherson, whether he thought they

could “teach influential Iraqis the basics of a free market economy.” His friend Peter from Michigan State University was “an educator” nevertheless. So began “two months of Monday night economic seminars that became quite popular among Iraqis.”

What do you think was the eventual result of these seminars? I humbly believe that Iraq has indeed become a free market, at least for terrorists where they can shop for everything needed for further assaults.

I respect our Western allies’ sensitivity to democratic norms or civil rights and am absolutely aware that neither of them can actually be approached with excuses or pretexts in hands, as is widely done by leaders of developing countries. Nevertheless, one should also not forget the concept of evolution in any particular country.

How then are we going to draw the fine line between excuses on the one hand and the authentic internal dynamics of respective countries on the other? This is a question of grave importance which immediately brings to mind British writer George Orwell’s piece on World War II-era pamphlets, whose accomplishments in journalism are as significant and magnificent as his literature.

In his editorial for the Tribune in 1944, he pointed out a profound fact about these documents: His collection of pamphlets, from all points of the political spectrum, actually contained the same mentality. Unfortunately, nobody was searching for the truth; everybody was putting forward a case with complete disregard for fairness or accuracy. The most plainly obvious factors were ignored by those who did not want to see them. This mentality blinded people to subjective considerations. Pacifists for instance, by obstructing the war, were actually believed to be aiding the Nazis. In addition, the Trotskyites were accused of being Hitler’s agents, since criticizing the Soviet Union meant helping Nazi Germany. The fact that pacifists or Trotskyites might personally be hostile to fascism or Nazi Germany was irrelevant.

Orwell eventually warned that “if you disregard people’s motives, it becomes much harder to foresee their actions.” And an opponent, whatever the circumstances are, always “deserves a fair hearing.” The important thing is to “discover which individuals are honest and which are not.”

I have been travelling to Azerbaijan since 1993 and I must admit that I have never witnessed such intense change as is taking place nowadays. The country is changing in every aspect. As in every country, there are of course things in Azerbaijan to criticize. When engaging in a critical analysis, however, one should keep in mind that the Azeri republic is still young and needs more time. In that regard, as Orwell pointed out, it is President İlham Aliyev’s motives and intentions that make me confident about Azerbaijan’s future.

He indeed deserves a fair hearing....