A SILENT POWER STRUGGLE CENTERED AROUND THE 'ARAS 2025' MILITARY EXERCISE

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The South Caucasus remained on the agenda throughout the last week with reciprocal meetings, agreements, and interesting developments. First, one of the most remarkable events of the week was the Aras 2025 military exercise between Iran and Azerbaijan, which took place on 19-21 May 2025. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense announced that this exercise, which took place in the liberated Khojavend and Shusha, served to expand military cooperation between the two countries and increase mutual trust[1]. Brigadier General Veli Medeni, who serves as the Deputy Operational Commander of the Iranian Land Forces and served as the commander of the Aras 2025 exercise, also highlighted the importance of the exercise in terms of countering possible threats and enhancing joint border security[2].

It is clear from the statements of both sides that the exercise served similar objectives for both countries. The exercise was carried out as a result of the decisions previously taken by state authorities. Joint decisions had been taken on cooperation in various fields during the official visit of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to Azerbaijan on 28 April 2025. Immediately afterwards, on 3 May 2025, Azerbaijan's Deputy Minister of Defense Four Star General Kerem Mustafayev had met in Tehran with Major General Aziz Nasirzadeh, the Iranian Armed Forces Deputy Chief of General Staff, and had discussed the possibilities of cooperation in the field of defense.[3]

Following the tension that occurred between Iran and Azerbaijan after the Karabakh victory, the parties' successive meetings and attempts to establish partnerships can be viewed as an important step to revive the fragile and damaged relations, to ensure security and stability in the region, and to move forward together in line with mutual interests. At the same time, the Aras 2025 exercise was not the first of its kind; similar exercises were held in November 2024 in the Aslan Duz region of Ardabil[4].

Another noteworthy aspect during these exercises in Karabakh is Azerbaijan and Irans official visits to and cooperation with countries that are seen as the rivals of the other side. For example, on 19 May, Azerbaijani Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov and Deputy Minister Agil Gurbanov paid an official visit to Israel and held talks with the Chief Director of the Israeli Ministry of Defense Amir Baram. During the meetings, the two countries

discussed activities and plans for expanding cooperation in the military-technical and military-training fields[5].

The fact that Azerbaijan simultaneously held talks with Israel while military exercises with Iran were underway shows that Baku is pursuing a balanced foreign policy with both states based on stability, partnership, and the maintenance of regional peace. This approach reveals that Azerbaijan is pursuing both its military and diplomatic interests, and that while it wants to improve its relations with Iran, it will continue to cooperate with its former partners and can look out for its interests in the region without reservations.

Another striking aspect of the issue is that Iranian officials were in contact with Armenia during this period. Before the exercises were completed and only two days after the Azerbaijani Minister of Defense's visit to Israel, Iranian Minister of Defense Aziz Nasirzadeh paid an official visit to Armenia and held talks first with Armenian Minister of Defense Suren Papikian and then with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. During the meetings, Nasirzadeh stated that Iran unconditionally supports Armenia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and will not accept any attempt to close the common border between Armenia and Iran. He also described this border as a historical communication route between the two nations and emphasized that they will not allow any aggression in this region[6].

These statements by Iranian officials regarding Armenia suggest that although Iran wants to establish stable relations with Azerbaijan, at the same time, it still sees Azerbaijan as a threat and is thus conducting maneuvers to counter this threat. In fact, Iran expressed its strong opposition regarding issues such as the Zangezur Corridor and the closure of the border with Armenia in its negotiations with Baku and continues to view these issues as a threat to its security and economic development. In this context, it is possible to say that Iran seeks a balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, the fact that Nasirzadeh's visit to Armenia took place soon after the visit of the Azerbaijani delegation to Israel can be interpreted as a message to Baku.

Another point to be added is that Iran arranged a joint exercise with Armenia in April to reinforce the security of the common borders and to increase the capacity of the forces deployed in this sensitive region. During this exercise, Iran emphasized the geopolitical importance of the Caucasus and reiterated its commitment to peace and stability[7].

From Armenia's point of view, the country is on the one hand cooperating with Iran and the West to strengthen its regional defense, while on the other hand trying to revive its relations with Russia, which have become strained and fragile since 2022. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ararat Mirzoyan in Yerevan on 21 May shows that Armenia is trying to strike a balance between the West and Russia and is making diplomatic maneuvers to gain the support of both sides.

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[6] Iran Warns Against Encroachments On Border With Armenia, 22 May 2025, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33420510.html

[7] Iran, Armenia launch joint military drill near border, 25 May 2025, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/511627/Iran-Armenia-launch-joint-military-drill-near-border

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