

Iran Started a Clandestine War in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

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Iranian Minister of Intelligence and Security Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejeie During the last two months, Tehran's secret services have boosted their work in the countries of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, AIA high-ranking source in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in one of the Central-Asian countries inform. According to him, relevant data is received "through the internal channels of counterintelligence, and to some extent from our diplomatic missions in a number of neighboring countries of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus". In this context, security servicemen even held a "prophylactic conversation" last week with the employees of the MFA central apparatus. The diplomats were notified about the rise in activity of Iranian secret services. As a consequence, a new, more severe regime of control and report about any contacts between the MFA employees and the official or private representatives of Iran was tacitly introduced.

Methods

Emblem of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security

According to information that our source has at hand, within the economic and scientific delegations from Iran, lately there are more and more those having connection to Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Moreover, in January ` February this year, secret servicemen working in the region under the cover of diplomatic and economic missions boosted their activity as well.

Simultaneously, there were cases when the representatives of Iranian companies showed interest in strategic and military facilities that have nothing to do with their professional activity. This phenomenon was registered as an "occasional" emergence of the Iranians, as a rule equipped by photo or video cameras, near such facilities (for instance, near the US military base in Kyrgyzstan), or in their talks with local officials, representatives of private companies, and journalists.

At the same time, Iranian military intelligence makes efforts to boost its cooperation with the similar bodies in Armenia and Turkmenistan. As far as the former is concerned, this task is mainly entrusted to the military attachÃ© of Islamic Republic in Yerevan, Colonel Bizhan Hamzeil Hashame. The same mission in Ashkhabad is carried out by the officers of the Iranian General Staff.

Goals

As one could expect, the regional activity of Tehran's secret services concerns mainly the South-Caucasian and Central-Asian politics of the USA. From the point of view of confidential information, Iranian representatives pay most attention to the regional contacts of the Americans in political and military sphere, in particular ` to the

Pentagon, CIA, and NATO officials' visits to the countries of the region. The Iranians also have a particular interest in all contacts of the employees of the local US embassies, and in the activity of US academic circles and humanitarian foundations.

Iranian special services' primary purpose is to collect information about possible use of the states in the region for military, intelligence, and propaganda activity of the USA against the Ayatollahs' regime. In addition, Iranian secret servicemen, same way as the diplomats, have to work with the local elites, to guarantee neutrality of the South-Caucasian and Central-Asian governments in case of an operation against Iran. In a number of states, and in particular in Azerbaijan and Armenia, special attention is paid to work with journalists.

Central Asian Back Land

A lot of tendencies in South-Caucasian and Central-Asian politics serve Tehran's interests. First of all, it is Armenia's and Georgia's growing aspiration to end their dependence on the Russian energy supplies, as well as weakening of the Western influence in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in course of the last two years. Moreover, Tehran widely exploits regional elites' concerns that destabilization in Iran might negatively impact on the economic and political situation in their own countries (either as a result of joint economic projects' dismantling (in particular in energy and transit trade sphere), or as a result of the regional ethno-political map's recast).

Regardless of positive aspects in the regional situation (from Iran's point of view), Tehran shows concern as to a possible American economic and political pressure upon the South-Caucasian and Central-Asian republics. Nor lesser concern of the Iranians is caused by a situation when it is enough for the Americans or the Israelis to "play" on personal economic interests of certain rulers and their entourage, in order to change the geopolitical priorities of the whole states. Iranian leadership, for example, views Turkmenistan as an important strategic partner in Central Asia. However, the Iranians show concern about the influence that the Israeli businessman Yosef Maiman

Yosef Maiman

(head of Merhav company, and former Mossad officer) has on the President Niyazov. Tehran representatives are sure that this influence is based mainly upon extremely rich gifts and profitable commercial services that the Israeli businessman renders to the President himself, and to his confidants.

Situation in almost all the other Central-Asian countries does not cause any Iranian concern. According to the Iranians, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are too much tied to Russia and China, economically and politically, to cooperate with the USA. Even is Astana, in order not to spoil its relations with Washington, is ready to have formal contact with Pentagon, Tashkent won't agree to do it after the American-Uzbek confrontation that followed the Andijan events in May 2005. Neighbouring Tajikistan, though taking advantage of the US generous economic aide (in 2005, it totalled in about \$60 million), won't support the Americans in case of any operation against the Ayatollahs, because of its traditionally close ties with Iran. This was vividly demonstrated during the last visit of the President Rahmonov to Tehran that took place in January, in the midst of confrontation between Iran and the West. While his Afghani colleague

cancelled his visit to

Emomali Rahmonov meeting with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Tehran, the Tajik President made it clear to everyone that he is not going to give up strategic partnership with the Ayatollahs.

However, while Dushanbe's loyalty is not questioned by Tehran, the situation with Kyrgyzstan hides a potential threat to Iran. The President Bakiev, who came into power last year as a result of an overturn, initially quite rapidly endeared the Iranians. His announcements as to the necessity of the American military base withdrawal from the Kyrgyz territory served as a pretext to such positive attitude. However, as soon as Washington showed readiness to agree additional financial aide to Bishkek (\$200 million), the Kyrgyz leader momentarily satisfied all the American wishes. Thus, it was not incidentally that Tehran paid special attention to the fact that in the budgetary project for the new financial year the White House reduced financial aide to all the CIS countries, except for Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. The Iranians fear that these and if needed ` additional means will allow Pentagon to use its Kyrgyz base not only in the Afghan campaign, but also to carry out operations against the Islamic Republic. Tehran, in its turn, tries to hold its own bargain with Bishkek. As was announced two months ago by the new Iranian Ambassador in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to the loan that was agreed in autumn 2004 (50 million euro), his government is ready to agree this republic 200 million euro more, on the most advantageous terms.

The Caucasian Front

In the context of a potential Iran-American conflict, the Southern Caucasus represents a considerably bigger danger to the Islamic Republic, rather than the countries located to the east of the Caspian Sea. Out of five Central-Asian republics only Turkmenistan borders Iran, while in the Caucasus it has common border with two of the three states of the region - Azerbaijan (611 km.long) and Armenia (35 km). Moreover, northern Iran and neighboring Azerbaijan form a unique ethno-cultural space - a historical living area of Azerbaijan ethnos (30 million of its adherents live in Iran and 8 million in Azerbaijan).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Baku openly - and from the middle of the last decade - secretly, has patronized activists of the separatist movement of the Iranian Azerbaijanis. A common border connecting these two states, residents of one nation settled from both sides, and also the traditional friction between Baku and Tehran, have created favorable conditions for using the "Azerbaijani card" for destabilization in Iran.

As it is known, this month Condoleezza Rice asked the consent of Congress for allocation of an additional \$75 million for subversive actions in the Islamic Republic. In this connection, the White House and Langley see a special value in the ethnic factor (Persians hardly make up more than half of the Iranian population). However, plans for provocation of interethnic tension in the Islamic Republic, with a view toward a possible overthrow of the Ayatollahs' regime, can be realized only with the revival of Azerbaijani separatism, as its potential supporters form the largest ethnic minority in Iran.

The threat from the northwest in many respects is caused by the fact that the USA has much more influence in the Southern Caucasus than in Central Asia.

Georgia, ruled by a graduate of Columbia University in New York, Mikhail Saakashvili, serves as the main American bridgehead in the region. In its foreign policy as a whole, and in particular concerning Tehran, Tbilisi is guided exclusively by Washington. The events of the end of the previous and beginning of the current month bear eloquent testimony to that. Despite his aspiration to end power dependence on Russia, under American pressure Saakashvili refused the import of Iranian gas. Currently the Pentagon considers the Georgian territory the most suitable bridgehead for US Air Force operations in case of military conflict with Iran.

Owing to the extreme strain in relations with Moscow, and the refusal of cooperation with Tehran, Tbilisi has almost deprived itself of an opportunity to reject Washington's claims on the usage of Georgian airfields. In fact, today America is the main and almost the only patron of Georgia on the issue of integration into international economic institutions, cooperation with NATO and the EU, and also in solving the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts.

This month, the ambassador of the Islamic Republic in Tbilisi, Hossein Aminian Toosi, expressed confidence that "the Georgian government will not agree to the use of its territory in military actions against Iran". However, in the present situation, such a statement is just another testimony to the true fears of Tehran.

As for Azerbaijan, the situation is not so unequivocal, as in the Georgian case. However, it does not relieve Baku of Tehran's suspicions about possible cooperation with Washington. Ilham Aliyev from first day of his rule was compelled to maneuver between two geopolitical blocs competing for influence in the Southern Caucasus. On the one hand, Azerbaijan is clamped from

Ilham Aliyev and the Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei the south and the north by the large regional powers - Iran and Russia. Both neighbors have many opportunities to destabilize the situation in the republic, in particular, using the separatist moods of the Lezghins in the north (Moscow), and the Talish minority, and also the pro-Iranian Islamic elements in the south (Tehran). These threats force Baku to reckon constantly with the wishes of the Kremlin and the Ayatollahs. On the other hand, commercial interests of the Azerbaijan ruling elite are closely connected to the western, in particular American, oil companies, and that, in its turn, provides the USA with rather weighty influence in this republic. Besides, though the White House is not interested in destabilization in Azerbaijan, (this was especially evidenced by the American reaction to the November elections to the local parliament), at any moment it can change its position. If Aliyev-junior appears too intractable, or is going to refuse flatly to cooperate with the Pentagon on the Iranian direction, Washington would have an opportunity to support actively the Azerbaijan pro-Western opposition, using a technique already tried in the other CIS countries.

The fact that Aliyev really understands the threats from his closest neighbors and transatlantic partners is confirmed by the events of this month. On the one hand, the key figures in the Azerbaijan Government declare over and over again that the republic's territory "cannot be used for a hypothetical US attack on Iran" (the Head of Defense Ministry Safar Abiyev) and that "this question is not on the agenda and cannot be on it" (the Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Elmar Mamedyarov). On the other hand, Aliyev gave his final consent to placing in Azerbaijan US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Ilham Aliyev

of the two American radar stations, one of which will be directed toward Iran. The same month, the Iranian Ambassador in Baku, Afshar Soleymani, declared that Tehran "completely trusts the Azerbaijan leadership's assurances on the impossibility of using the territory of the republic for military actions against Iran". However, if such confidence were absolute, there would be no reason to speak of it publicly.

Armenia is considered the only strategic partner of the Islamic Republic in the Southern Caucasus. The Iran-Armenian partnership is stipulated by the confrontation of Yerevan with Baku and Ankara, and also by permanent tension between Teheran and Baku. The value of connections with Iran is dictated for Armenia, first of all, by the prospect of ending up with dependence upon power supply from Russia through the Georgian territory. Now this task is one of the prioritized, from the point of view of Yerevan, against the background of diversion in January of the North-Caucasian gas pipe, and the forthcoming increase in prices of Russian gas in April. Besides, a strategic partnership with Iran appreciably strengthens the position of Armenia in the Karabakh conflict.

In the regional strategy of Teheran, the importance of connections with Yerevan is stipulated by interaction in the field of security. It especially concerns the efforts of the Ayatollahs' regime to prevent spreading of American military-political influence in the Southern Caucasus.

In this context, the main support for the Islamic Republic from the Armenian side is provided by the representatives of the military command. They see in the Iranians a valuable ally in case of renewal of military actions against Azerbaijan (if negotiating process will finally fail). However, the political leadership of Armenia prefers to limit relations with Iran to questions of power and trade cooperation. Official Yerevan does not wish at all to look like an ally of Tehran, against the background of growing criticism over the Iranian nuclear program from the side of the USA and the EU.

Crisis in relations with Russia also compels Armenia to distance itself from excessively close partnership with the Islamic republic. Firstly, in its rapprochement with Ankara in 2004-2005, Moscow did not even try to take care of the interests of its only South-Caucasian ally. Secondly, despite the harshest consequences for the Armenian economy, Russia unequivocally decided to raise prices for gas exported to this republic starting in April of this year.

The Armenians are especially angered with one irritating circumstance, that soon they will have to pay for Russian gas exactly as much as Ukraine and Moldova, which have pro-Western orientation and undermine positions of the Kremlin on the post-Soviet space. Thus, the actions of Moscow force Yerevan to search for new foreign policy partners.

It would seem that a natural choice in such a situation should become even greater strengthening of partner relations with Iran. However, many representatives of the Armenian establishment are afraid that in that case, Yerevan risks remaining with nothing. If the military conflict between the USA and Islamic Republic would take place, and Armenia won't turn away from its southern neighbor, and as a result will suffer twice. On the one hand, its relations with the West will worsen, and, on the other, all the joint Armenian-Iranian projects will be cut short, harming first of all Armenian plans on acquiring energy independence from the Russian sources.

Against this background, Tehran's fears that the United States will

take advantage of this situation are quite reasonable. Guaranteeing the Armenians economic assistance and support in the Karabakh question, the Americans can try to draw them to their side before the beginning of the Iranian campaign. The fears of Teheran are supported by data on the activity during the last months of some influential representatives of the Armenian Diaspora in the USA, supporting Yerevan's reorientation on Washington.

Priorities of Iranian Intelligence

Southern Caucasus and Central Asia map

An analysis of the situation in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, in view of potential threats to the national security of the Islamic Republic, allows determining key directions of regional activity of the Iranian secret services.

They have two main tasks in Central Asia. The first consists of neutralizing American - Israeli influence on the leadership of Turkmenistan. An important role in reaching this goal may be played by the creation of optimum conditions for strengthening the Iranian-Turkmen economic cooperation, following the personal interests of the highest leaders of this republic. The second task consists of gathering information on military-political contacts of Kyrgyzstan with the USA, and also data on any changes in staff and technical activity at the American base in this republic. It is possible, that in the case of a conflict, a complex of preventive measures directed toward the breakdown of activity of this base will be prepared.

Activity of the Iranian special services in the Southern Caucasus represents a greater value for the Islamic Republic's security than their actions in Central Asia. Most likely, for work in this direction the greatest means are to be allocated and the best staff of the Iranian special services is to be used.

Besides, they have much stronger positions in the southern Caucasus than in Central Asia. It is stipulated by several factors. A large community of Iranian political emigrants are living in Azerbaijan (by various estimates, about 200 - 300 thousand) and many Iranian students are studying in the local high schools (last year their number exceeded 200). The Iranian secret services actively use both for their own ends. Besides, on the territory of Azerbaijan, Tehran oriented Islamic radical elements operate.

In neighboring Georgia, intelligence structures of the Islamic Republic also get the assistance of some representatives of the local Muslim community (its number reaches about one million, and almost half of them are ethnic Azerbaijanis). In parallel, representatives of the Iranian secret services closely cooperate with their Armenian colleagues, primarily in the Azerbaijani direction. Thus, today in the South - Caucasian region, rather favorable conditions for performance of the tasks, which stand before the intelligence community of Tehran, are created.

In Georgia the main task of the Iranian special services consists of tracking the activity of the Pentagon and the course of the work on restoration of the airfields built during the Soviet period, which are suitable for military purposes. In this connection, the carrying out of sabotage actions directed to the disruption of repairs is possible.

In Azerbaijan, the main task of the Iranian special services consists

of prevention, by all means, of using territory of the republic in military actions against Iran. Various measures in this case can be undertaken: from influencing public opinion through mass media, up to diversions and acts of terrorism against American and governmental facilities, and also attempts to destabilize the republic with the help of radical Islamic elements and the Talish national minority. It all depends on the degree of probability of an American - Iranian military confrontation, and the readiness of the Azerbaijan authorities to assist the United States. In any case, the confidential services of Teheran will pay greater attention to the Iranian political emigrants who live in Azerbaijan, their contacts with fellow tribesmen in the native land, and also with the representatives of American and Azerbaijani intelligence.

In Armenia the main task of the Iranian special services consists in preventing in every possible way the reorientation of the republic to the West. This can be promoted by activating contacts with the local mass media and politicians, and also by strengthening the pro-Iranian lobby in the business and military circles of the republic. In parallel, the secret services of Tehran should trace the activity and visits to the republic of representatives of the Armenian Diaspora from the USA and the countries of Western Europe.

The Regional War of Special Services

Activating of the Iranian secret services might very well provoke a similar response on behalf of the USA, and, as a consequence, of traditional contenders for influence in the region - Russia and Turkey, and also of China in Central Asia. Inveterate territorial disputes between the republics, which have arisen from the ashes of the former USSR, and also numerous interethnic and religious contradictions are a fertile field for a war among the intelligence services in the Southern Caucasus and in Central Asia. As a result, a new spark of secret confrontation between the leading participants of the 'Great Game' will inevitably cause even greater aggravation of an already tense situation in the region. It is quite possible that the whole chain of the allegedly non-connected dramatic events of the last weeks (as, for example explosions on the Russian - Georgian gas pipeline or interethnic collisions in Northern Kyrgyzstan), is actually a result of an already unraveled clandestine war|
