

Iran War FALLOUT: It Gets Worse for USA | Mamedov and Shakarian

Iran looks far harder to break than many in the West assumed. Pascal Lottaz talks with Dr. Pietro Shakarian and Eldar Mamedov about Iranian Azerbaijan, Armenia, Israel, Turkey, failed diplomacy, and the wider South Caucasus fallout from the war. Links: Eldar Mamedov at Quincy Institute: <https://quincyinst.org/author/eldar-mamedov/> Eldar Mamedov on X: <https://twitter.com/EldarMamedov4> Dr. Pietro A. Shakarian at AUA: https://people.aua.am/team_member/dr-pietro-a-shakarian/ Pietro A. Shakarian at The Nation: <https://www.thenation.com/authors/pietro-shakarian/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Guests and Iran background 00:04:43 Iranian Azerbaijan reality 00:13:26 Soviet myths and deep integration 00:16:11 Armenians and Christians in Iran 00:22:16 Iran as a civilizational state 00:27:05 Gaza Israel and failed diplomacy 00:36:46 Azerbaijan Turkey and war risks 00:55:21 Armenia politics and corridor fallout 01:00:34 Regional solutions and closing

#Pascal

Welcome back to Neutrality Studies. Tonight we're joined again by Dr. Pietro Jacarian, a good friend of the show, and for the first time, Eldar Mamedov, a non-resident fellow at the Quincy Institute and a member of the Pugwash Council on Science and World Affairs. Pietro, Eldar, welcome.

#Shakarian

Pascal, thank you for having me on. And actually, thank you for having Eldar on, because he's one of the top experts who can speak to this issue of Iran and Azerbaijan and all that. I'm very glad you were able to bring him on the show. So, gentlemen, thank you so much for the company, and I'm looking forward to a great conversation. Thank you.

#Mamedov

My pleasure. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much.

#Pascal

And I'm very glad, you know, because this was actually Pietro's idea. It's a wonderful idea, Pietro. And Eldar, let's start with you. Can you tell us a bit about your connection with Azerbaijan and Iran? I understand you were in Iran not too long ago. Could you give us a little of your background and

then your analysis of where the Azerbaijani part of Iran stands today, as we speak on this 30th of March, one month into the war?

#Mamedov

Okay. Well, concerning my background, I've been doing the rounds here in the European Parliament for more than 15 years, which included organizing missions from the European Parliament to Tehran—several missions in the happier times when the EU and Iran still had a proper political and diplomatic dialogue. Interparliamentary diplomacy was one of the branches of this dialogue. Obviously, that's not happening now, but we can come back to that. I also participated in drafting dozens of European Parliament resolutions on Iran.

So, not all of them were of equal value, to put it mildly, but that's part of my story. And indeed, I've been in Iran on almost two dozen occasions. I think, all in all, a total of 17 times, including twice last year. The first time was at the end of May, actually, which made me one of the very few Western analysts who visited the Islamic Republic before Israel launched its war against Iran, known as the 12 Days War in 2025. And on that occasion, I participated in them.

#Mamedov

The conference was organized by the Tehran Dialogue Forum, which is part of the main think tank, the Institute for Political and International Studies, under the Iranian Foreign Ministry. Then I was in Iran again last year, in November, which once more made me one of the very few Western researchers to visit after the war. And of course, it gave me some pretty valuable insights into how the political elite was thinking—how they saw the situation then—which helps to understand their strategy and the steps they're taking now. But I think equally, if not more valuable, was the opportunity to travel beyond Tehran, specifically to the northern areas, which very few visitors to Iran actually get to see.

If anything, when people visit places beyond Tehran, it's usually Isfahan, Shiraz, or Persepolis—the historically well-known landmarks. Very few go to Tabriz or to Ardabil in the north. But those are very rich areas in terms of the ethnic and religious tapestry present there. So it was a pretty enlightening visit. It wasn't my first time in the Iranian Azerbaijan area, but the first one was more than ten years ago, so it was very useful to get updated impressions.

#Pascal

And let's just continue there. I mean, what's the impression from over there? Because we've had all these talks about, you know, Azerbaijan getting or readying its troops on its side of the border. But as far as I understand, there are actually more ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran than in Azerbaijan. So what's the situation around Tabriz and those places? Is there any kind of separatism going on?

#Mamedov

No, this is not a serious proposition. Iranian Azerbaijanis have been part and parcel of Iranian history for centuries. Let's not forget that some of the most prominent monarchical dynasties in Iran's history were of Turkic—or, as they would say, Azerbaijani—origin, such as the Safavids, for example, or the Qajars, the dynasty that ruled before the Pahlavis came to power. Does that make them Azerbaijani? Of course not. They are Iranians who happen to be ethnically Azeri, who have their own language, which they call Turkish. Of course, it's not the Turkish of Istanbul; it's the Turkish of Tabriz, or of that area. They actually very seldom use "Azeri" or "Azerbaijani" as a marker of identity.

So what they are, essentially, are Iranian Turks—with the emphasis on Iranian. The overwhelming majority feel strongly identified with the Iranian state. Let's also not forget that the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is of Azeri origin. The president, Masoud Pezeshkian, is of Azeri origin. The chief of staff of the armed forces, who was also killed by the Israelis during the 2024 war, Mohammad Ali Bagheri, was of Azeri origin as well. He was born in Tabriz. And interestingly, in the case of Bagheri, he was also someone who visited Persepolis and made quite a big show of it—to express nationalist sentiment as an Iranian Turk. And that is very typical. Iranian Azeris, Azerbaijanis, Turks—whatever you want to call them—the overwhelming majority of them are staunch Iranian patriots.

#Pascal

That doesn't mean that pan-Turkist sentiment doesn't exist at all. It does exist. There are...

#Mamedov

TV channels beamed from outside Iran—there's one based in the United States called Gunaz TV, which is South Azerbaijani TV. Some people do watch that on satellite dishes or otherwise. But I cannot say that, being in Tabriz or in Ardabil, you feel any strong affinity with the Republic of Azerbaijan, with its president Aliyev, or any inclination to secede from Iran. In fact, many Iranian Azerbaijanis joke, "Why would we want to join Baku if we can't rule Tehran?" And that, in many ways, is true. Because so many of them—well, I just mentioned three examples, but I could go on and on. For example, at another level, the best football player and top goal scorer in the history of Iran is Ali Daei, and he's from Ardabil. So he's also of Azerbaijani origin.

There are so many examples like this that it simply doesn't make any sense. In fact, no one in Iran even frames the question in terms of ethnicity. This is an entirely imported concept, one that was promoted during the Soviet Union. The Iranian-Azerbaijani conflict was portrayed as a part of Iran that was supposedly ripe for liberation from the Persian yoke. That was the narrative spread during Soviet times, in schoolbooks in Soviet Azerbaijan. And then, when the independent Republic of

Azerbaijan was established after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the new elites accepted this narrative as one of the foundational myths of the Azerbaijani state—particularly the nationalist movement that first came to power after the breakup, under President Abulfaz Elchibey.

They were—and their political successors in today's Republic of Azerbaijan still are—very strongly committed to this idea of southern Azerbaijan. To some extent, Ilham Aliyev's government has co-opted this narrative into its own discourse. But in Aliyev's case, it's more opportunistic than truly passionate or ideological. The point is that this whole narrative of South Azerbaijan is like, you know, an internal echo-chamber discussion in Baku. It has literally no impact or influence among Iranian Azerbaijanis. In fact, the first time I visited those parts of Iran—more than ten years ago—when I brought up the subject of South Azerbaijan, people were really surprised to hear that such a concept even exists.

So, to summarize, I would say this is not a serious proposition. And by the way, the recent war has shown once again—and I hope conclusively—that South Azerbaijan is just a pipe dream. Because if we were to believe the narrative, that up to 70 million, or some would say 40 million, Iranian Azerbaijanis exist—by the way, if you listen to some of those Azerbaijani nationalists, you could easily believe that the majority of the population of Iran is of ethnic Azerbaijani or ethnic Turkish origin. Yeah, but that's the nature of all ethnic nationalists: to exaggerate and inflate numbers to boost their case.

But if indeed that were the case—if those tens of millions of people were ready to revolt in the name of seceding from Iran, establishing an independent entity, or joining the Republic of Azerbaijan—then the question is, why didn't they? Why was there no uprising at all? Remember, there were widespread protests against the Iranian government, and they were followed shortly afterward by the Israeli-U.S. war on Iran. So one would think, could there be any better conditions for such an uprising, if there were any real basis for it? The fact that it didn't happen is, I think, conclusive evidence—if there was ever a need for any—that this concept is simply not a serious proposition.

#Shakarian

Yeah, I also want to add just one more thing to that, because, like Eldar was mentioning, this idea of South Azerbaijan was promoted during Soviet times. There was even a moment during the Second World War when the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, was overthrown by the British and the Soviet Union to secure lend-lease supplies through Iran. And at the end of the war, in 1946, there was actually an effort by the Soviet Union to promote an Azerbaijan People's Republic in northern Iran. So there's this history that Iranians know—of external players trying to foment breakaway entities in the north of Iran.

And not only that—there was also the Kurdish Mahabad Republic being encouraged at the same time. Eventually, you know, the Soviets made a deal with the Shah, and that whole episode ended. And that was the end of it. But there has never been a serious—just like Eldar says—there's never

been a serious push for the independence of Iranian Azerbaijan. To give you an idea, Pascal, the level of integration of Azerbaijanis with Iran is almost like, historically speaking, how Ukrainians were integrated with Russians—like how we had someone like Mikhail Gorbachev, who was part Russian, part Ukrainian.

His wife is fully Ukrainian. Or maybe another example could be the Manchus in China—how they were historically integrated into Chinese history and culture, like with the Qing Dynasty and all that. That's how deeply integrated Iran is. It's central, really. I mean, that's how deeply integrated Iranian Azerbaijan is with the history of Iran. And even someone like Mousavi, the opposition leader from the 2009 Green Movement—he himself was of Azerbaijani descent, or Iranian-Turkish origin. So yes, Eldar gave you a perfect summary of it. Yeah, absolutely.

#Pascal

So how does this, Pietro—how does this, in your view—now also impact the development of the war? Like, the sheer fact that Iran is a multi-ethnic, functioning, well-working society, as opposed to, let's say, Syria, where you could see how these different ethnicities were played against each other—especially the Kurds, right? And then dropped like a hot potato once they were no longer needed by the United States. Pietro, how do you see that developing? And maybe one more thing—is there also an Armenian minority living in Iran, actually?

#Shakarian

Absolutely, yes, there is, and it's very integrated in Iran. As a matter of fact, the Iranian government is very deferential to the Armenian Christian population. They're very tolerant of the Christian community. They even opened a metro station in honor of the Armenian Christian population of Iran. And the Armenian historical sites—the monasteries, like the St. Thaddeus Monastery in northern Iran—are very well preserved by the Iranian government. It's even considered a holy site by the Iranian Azerbaijani population. So that's actually quite interesting. And to give you kind of a reverse example, within Armenia itself—I can tell you, because I'm here in Yerevan—there's a lot of sympathy toward Iran in Armenia over this war.

To the point that if you go to the Blue Mosque on Mashtots Avenue in Yerevan, there's a kind of makeshift memorial dedicated to those who died in the war—basically showing support for Iran against this war of aggression. And there's even one dedicated to those schoolgirls who died in Mianeh. So actually, religion isn't really a good way to divide people here. I mean, in Western commentaries, they often focus on Christian Armenians versus Muslims or whatever, but in a case like this, as you can see, religion isn't such a decisive factor.

#Mamedov

Can I jump in on that?

#Shakarian

Okay, go ahead, Aldo.

#Mamedov

Okay, no, it's just a perfect occasion for me to jump in because, in fact, during the trip I mentioned last year to Iranian Azerbaijan, I actually visited those monasteries—St. Thaddeus, St. Stepanos, Shepherd's Chapel—and the impression I had was exactly the one Pietro described. Those places are not just well preserved; they're also cherished. You see both Christian Armenian worshippers and Muslim visitors. And most of those visitors, who were just, you know, there as tourists, I overheard speaking in Azeri Turkish.

Which is something that's hard to imagine just across the border in the supposedly secular, modern, enlightened Republic of Azerbaijan, where those churches and other monuments of Armenian heritage were simply destroyed. So it was quite, I would say, fascinating to be in those places—literally right next to the Araks River, which is the natural border between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, directly overlooking the other side of the river in the Nakhichevan region, which has become infamous for the wholesale destruction of Armenian khachkars, the holy tombstones.

And there was even a big story in *The Guardian* back in, I think, 2006. So here is this contrast, and I think it's very important to emphasize it, because the narrative we get in the Western media—especially in the run-up to the war—is one of demonizing Iran: this horrible place that hates Christians, hates Jews, kills everybody who isn't Muslim, and wants you essentially to be a jihadist if you want to stay alive. Nothing could be farther from the truth. And the situation—the fate of the Armenian community in particular—is a striking example of that. Now, I don't want to get carried away and say there's perfect harmony and no problems.

Of course there are problems, but the problems that Christian Iranians face are actually the same as those faced by Iranians of other denominations as well. There are, of course, some discriminatory provisions—for example, a Christian cannot become the Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic, and there are a few others. But I think what's important is to put things in perspective, to put them in context. If you compare the situation of the Christian population in Iran with that of other countries in the region, particularly neighboring ones, the difference is quite striking—and I would say it's in favor of Iran.

#Shakarian

Absolutely. Also, something else, Pascal—I just want to add this. You know, I mentioned the Blue Mosque in Yerevan. This is a legacy of the history of Iranian rule over eastern Armenia. It was actually restored as a collaborative effort between the Armenian government and the Iranian government, and now it's like an Iranian cultural center. It also serves Iranian workers who attend

the mosque here in Yerevan. But one more thing I want to mention—you asked, what's the difference between Iran and a country like Syria, or, I don't know, Iraq or Jordan, or something like that? Well, the reality is, Iran, Pascal—and this is why Trump really made a major miscalculation with this war.

Iran is like a civilizational state. It's Persia. The borders of Iran have more or less remained unchanged for centuries. So the borders we have today, with the exception of areas north of the Araks River—Transcaucasia, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, all that—with very few exceptions, the borders of today's Iran are basically the same as those you would have seen around the time of the Safavid Empire. Even the famous frontier between Iran and Iraq, or Iran and Turkey, is still a legacy of the old 1639 border between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire.

So what we're dealing with here, Pascal—and this is something Eldar can also speak to—is that this is a civilizational state. It's not just something created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement or anything like that. It's not a new country by any means. It's an old, old country where the borders have been more or less unchanged for centuries. Even going back, it's striking when you look at the old history of Iran—when you look at Parthia and the period of the Roman Empire and its leaders. I mean, I can speak to this: they tried, unsuccessfully, to conquer Iran.

So even in history, you know, Crassus tried to launch a campaign against Iran. He wanted to go through Armenia. The Armenian king, Artavasdes II—actually, no, excuse me, let me rephrase that—the king, Artavasdes II of Armenia, invited Crassus to go through Armenia. He thought that was the best route for him. But Crassus decided, no, I'm not going to do that; I'm going to go through Mesopotamia instead, right? Because he didn't want to be, you know, burdened with the business of protecting Armenia or whatever. But in the end, that turned out to be a fatal miscalculation, and he was decisively defeated.

In the meantime, Iran and Armenia made their own kind of separate peace through a marriage alliance and the performance of a Greek play, actually in Armenia. Artavasdes II was there with the Parthian king, and they served Crassus's head on a plate. So it shows you the folly of trying to conquer Iran in history. Also, Mark Antony was being encouraged by Cleopatra to go against Iran. Julius Caesar, before he was assassinated on the Ides of March, was thinking about taking on Iran. So this is an old, old, old country. And to think that Trump, of all people, could succeed where Mark Antony had not succeeded—I think that's incredibly insane, to put it lightly.

#Pascal

Eldar, can you speak to this? I mean, the age of Iran—what this also does to a people. You know, I'm from a place, the Swiss, who trace their roots back about 800 years. But we now more or less know that 600 of those 800 are largely made-up mythology. Not that they weren't there, but the national narrative—modern Switzerland—is basically a 200-year-old country. It works, but it's relatively young in the way we know it today. Iran, though—what does this do to the way people

there think about the land they're living on and the responsibility they have? And I just want to point out, as Marandi keeps saying, Iran is the only state that really supports Gaza and the Palestinians, even though most of them are Sunni and Iran is Shia. But he says this doesn't matter, because it's about the people, not about what kind of prayers they say. Can you speak to that?

#Mamedov

Well, on the first point, Iran being a civilizational state—actually, there's barely anything to add. I think Pietro gave an excellent overview, and I fully agree with that. There's not much to add. Concerning the point made by Professor Marandi, I would say that claiming there is unanimity in Iran regarding Gaza and the Palestinian question more generally would be an exaggeration. The baseline is that, indeed, the overwhelming majority of Iranians—just like people elsewhere in the world—are very critical of the Israeli-perpetrated genocide in Gaza. So, largely, there's no dissent on that. Now, to what extent Iran should get involved, and to what extent it should have made the Palestinian question such a pillar of its foreign policy—that's a matter of debate. And, in fact, it's not a new debate.

What's interesting, though, is that the narratives being pushed to justify a war on Iran are heavily based on Israeli views—on the way the Israelis see things. They see a regime that, for 47 years, has demanded the destruction of the Jewish state, and they use that to bolster their case for removing the regime. But that narrative has many holes in it. It's incomplete, to put it mildly, because there were periods in Iranian history—specifically in the history of the Islamic Republic—when the authorities showed more flexibility on this question. For example, during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, Iran adopted a line saying it would agree to any deal between Israel and the Palestinians that the Palestinians themselves accepted.

And yet, that was completely overlooked in the narrative that portrays Iran as a terrorist state hell-bent on destroying Israel. Now, no doubt, enmity toward Israel is one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic's identity, not just its foreign policy. And there may be, you know, multiple reasons for that—not only related to Gaza but also historical ones. Mossad, for example, was instrumental in establishing the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, which was known for its savagery and for torturing dissidents. Many of the people who later became part of the Islamic Republic's elite—clerics and others—had passed through the Shah's prisons and been tortured by SAVAK, which in turn had been trained by Mossad.

So there's also this, you know, personal psychological element there, which helps explain, to a degree, the intensity of the feelings. But the point I want to make is that even on this issue—even on the issue of Israel and Gaza—there were windows of opportunity when the Iranian regime showed somewhat more flexibility. The problem is that whenever Iran showed itself available and ready for détente with the West—and those attempts, in fact, were constant since the time of Hashemi Rafsanjani in the early '90s, culminating with the JCPOA in 2015—every time Iran showed some flexibility, that trend toward moderation and integration with the world was undermined.

Israel played a key role in undermining those trends because, essentially, Israel isn't really concerned that Iran can destroy it in a physical or literal sense. Of course, that's nonsense—Iran doesn't have the capability to destroy Israel, given that Israel is a nuclear-armed state. But that bogeyman of the Iranian threat is used to tie in unconditional American support, and the strategic goal is to ensure Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. It's not because Israelis truly feel or fear Iran as an existential threat; it's simply to assert their own hegemony and make sure that no state in the region has any viable deterrence against Israel. Israel can basically act as it pleases—bomb any country at will, as they do with Syria or Lebanon—and they want to maintain that same status with Iran.

#Shakarian

One thing I just wanted to add, Pascal, is that it really shows how senseless this whole war is. There were so many opportunities to avoid it—even as late as this February, when they were negotiating a peace deal with the Omanis. The Omanis were mediating between Iran and the United States, and the terms of that deal were so good for the American side—it was the best deal they could ever get, even better than the Iran nuclear deal under Obama. But the outcome suggests those negotiations were used as a cover to prepare for this attack. And what's also quite painful about it is that it undermines America's diplomatic credibility.

Which also makes it very dangerous, because how can you trust anything the United States says? And not only here, by the way—there's also the example I mentioned of the Minsk Accords, where Merkel and Hollande basically said, in the first year of the war in Ukraine, that they were using the Minsk Accords as a kind of ruse to build up Ukraine for a future war with Russia. So again, how do these kinds of steps, this kind of so-called fake diplomacy, get perceived by the rest of the world? It's very dangerous. But the other thing I just want to add is how all of this could have been avoided.

And also, as Eldar was saying, how diplomacy, outreach, and détente can actually encourage domestic reform. If the United States really wants to see a more democratic, more open Iran, the best way to do that is to engage with the society and engage with the state—because you're not going to be able to just go in, as Trump attempted to do, and remove the government or something like that. I mean, even the idea—really, we're not talking so much about regime change, but about regime removal at the end of the day, or this notion of just destroying the regime and leaving behind, I guess, a failed state—that would be the idea.

But nevertheless, if you have something like the Iran nuclear deal, it encourages domestic reform. And this applies not only to Iran—it can apply to Russia, it can apply to so many other countries in the world. By pursuing détente, you encourage the endogenous process of democratization. But when you attack, when you become aggressive, when you launch something like an unprovoked war of aggression, what do you expect the result to be? Now we see that. Now you see what's happened. They killed off people who could have negotiated with them, who could have led to a

more moderate regime or a more moderate government in Iran. And now the government is more hard-line than it's ever been because of this. Absolutely. Absolutely.

#Pascal

The thing is, this Western narrative—that the West just wants democracies—is a sick joke. It's a sick joke. It was never meant seriously. They were never serious about it, and we know that. If they were, they wouldn't be dealing with Saudi Arabia the way they do. It was never meant. What they want is control, not cooperation. They want subordination. That's what Lasha Kasradze sometimes says on this show—you know, the United States just wouldn't take "yes" as an answer. You have to completely commit.

And that's the one thing Iran actually said it wouldn't do. Now, what does this mean for the region, Eldar? Azerbaijan has played a very interesting role—it actually offered its support and bases even for attacks coming from Israel during the 12-day war. I'm pretty sure at the moment they have this integration. We know that Turkey is there, and Turkey basically—well, if I had to define opportunism in international relations, I'd probably use the word "Turkey," which isn't a stupid thing for a state, right?

#Shakarian

He's very smart—really, incredibly smart. Erdoğan is a very, very clever politician, and he plays his cards well, you know.

#Pascal

Extremely clever politician. Not a principled or moral one, but you don't want to be too principled if you want to make it to the next day. So, Eldar, what's your assessment of the entire region—Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran?

#Mamedov

Well, I think when it comes to Azerbaijan, frankly, the president-elect is in trouble. I think he's in trouble. His overt and enthusiastic embrace of Israel—the transactional deal, the energy and strategic intelligence on Iran's foothold that Azerbaijan provided in exchange for cutting-edge military technology that helped Azerbaijan win the wars against Armenia in 2020 and then in 2023—plus the lobbying power on Azerbaijan's behalf in Washington. That was the architecture of the deal between Azerbaijan and Israel, and it worked remarkably well for both sides.

However, what happened when the current war started was that, in early March, two drones from Iranian territory landed in Nakhchivan, the autonomous region within Azerbaijan. No one was killed, but four people were injured. That just showed how vulnerable Aliyev and Azerbaijan are to any

spillover from the Iran war. So what did Aliyev do? He delivered a very combative speech. He called the drone attack an act of terror and blamed Iran directly, even though the Iranians denied that the drones were launched by them and claimed it was a false-flag operation to drag Azerbaijan into the war. I'm so sorry.

But what did he do after he delivered that, you know, characteristically combative speech, waving his, you know, threatening iron fist at Iran? So what really happened after that? The only real measure that was adopted was to close the land crossings between Iran and Azerbaijan, which, by the way, hurt the Azerbaijani side more—but also Russian and Georgian truck drivers who were engaged in cross-border logistics and trade with Iran. Four days later, that measure was lifted and the border was opened again. Aliyev, meanwhile, spoke with President Pascal Lottaz, and the Azerbaijani readout of that conversation sounded very warm, very positive.

Later, just a few days ago, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Abbas El-Archi, thanked Azerbaijanis in the Azerbaijani language for sending humanitarian aid to Iran. The foreign minister of Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bayramov, replied in both Azerbaijani and Persian. What we see in this kind of bilingual diplomacy is a very deliberate effort to de-escalate tensions. Why? Simply because Aliyev suddenly saw how vulnerable his country is—how exposed Azerbaijan's energy infrastructure actually is. And Azerbaijan depends on energy exports for about 90%. This is not a diversified economy; it's an economy that relies almost entirely on the export of hydrocarbons.

So what they have is this Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, through which Israel, for example, receives more than 40% of its oil needs, and then there's the whole oil and gas infrastructure in the Caspian. All of that infrastructure is extremely vulnerable to Iranian missiles. And what we see in the Persian Gulf is that Iran, in retaliation for the attack on it, is not hesitating to lash out at energy infrastructure in neighboring countries. So you can debate to what extent this is a smart or counterproductive strategy, but clearly there is a strategy—and that strategy is to inflict as much pain on the broader region as payback for an attack on Iran.

And by the way, the Iranians made it very clear to everyone that this is what they would do if they were attacked—so they're delivering. In that context, Azerbaijan is essentially no different from the Gulf countries. It's very vulnerable. So Arif understands that it's in his interest to downplay tensions—hence the de-escalatory moves, the sending of humanitarian aid, this diplomacy at the level of foreign ministers. But I also think the Turkish factor is important. And since you mentioned Turkey, that's a really good point. Turkey is not interested in a conflict with Iran. It has its own concerns about the potential destabilization and disintegration of Iran. The Kurdish factor comes into play there.

So Turkey definitely isn't looking forward to any semi-autonomous, let alone independent, Kurdish entities in the region. It's conceivable that, to some extent, Erdoğan also played a moderating role here. Besides, there's another issue that has more to do with Turkish–Azerbaijani–Israeli dynamics. The Turks always want to assert their role as the main ally of Baku. In other words, if there's a

choice between Ankara and Tel Aviv, Baku has to choose its alliance with Ankara. That's Turkey's position. And frankly, in the situation now evolving in the Middle East, we see that Israel increasingly frames Turkey as its next enemy.

In fact, they speak about it openly. And that actually goes back to the point I made earlier—that for the purposes of Israeli hegemony, there can't be any strong military or economic power in the vicinity. So they all have to be either failed states or submitted to Washington and Tel Aviv's will, like Egypt and Jordan are, for example. In this context, Turkey, as a powerful country with a strong military and an independent foreign policy, is increasingly seen—and deliberately framed—by Israeli and pro-Israel actors as the next threat to Israel. And of course, that introduces an element of tension in relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, yeah.

#Pascal

Pietro, do you want to speak to that? Because, I mean, this is super important. Should this actually give a little bit of concern to Erdoğan? You know, there was this video last week that circulated—it was put out by someone in Israel, not by the state—and it kind of became a meme. It showed all the political leaders that Israel had already killed off waiting in a waiting room, and then the last one, when the camera pans over, is Erdoğan waiting with his ticket to go into the slaughter room. I mean, this kind of stuff is out there. Pietro, what do you think it's going to do to regional geopolitics?

#Shakarian

I think it also kind of strengthens the—well, I mean, really, Turkey has to be careful, because all the oil coming from Baku goes through Turkey to Israel. At the same time, the Turkish street is incredibly, incredibly anti-Israeli and very sympathetic to Palestine. So this is a big issue. It puts Turkey in a much more difficult position, but it also puts more pressure on them, as they see themselves being singled out—not only in the case of this video, which is set to that song by The Doors, "The End," where Erdoğan is the last one in the waiting room to be, I guess, killed off.

But in addition, even Naftali Bennett went and said directly to the camera that, you know, Turkey is the next Iran—Turkey is the next Iran. And that's really the former prime minister of Israel saying that. So if that's not a clear message, I don't know what is. Plus, as Eldar is saying, the destruction or dismantling of Iran, for Turkey to have an issue with the Kurds—especially when they see that Trump has actually been trying to court the Kurds in Iran—he's been trying to maybe do a kind of revival of the Mahabad Project in Iran today, or something like that. And it seems, from what I've read most recently, that the Kurds are not interested in that proposal.

They're not interested in that proposal because they've also been screwed over by the U.S. in the past—in recent memory, I mean. So I think, at the end of the day—and also, the other thing—I think Turkey is very, very aware of what Israel's intentions are, but they're playing their hand very well and very cleverly. In addition, I think this whole Nakhchivan airport incident in particular, just as

Eldar was saying, made Aliyev realize that he's not invincible. Especially after the conquest and ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, there was this idea of, you know, "I'm now a great power, a middle power, maybe even a great power," something like that. But then he understood—no, no, really, I'm a small state too, and I have the concerns of a small state.

And I'm not somebody who can go in and invade northern Iran. Because the state in Iran, contrary to what Israel was thinking, contrary to what President Trump was thinking, and even, I guess—you know, the CIA was thinking—they believed the Iranian government could be so weak that if they took out the supreme leader, the whole edifice would collapse. Which makes me really wonder, Pascal, who are the Iran advisors in Washington, D.C.? Because supposedly they've read about Iran. Supposedly they're trained in area studies, or they know something about these countries. They should. And they also have intelligence.

Right. So they should know how sophisticated that government in Iran is—how structured and how strong it is—and that it's not something you can just take out by removing a single leader. Because, you know, they've been able to replace leaders and keep going. The fact that they think otherwise... And also, the other thing that really gets me about this war is this kind of religious dimension to it, right? You have Pete Hegseth basically praying for victory and praying for violence over our enemies. It's almost like—if you've ever read it—there's this great classic anti-war piece by the American writer Mark Twain called *The War Prayer*.

And it reminded me exactly of that—when you're watching Hegseth praying for violence against our enemies and so on. It really makes me question just how far we've come, or maybe what we believe. And even, directly quoting from Aliyev when he was visiting with J.D. Vance, he said, "America is the most powerful country in the world." You know, it's that kind of thing—a military force, the most powerful. But now you see how it is that supposedly the most powerful country in the world finds itself with Iran holding it at its mercy, with the Strait of Hormuz, with how it's waging this war. It's not the war that Trump and Netanyahu thought it was going to be.

#Pascal

Yeah, we're seeing the end of power. Like, there's no such thing as limitless power—no state has it, not even the United States. It's very powerful, but even that has its limits. But, you know, Eldar, what you told me about 40% of Israeli oil actually coming from Azerbaijan—that's really interesting, because the Iranians, of course, know that, right? And as you said, they've shown the willingness to destroy infrastructure, even if it's in third states. Now, the fact that they didn't do that in Azerbaijan, that they let this oil flow when they could have stopped it—what does that tell you about the Iranian strategy toward the South Caucasus and the entire region? The fact that they didn't strike infrastructure they could have hit to hurt one of their two primary enemies.

#Mamedov

Well, I think the Turkish element is clearly important here, because that pipeline does go through Turkey, and Turkey benefits in terms of transit. So I think that's one of the strategic elements behind the Iranian restraint. Generally speaking, it's not my impression that Iran wants a war on all fronts at the same time, at least for the time being. For now, clearly, the priority—the focus—is on the Persian Gulf. But that doesn't mean the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan and its ties with Israel, are of no concern to Iran. On the contrary, I'd say that after the war, Iran will possibly emerge as a weaker state in a conventional sense, but also much more radicalized, much more hardline.

And for Aliyev, that means he'll have to deal not with the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and not with the president, Pascal Lottaz, but with battle-hardened IRGC people who look at relations with other countries strictly through a security lens. They don't see Azerbaijan primarily as a brotherly Muslim Shiite nation—the kind of rhetoric the clerical leadership in Iran is particularly fond of. They see Azerbaijan through a purely unsentimental power and security lens. And what they see is a close alliance with Israel, and that will determine their future strategy toward Azerbaijan. I foresee it becoming much more hardline and radical. And even if...

#Mamedov

The state, even if Iran is weakened by the end of this war, will still be strong enough to inflict intolerable, unacceptable damage on Azerbaijan. That, in turn, I think, will push Aliyev to reconsider or somehow recalibrate his relations with Israel, which Tehran clearly sees as far too close for its comfort. Those ties are becoming a strategic liability for Baku. And, as we were discussing, that's not just because of Iran but also because of Turkey. So what I foresee is that there will be some attempts to disentangle from that—to close the lines with Israel, as far as Baku is concerned.

#Pascal

That would make a lot of sense. Pietro, we're already reaching the one-hour mark. So, Pietro, maybe give your last two minutes of remarks—what you'd like to add to this—and then a final word to Eldar before we wrap it up.

#Shakarian

One thing I want to add to this is where the impression is coming from here in Armenia, because in Armenia people are watching this with great concern, as I was stressing to you last time on the podcast. That concern actually turned into alarm once the war began. People were watching this war very closely at first, though now they're also focused on the election coming up here in June. I should also say that the situation with the war in Iran has put on hold, indefinitely, the whole idea of the so-called "Zangezur corridor"—the plan for a route through Armenia's southern Syunik province. The idea was that Trump would somehow lease a corridor through southern Armenia for 99 years or something like that, but that whole concept is now completely on ice.

Now, Nikol Pashinyan, the prime minister, continues to act as if nothing has changed, right? Because even the media here in Armenia—even Pashinyan’s media, not the opposition media but the government-aligned outlets—were believing and actually predicting that Iran would be defeated by the United States in this war. But in fact, we see the opposite happening. The expectations have been completely upended by how Iran has waged this war. And Iran sees this. Iran sees how Pashinyan’s actions speak louder than his words when it comes to relations with Tehran. But even domestically in Armenia, Pashinyan has major problems.

I mean, just yesterday it was Palm Sunday here in Yerevan, and Pashinyan went and pushed his way through a mass. There was this padarak, you know, where basically the whole church—St. Anna’s Church on Abovyan Street—was completely packed with people. And he pushed his way in with his security detail. There were some scuffles going on and all that, but it was a complete embarrassment. People there were very upset with what he was trying to do—turn something as sacred as the mass of the Armenian Church into a political statement or a political rally. And that’s not even counting what he did last weekend, when he was out trying to solicit support from voters on the streets.

He went on the Yerevan Metro and ended up getting into a very heated argument with a woman who was a refugee from Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh. He was yelling at her, saying, you know, “You people, you people are like runaways. You people are fugitives.” That kind of thing—basically denying that they were victims of ethnic cleansing. He lectured this woman. And you have to think, in a society like Armenia, which is very traditional and conservative, kind of Eastern—Caucasian—how that’s received. She was there with her little son, and you can imagine how something like this is seen in Armenia. So Pashinyan, it’s almost like he’s making one mistake after another, politically, in advance of this election in June.

So he's not looking—election in June in Armenia, sorry. Yeah, election in June in Armenia. That's what I'm saying. It's not looking so good for him. And the war in Iran also undermines him, not only because trade is put on hold indefinitely, but also because Pashinyan’s claim that, you know, “Mr. Aliyev and Mr. Trump and I together, we are supporting peace in the region, that I am the candidate of peace”—this is what Pashinyan says: peace, peace, peace, peace. And yet one of the parties of this so-called peace is waging, you know, the highest war crime—a war of aggression against Iran in tandem with Netanyahu and Israel.

And you see, people notice this. I mean, even Armenian villagers in the regions see that there’s a disconnect between Pashinyan’s rhetoric and reality—that really, Trump is not a man of peace. Pashinyan and Aliyev were even nominating Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize and all that. But now that whole idea of Trump being a man of peace is completely falling apart because he started this war in Iran, and you see what’s happening. And Iran is also making the point that there’s no easy way out of this. You want to offer him something? Even Pashinyan was trying to offer him something.

Because Eshbian was saying, "Look, he was even apologizing to the neighboring states, saying, oh, you know, maybe we can cool things down here." And Trump dismissed that peace offering out of hand. That was an offering on March 7th—he completely destroyed it. And now, when the markets are doing really bad, really terrible in the United States, he's looking desperately for an off-ramp. And you can see it's not ending the way he thinks it's going to end. So that's just my two cents on that. The election in Armenia is going to be very interesting to see how that goes down.

#Pascal

Yeah, we'll also see if it goes down democratically. But we've reached the one-hour mark. Eldar, your closing words to bring everything together in a nice final statement.

#Mamedov

Well, first of all, I'd like to say that I've always been—I'm on record, by the way—as being very skeptical of this whole scheme. And it's not necessarily, you know, a case of feeling deeply satisfied about being able to say "I told you so." But nevertheless, I think that's accurate. The trip from the beginning was more like a mirage, more like a PR exercise for Donald Trump—a stepping stone toward his Nobel Peace Prize. I never saw any real substance in that. What I think has changed now with the war—or rather, maybe not changed but been highlighted—is that the United States' commitment to the region is erratic and shallow, especially with an administration that is so diplomatically inept, unprofessional, unwilling, and unable to follow through on anything, led by a president who is clearly unfit to lead the country, with a hollowed-out diplomatic service.

It just beggars belief. It's mind-boggling how anyone would build their strategy and future on the assumption that the STRIP project is a solid foundation for U.S. engagement in the South Caucasus. And frankly, given the way the Iran war is going—maybe even for the better—just imagine if the U. S. were to start building some sustained presence in Armenia, some real infrastructure with American companies involved. Who knows, in due time, boots on the ground would only make Armenia a target for Iran, which it currently isn't.

So, therefore, I think the lesson that the regional countries will draw from this war is that signing up for these schemes promoted by extra-regional players with very uncertain commitment to the region is simply a road to perdition. Regional issues have to be solved among the regional countries, based on mutual respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, and their interests. So I'm convinced that only a regional approach—regional integration—can solve the issues in the South Caucasus, of course also involving important neighbors like Turkey and Iran.

#Shakarian

And also, just to follow up on that, I wanted to add one more thing, Pascal. This is kind of my final point on this. This was exactly the idea presented by Russia and Iran in their strategic partnership

agreement. They said, you know, the best way for regional integration is if the countries of the region come together and work together. It's not about—well, they would work to push out those external forces that try to create instability and tension in the region. And actually, Russia—along with China—has played a very big role in supporting Iran in this war.

#Pascal

We've got the forces of division versus the forces trying to bring things together for some form of mutual prosperity in the future. And, well, we'll see where it goes, but I'm also quite sure this will make the case that a sovereign and neutral kind of approach is sometimes the most rational thing to do, instead of trying to gang up against one or the other. Ganging up is not usually the idea, especially in a multipolar world. This was highly fascinating. Thank you very much, both of you. Thank you.

#Shakarian

Thank you for having us. We really appreciate it. Thanks so much.

#Mamedov

It was my utmost pleasure to be here. Thank you so much. Thank you for watching. Thank you.