AZERBAIJAN GOVERNMENT SETS UP THINK TANK IN EFFORTS TO INCREASE REGIONAL CLOUT

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At the start of last year, Azerbaijans government established the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) think tank, in an effort to modernise and increase its regional and international clout.

Farid Shafiyev, a diplomat who came back to academia to chair the think tank after more than 20 years in the foreign service, sat down with journalists a day before the parliamentary elections on Sunday (9 February).

Now we are working to have a scholarship funded by the government to come and research at the centre, said Shafiyev, who also contacted think tanks in the region as well as Brussels-based organisations.

The number one research topic for the AIR Center is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia, with more than two-thirds of efforts going in this direction.

Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions are internationally recognised territories of Azerbaijan but have been occupied by Armenia following a 1988-94 war that claimed an estimated 30,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

A ceasefire was called in 1994, but decades of internationally mediated negotiations with the involvement of the OSCEs Minsk Group have failed to result in a resolution. The Minsk Group is co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States.

Also, AIR Center also spends considerable resources on studying Azerbaijans neighbours, Georgia, Russia, Turkey and Iran.

We have a complicated relationship with Iran, said Shafiyev, former ambassador of Azerbaijan to the Czech Republic and Canada. We have millions of ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran.

The number of ethnic Iranian Azeris is heavily disputed, with estimates ranging from 12 million to as much as 30% of Irans population, or about 23 million people. Azerbaijans own population is 10 million.

Thats an important factor in our relationship, said Shafiyev, the other, of course, the differences in our state systems. Azerbaijan is staunchly secular.

The former diplomat sees a parallel between Iran and Russia in that both attempt to bring Azerbaijan within their sphere of influence.

At least Russians dont deny our ethnic identity, said Shafiyev. With Iran it is much more tricky, because the Islamic Republic plays on the religious kinship between the two states. About 80% of Azerbaijanis are Shia Muslims.

Plus, another factor that irritates Iran is that we have relations with the United States and Israel, said Shafiyev, adding we, in turn, always point to the good relations between Iran and Armenia.

Having said all that, we believe its important to have good neighbourly relations with Iran, underscored Shafiyev, describing the American withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal as unfortunate and raising tension in the region.

As a neighbour, we dont like to see war, especially one that would have direct repercussions for Azerbaijan because of the potential inflow of refugees, added Shafiyev.

On the issue of trade, Shafiyev said that having a solid economic relationship with the EU will remain a priority for the Caucasian country as it attempts to become more competitive and open.

However, there is the Russia factor' which Azerbaijan should keep in mind, especially in view of disunity within the EU and the World Trade Organisation, Shafiyev said.

We have seen what happened in Ukraine. Because the EU is not God, its not going to come and rescue your economy or [solve] your political problem with your neighbours.

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