

## **Nervous Caucasus Backs Washington over Iraq**

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Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia support United States to various degrees, but worry about war's impact on their own region.

The leaders of the south Caucasus countries are generally supportive of the United States-led attack on Iraq, but fearful of its consequences for a region not far from the conflict zone.

Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, is only 750 km from Baghdad, and the other two Caucasian capitals, Baku and Tbilisi, are not much further away. But the three countries are less likely to endure floods of refugees than the broader shockwaves of a conflict that will reshape the wider region.

Two of the three countries in the region, Azerbaijan and Georgia, were named by the US State Department on March 19 as being part of Washington's 30-member "coalition of the willing" formed to fight Saddam Hussein.

Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze is one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the United States' position, and hints openly that backing Washington is "in the interest of Georgia." Shevardnadze said on March 20 that "if the necessity arises" he would be glad to give the Americans use of Georgian airbases in the war on Iraq. The USA has not taken up the offer.

Shevardnadze also said he had "made a mistake" when, as foreign minister of the Soviet Union 12 years ago during the last Gulf War, he had advised his US counterpart James Baker against sending troops into Baghdad, as he believed it would lead to heavy loss of life.

Azerbaijani leader Heidar Aliev has given more cautious backing to Washington's campaign. Baku has not given permission to the USA to use Azerbaijani airfields for an attack on Iraq, although it is giving overflight rights to the Americans. The deputy director of AZAL airline Sabir Ilyasov told Turan news agency that Baku airport was ready to receive civilian aircraft for refuelling en route to Iraq - but that so far no requests had been made.

Azerbaijan's international profile roughly mirrors that of Turkey: a pro-western elite with close ties to Washington is treading carefully, aware that the majority of the population is opposed to war on a fellow Muslim country.

Yeni Musavat newspaper reported on March 17 for example that many Azerbaijani volunteers had been turning up at the Iraqi embassy in Baku wishing to go and help defend the Baghdad regime.

Armenia is the most ambivalent of the three south Caucasus countries and its position is close to that of its strongest ally, Russia. Foreign minister Vartan Oskanian has called for the United Nations process to be given more time.

Some Armenians fear that the US will strengthen Turkey, Armenia's historic foe, both politically and economically as the price of its support in the Iraqi campaign.

The view of Anahit Stepanian, a Yerevan teacher is typical, "The stronger Turkey is, the worse it is for us.

Turkey wants to destroy the Kurds, just as it once organised the genocide of the Armenians. And that is bad for everyone."

Armenia also has the closest ties of the three countries to Iraq and there is a long-established Armenian community of some 20,000 people there. Armenia opened an embassy in Baghdad in February 2002. The diplomats were evacuated over the last few days and some of the Armenians may well also try and make their way to Armenia to escape the war.

However, geography is likely to spare the south Caucasus from any influx of refugees, who would first have to make their way across Iran to get to the region. Azerbaijan has so far recorded just 14 refugees from Iraq, who are being looked after by the United Nations High Council for Refugees.

Just in case however, Georgian intelligence chief Avtandil Ioseliani said that his country could not cope with any more refugees after its experience with displaced persons fleeing Chechnya in 1999. "Georgia's display of humanity to Chechen refugees ended up by giving us the Pankisi problem," Ioseliani said.

Last year Georgian politicians repeatedly expressed worries that Moscow might use war in Iraq as a pretext to strike at the Pankisi Gorge, which it accused of being a haven of Chechen fighters. That immediate worry appears to have passed, but some Georgian commentators are worried that Tbilisi has thrown in its lot too openly with the United States.

Political scientist Ramaz Klimiashvili said that Georgia's position might alienate friends in Europe and expose it to dangers if things began to go wrong. "I think after petrol prices rise and inflation jumps as a result of the Iraq crisis, Georgia's leaders will soon dampen down their political rhetoric," he said.

Natiq Aliiev, head of the Azerbaijani state oil firm SOCAR, said that the war was not likely to affect adversely work on the country's major economic project, the new pipeline under construction from Baku to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

But Aliiev did not predict how a US takeover of the world's second-largest oil producer, Iraq, would affect a small country almost entirely reliant on oil revenues for economic survival, Azerbaijan.

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**Location:** Caucasus  
Turkey  
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