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IRAN'S ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN POLICY:

GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The Second Karabakh War that led to Armenia's defeat as a result of Azerbaijan's victorious counter-offensive dubbed as "Iron Fist" was not just a war fought between the two countries, but also a deciding factor of the new geo-political situation in the South Caucasus region. It is beyond a doubt that there are countries reluctant to accept these new geo-political realities that are trying to destabilize the situation and Iran is one of these states. Despite the Azerbaijani people's being part of the Islamic civilization and the country's historical and cultural proximity to Iran, the Iranian state has placed an emphasis on gaining significant leverage of influence in the region, prioritizing Armenia in its quest for a strategic ally. Moreover, on many occasions, Iran has backed Armenian military aggression against Azerbaijan either openly or covertly. Azerbaijan has sought to comply with the principles of good neighborliness, considering the current geo-political situation, instead of taking a tough stance against Iran. At the same time, Azerbaijan has established bilateral political, economic and cultural ties with Iran. Nevertheless, Iran moved to expand its relations with Armenia, keeping in mind its concerns over "the Azerbaijan's unification with the territories in northern Iran densely populated by Turks". From Iran's viewpoint, Armenia fulfills the emerging task of protecting western and northern Iran from the influence of the Turks. On the other hand, capitalizing on the Armenian community's political clout in the USA and Europe meets Iran's interests. Other factors contributing to the strengthened Iranian-Armenian relations included Turkey's growing geopolitical influence in the region, and Azerbaijan's close relations with Turkey. Although new geo-political realities emerged in the South Caucasus region during and after the 44-day war, Iran has been attempting to destabilize the situation ever since due to its reluctance to accept the facts. Unsurprisingly, ample evidence is available concerning Iran's cooperation with both Armenia and the separatist entity, as well as its involvement in joint illegal activities in the Azerbaijani territories that were under Armenian occupation for nearly 30 years. Azerbaijan liberated its territory from the Armenian occupation as a result of the 44-day Patriotic War, which led to the emergence of new geo-political realities in the South Caucasus. Evidently, Iran is utterly perturbed over this situation, given that the new geo-political environment increases the influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey in the region as part of their cooperation. Furthermore, the strengthening of a strategic alliance between Turkey and Azerbaijan and the expanding cooperation and integration in the Turkic world in general come into play. Overall, Turkic unity is an underlying cause of Iran's inability to grasp the current geo-political realities in the region. Iran definitely perceives Turkic unity as a threat. Therefore, it has consistently backed Armenia instead of supporting Azerbaijan, and this is currently the case as well. Although Iran certainly reserves a sovereign right to pursue its own policy and establish close ties with Armenia, taking sides, supporting this country and making defiant accusations significantly questions Tehran's attitude of good neighborliness toward Azerbaijan.

Keywords: Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, The Second Karabakh War, Geopolitical Realities.



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İRAN'S ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN POLICY: GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

İRAN'IN ERMENİSTAN VE AZERBAIJAN POLİTİKASI: JEOPOLİTİK REALİTELER VE KARŞILAŞTIRMALI ANALİZLER

ÖZ

Azerbaycan'ın 44 gün devam eden "Demir Yumruk" operasyonu ile Ermenistan'ın mağlup olduğu İkinci Karabağ Savaşı sadece iki ülke arasında yaşanan bir savaş değil, Güney Kafkasya'nın yeni jeopolitik durumunun da belirleyici bir faktörü oldu. Her ne kadar bölgede yeni jeopolitik realiteler oluşsa da, durumu kabullenmek istemeyen ve istikrarı bozmaya çalışan devletlerin olduğu da yadsınamaz bir gerçektir ve bu devletlerden biri de İran'dır. İslam medeniyetinin taşıyıcılarından biri olan Azerbaycan halkının da Müslüman, aynı zamanda onunla tarihi ve medeni bağları olmasına rağmen bölgede ciddi prestij kazanma ve kendine stratejik müttefik arayışı içerisinde olan Ermenistan'a büyük üstünlük vermiş, bu devletin Azerbaycan'a yönelik askeri tecavüzünü bazen kapalı, bazen de açık şekilde desteklemiştir. Fakat Azerbaycan İran'a yönelik radikal bir tutum sergilememiş, mevcut jeopolitik durumu hesaba katarak komşuluk politikası yürütse de, aynı zamanda karşılıklı ekonomik-politik, kültürel ilişkiler kursa da, İran "Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti ile İran'ın kuzeyindeki Türklerin yoğun olarak yaşadığı toprakların birleşmesi" düşüncesini her zaman göz önünde bulundurarak Ermenistan'la ilişkilerini güçlendirmiştir. İran tarafından değerlendirildiği zaman Ermenistan Batı ve Kuzey İran'ı Türklerin etkisinden koruyan bir mihver görevini taşımaktadır. Diğer taraftan, ABD ve Avrupa'daki Ermeni lobisinin siyasi alandaki etkisinden yararlanmak da İran'ın çıkarlarıyla örtüşmektedir. Ermenistan ise İran'la ilişkileri açısından onu Ermenistan'a ekonomik açıdan nefes verdirecek bir devlet olarak görmekte ve bu yaklaşım günümüzde de geçerliliğini korumaktadır. İran'la Ermenistan arasındaki ilişkileri güçlendiren diğer faktörler ise jeopolitik açıdan bölgede Türkiye'nin artan etkisi ve Azerbaycan'ın bu devlet ile olan yakın ilişkileridir. 44 günlük savaş döneminde ve sonrasında Güney Kafkasya'da yeni jeopolitik realiteler oluşsa da, gerçekleri kabullenmek istemeyen İran istikrarı bozmaya çalışmaktadır. Nitekim, İran'ın 30 senelik işgal döneminde hem Ermenistan'la, hem de Karabağ'daki Ermeni ayrılıkçı güçleriyle işbirliği içerisinde olmasına, işgal altındaki Azerbaycan topraklarında yasal olmayan faaliyetler yürütmesine ilişkin çok sayıda deliller vardır. 44 günlük Vatan Savaşı sonucu Azerbaycan kendi topraklarını işgalden kurtararak Güney Kafkasya'da yeni jeopolitik realiteler oluşturdu. Görünen o ki, bu durum ve ortaya çıkan gerçekler İran'ı ciddi şekilde rahatsız etmektedir. Çünkü yeni jeopolitik realiteler Azerbaycan'la Türkiye'nin işbirliği platformları çerçevesinde Güney Kafkasya'daki rolünü daha da etkili kılmaktadır. Türkiye ile Azerbaycan arasındaki stratejik müttefiklik düzeyinde ilişkilerin pekiştirilmesi, genel olarak Türk Dünyası arasında işbirliği ve entegrasyonun kurulması, dolayısı ile Türk Birliği faktörü İran'ın bölgede jeopolitik realitelerle uzlaşmamasının önemli unsurlarındandır. Türk Birliği faktörü İran açısından büyük bir tehdit olarak algılanmaktadır. Bu sebepten İran her zaman Azerbaycan karşısında Ermenistan'ı desteklemiş, bu gün de desteklemektedir. İran'ın Ermenistan'la ilgili yürüttüğü politika ve samimi ilişkiler kurması, hiç kuşkusuz onun yasal hukukudur, fakat taraf tutarak bu ülkeyi desteklemesi ve provokatif yöntemlere yönelerek Azerbaycan'ı suçlamalarda bulunması Tahran'ın samimi komşuluk tavrının önemli ölçüde sorgulanmasını gerektirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Ermenistan, Azerbaycan, İkinci Karabağ Savaşı, Jeopolitik Realiteler.

INTRODUCTION

As is known, historically, the system and principles that have been leading to maintaining peace among states have always suffered defeat against geopolitics. Agitations, games, intrigues, and wars seem endless in many countries around the world. The same situation can be observed in the South Caucasus. For about 30 years, an uncertain situation had arisen regarding the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which could not find a solution. First of all, both countries were considering each other as enemies who will never be able to come together. More than anything, this was because of the fact that each side claims that the other side came to Nagorno-Karabakh region after them and they are the legitimate residents. However documents prove that the Armenians were forced to move to the area by the Russians with the 15th article of the Turkmenchay Treaty signed between Russia and Iran, which later resulted in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Scientist Nikolay Shavrov who was the Russian envoy in Iran at that period provides very valuable information about this issue: "We started the colonization by placing the others, not the Russians in the Southern Caucasus region. After the 1826-1828 wars, between 1828 and 1830, we placed more than 40.000 Iranian Armenians and 84.000 Turkish Armenians in the territories that had the best public areas... More than 1 million out of 1.3 million Armenians in Southern Caucasia as of the beginning of this century are not the native inhabitants of the region, but rather were placed by us..."¹ Armenian historian M.Nersisyan also verifies the mobilization of Armenians from Turkey and Iran to Karabakh and Yerevan region after the Turkmenchay Treaty: "At the end of 1820s more than 40.000 Armenians from Iran and around 90.000 Armenians from Turkey were made to move to the region...."² Russian scientist A.Liprandi mentioned that Armenians came to Karabakh later³ and he indicated that the issue

¹ Николай Шавров, *Новая Угроза Русскому Делу в Закавказье: Предстоящая Распродажа Мугани Иностранцам*, ЭЛМ, Баку 1990, с. 63.

² Микртин Нерсисян, *Из Истории Русско-Армянских Отношений. Книга I*, изд-во "Академия Наук Армянской ССР", Ереван 1956, с. 227.

³ Александр Липранди, *Кавказ и Россия*, Харьков 1911, с. 46.

with them moving to Southern Caucasia is a result of the imperialist policies that Russia applied in the region.⁴ The information about the immigration policies can also be found in the studies of other Russian scientists such as I.Yenikolopov,⁵ S.Şostakovich⁶ Armenian historian T.Agayan,⁷ V.Parsamyan,⁸ Turkish historian B.Kemal,⁹ M.Gokce,¹⁰ H.Demirci¹¹ We also have a special study on this topic.¹² If the issue is looked upon from the perspective of historical truth, it is seen that Armenians came to Karabakh after the Azerbaijani Turks and there is no base in asserting that their existence on those territories is legitimate. However it would be unreal to assume that the issue will be solved through the historical truth. In such an atmosphere, there was a belief that there will not be reconciliation and peace between the parties. And also this was a result of the double standards policy of major powers, which caused the Armenian side not to approach the problem for its real resolution. However, the geopolitical and military processes in the region have fundamentally changed. The 44-Day War played a decisive role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has effectively created a new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus. Unfortunately, there are still forces that do not want to reconcile with this geopolitical reality today. These states hinder the achievement of peace and stability in the region through their statements and actions. One of these states is Iran. The position of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a neighboring country is quite thought-provoking in this regard. From this point, Iran deems a weak Azerbaijan, despite being a Muslim country, essential for its own existence. With tendencies to integrate within southern Azerbaijan and Northern Azerbaijan, Iran's regional policy requires strengthening Armenia. Armenia is also a factor that protects Southern Azerbaijan from the influence of the Turks. In other words, as Iran believes that Turkey would play an important role in a possible request for independence among its population with a Turkic origin, it is developing its ties with Armenia rapidly. In this article is researched the new geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus and Iran's position from an analytical perspective and Iran's Armenia and Azerbaijan policy has been analyzed comparatively.

1. The Place of Islam in the Political Ideology of Iran

As is known, Iran is one of the countries that recently had a say on emerging challenges in the Middle East, South Caucasus and the entire Islamic world and considerably influenced world powers, appearing friendly and sincere to some of its neighbors, while threatening other states. The Six-Day War in 1967, which went down in history as a defeat of the Arab countries, caused a decline of nationalism ideas in the Middle East. At the same time, the idea of a revolutionary religious movement launched in Iran by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini inevitably gave an impetus to the emergence of new trends in the Arab world. The overthrow of the Shah regime and the coup in Iran, i.e. the ensuing emergence of the faith-based ideology, led to a further religious divide in the Islamic world. Certainly, Khomeini's taking refuge in France and his return to Iran from that country was no coincidence. In fact, this is an important matter that should be thoroughly researched.

Undoubtedly, some world powers were seeking new opportunities to realize their geo-political goals in the region. Sectarian wars were one of the most efficient tools in this regard. Therefore, Khomeini's coming to power facilitated the efforts of those powers, since his convictions were based on the religious Wilayati-faqih concept ("Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist").

It is worth mentioning that the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978 led to the strengthening of unity among the Arab countries and hostility against Israel increased. The toppling of the Shah of Iran in February 1979 and the emergence of the Khomeini regime shifted the attention of the Sunni Arab world from Israel to the Shia Iranian state and a clash with a new foe appeared unavoidable.

It came as no surprise that differences within the Arab world exacerbated after the mullah-controlled regime came to power in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War broke out in September 1980. Inter-religious rift further intensified as well.¹³ Simultaneously, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran fueled religious conflicts in the

⁴Aleksandr Liprandi, *Кавказ и Россия*, Харьков 1911, с. 133.

⁵Иван Ениколопов, *Грибоедов и Восток*, Айпетрат, Ереван 1954, с. 137.

⁶Сергей Шостакович, *Дипломатическая Деятельность А.С.Грибоедова*, изд-во "Социально-экономической литературы", Москва 1960, с. 154.

⁷Цатур Агаян, *Роль России в Исторических Судьбах Армянского Народа: К 150 Летию Присоединения Восточной Армении к России*, Наука, Москва 1978, с.220.

⁸Вардан Парсамян, *История Армянского Народа (1801-1900 гг.)*, Аястан, Ереван 1977, с.49.

⁹Kemal Beydilli, "1828-1829 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşında Doğu Anadolu'dan Rusya'ya Göçürülen Ermeniler", *Türk Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi*, 1988, с. XIII, sayı. 17, p. 407.

¹⁰Mustafa Gökçe, "Yükarı Karabağ Sorunu ve Türkiye-Ermenistan İlişkileri Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme", *Turkish Studies – International Periodical for the Languages, Terature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 2011, Volume 6/1, p. 1140.

¹¹Hikmet Demirci, "Karabağ Sorunu'nun Tarihsel Gelişimi ve Son Karabağ Mutabakatı", *Asya Studies, Academic Social Studies / Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar*, May 2022, year: 6 – Number: Special Issue (Özel Sayı) 2, p. 21-22.

¹²See more: Emin Şihaliyev, "Çarlık Rusya Tarafından Ermenilerin Azerbaycan Topraklarına Göçürülmesi ve Akabinde Oluşturulan Ermeni Vilayeti (1828) (Rus ve Ermeni Kaynakları Işığında)", *Avrasya Strateji dergisi*, 2015, C.4, S. 1, p. 7-24.

¹³See more: Fahir Armaoğlu, *20. yüzyıl siyasi tarihi (1914-1980)*, 2 ciltte, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür yayınları, Ankara 1991, I c, p, 749.

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Islamic world. Nevertheless, **verse 103 of Surah Al-Imran** of the Quran says, “*Hold firmly to the rope (book, religion) of Allah and do not be divided.*”

Other verses of the Quran also issue a clear warning in this respect. “*Obey Allah and His Messenger and do not quarrel with one another. Otherwise, you will weaken and lose your strength,*” says **Verse 46 of Surah Al-Anfal**.

The issue of religion's role in Iran is particularly worth mentioning in this regard. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the state-religion relations are crucial for the public from the scientific, political and personal points of view. Certainly, Iran is not the only such country in the world. The state-religion relationship is rooted and extreme in Afghanistan and some Arab countries as well.

The point is that if religion becomes a political and ideological tool of a country's government, the state power is sanctified. At the same time, commenting on state policy or expressing critical views is considered a sin in such a country. Moreover, criticizing the government's decisions is deemed blasphemy and labelled as harmful for the sacred image of the state. As a result, executions are frequently carried out and a lot of people are detained and cast behind bars; those persons and their relatives face torture and their property is confiscated. The government clamps down on dissent because criticizing it in those countries is equated to criticizing God.

The reality is that the laws passed in the Islamic Republic of Iran envisage pressure and oppression, although a founding principle of Islam says, “*Let there be no compulsion in religion*” (**Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 256**).

Since religion is not mandatory for anyone, obligatory Islamization and forcing people to follow Muslim rites is absolutely meaningless. Otherwise, the person facing pressure would turn into a religious hypocrite instead of becoming a devout Muslim, which runs counter to Islam altogether. Despite its name that suggests to the contrary, Iran has failed to become a truly Islamic republic. In general, any state should be committed to safeguarding public order, ensuring justice for its citizens and the rule of law. All people should be at liberty and empowered to choose their own path and convictions. Thus, some verses of the Holy Quran refer to people's free choice of either denial or faith. Thus, **Verse 29 of Surah Al-Kahf** says “*whoever so wills may believe and whoever so wills may deny*”. The phrase can also be written out as follows: “*Undoubtedly, we have shown the righteous path to men, but every person was also given the right to be a believer or a disbeliever*” (**Surah Al-Insan, verse 3**).

If the government in any country turns religion into a political and ideological tool in an effort to manipulate public opinion, its actions amount to “*deceiving about Allah under the pretext of religion*”. **Surah Fatir, Verse 5** of the Quran says, “*Do not let a deceiver mislead you about God.*”

The canons of Islam do not authorize anyone to put pressure on people or resort to violence and prophets are no exception in this regard. “*If the Lord so willed, all those on the face of the earth would be believers. Will you then force mankind into believing?*” (**Surah Yunus, verse 99**).

In this situation, what is the basis for Iran, an Islamic republic, to employ its tough leverage of influence on others, having turned religion into a major tool at its disposal? A multitude of examples could be cited in this regard. As a result, there is widespread hostility in Iran and similar countries toward not only the government and officials, but also Islam, which is a religion of peace, love and compassion. This hatred is caused by Iran and such countries themselves. Moreover, the actions taken by Iran continue to undermine its relations with neighboring states, in particular, Azerbaijan. Despite its persistent attempts to take advantage of the Shia factor both domestically and in Azerbaijan, the facts speak for themselves.

Iran has established top-level relations with Armenia over about a 30-year period, despite the Armenian invasion of the historical territory of Azerbaijan, which is regarded by Iran as its “**Shia brother**”, as well as Armenia's blatantly insulting Azerbaijani historical and religious monuments and pursuing a policy of terrorism against cultural monuments. Iran turned a blind eye to the desecration of Azerbaijani shrines by the Armenians, who were keeping pigs, cows and other animals in mosques. Following the liberation of Azerbaijan's territory, Iran showed its true colors by openly declaring fraternal ties with Armenia, making its stance clear on “*unchanged borders*” and opposing the opening of the “*Zangazur corridor*” as its “*red line*”. So, the following question arises, “*Where was Iran's red line during the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory? What about its Shia brotherhood slogans?*”

Iran acted aggressively against Azerbaijan in the past as well. Although Iran had not conducted military exercises during the occupation of a part of Azerbaijan's territory, it launched regular drills following Azerbaijan's historic victory in 2020. These actions are apparently part of Iran's strategy aimed at intimidating Azerbaijan. One of the graphic examples of this was an assault and terror attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran committed on January 27, 2023. A conclusion may also be made that the Iranian secret service could

have been implicated in the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in London on August 4, 2022, which was covered up by the alleged issue of Islamic faith.

Nevertheless, all of Iran's hostile actions are fruitless. But such actions as forging high-level discussions with Armenia, the swift opening of a consulate in Qafan and a vigorous commitment to providing humanitarian aid to Karabakh Armenians are a far cry from religious "brotherhood". What is the difference between Iran, which is boosting its friendly ties with Armenia, and the Armenian state, which insults Islam by keeping cattle in mosques? None whatsoever. Both countries are similar and known for their hostile plans against Azerbaijan on crucial issues. Although Iran certainly reserves a sovereign right to pursue its own policy and establish close ties with Armenia, taking sides, supporting this country and making defiant accusations significantly questions Iran's attitude of good neighborliness toward Azerbaijan.

2. Iran's Policy on Armenia and Azerbaijan Before Second Karabakh War

New geo-political realities emerged in the South Caucasus following the 44-day Patriotic War, which resulted in Azerbaijan's confident win and Armenia's crushing defeat. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had remained unresolved for nearly three decades and obstacles impeding its political and legal settlement stood in the way. Armenia, which bound hopes with an everlasting support of superpowers, repeatedly sought to violate the Line of Contact and deal a psychological blow upon Azerbaijan. Armenian officials' arrogant and harsh statements contradicting international law, as well as Armenia's adventurous and erroneous moves, served as a precursor for the outbreak of a new war. Armenia's ceasefire violation and attack on Azerbaijani land on September 27, 2020 sparked "an instantaneous war".

It is noteworthy that these developments had been reinforced by the strengthening resolve of both the Azerbaijani government and people to liberate the country's occupied territory. As a result, Azerbaijan achieved this goal after launching a counter-attack and winning the 44-day war. Armenia was completely disarmed and its maneuvering potential collapsed, while its tactics aimed at misleading the public at home and the world community became futile. Surrendering was the only option left for Armenia. Facing a predicament, Armenia resorted to its traditional policy and started seeking assistance from world countries, which demonstrated its actual essence to the whole world. Moreover, the 44-day war and the post-war period clarified the positions of world countries on the conflict and the international community clearly witnessed which countries sided with either the party fighting for a just cause or the unfair party.

Although the war ended in Azerbaijan's resounding victory in the battlefield, it is still underway in the political, diplomatic and information realm. From now onward, Azerbaijan should develop a new strategy to repel any potential attack in accordance with the emerging situation. These measures are necessitated by geopolitical realities of the current time period. It is also worth mentioning that the Second Karabakh War that led to Armenia's defeat as a result of Azerbaijan's victorious counter-offensive dubbed as "Iron Fist" was not just a war fought between the two countries, but also a deciding factor of the new geo-political situation in the South Caucasus region. It is beyond a doubt that there are countries reluctant to accept these new geo-political realities that are trying to destabilize the situation and Iran is one of these states.

Despite the Azerbaijani people's being part of the Islamic civilization and the country's historical and cultural proximity to Iran, the Iranian state has placed an emphasis since the Soviet Union's collapse on gaining significant leverage of influence in the region, prioritizing Armenia in its quest for a strategic ally. Moreover, on many occasions, Iran has backed Armenian military aggression against Azerbaijan either openly or covertly.¹⁴

All regional countries were increasingly wary of the Iranian-Armenian relations, which were rising to the level of a strategic partnership. This situation necessitated raising some important questions, including those concerning possible causes underlying this partnership.

Iran-Armenia relations developed on the basis of the following considerations and Iran's policy with regard to its ally was underpinned by the following factors:

- * *prioritizing certain projects of strategic importance and implementing some of those bilateral initiatives*
- * *Iran's stance on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*
- * *impact of the issue concerning the Azerbaijani-populated territory in northern Iran (informally referred to in Azerbaijan as South Azerbaijan – E.Sh.) on bilateral relations*
- * *increasing efforts aimed at comprehensive Turkish-Azerbaijani integration and Turkey's policy of balancing regional relations*
- * *trends of strengthening unity between Iran's north and the Azerbaijan Republic (Iran deems this possibility as its most significant security challenge)*

¹⁴Musa Qasimov, *Azərbaycanın xarici siyasəti (konsepsiya məsələləri)*. Mütərcim, Bakı 1997, p. 74-75.

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* *Iran and Armenia's being sidelined from planned projects on delivering Azerbaijan's energy resources to world markets*

* *impeding efforts on regional countries' Western integration*

* *Tehran's intention to take advantage of the powerful Armenian lobby in the U.S. and Europe to counter the Jewish community's anti-Iranian activities internationally.*

Unlike the early years of its independence, Azerbaijan has sought to comply with the principles of good neighborliness, considering the current geo-political situation, instead of taking a tough stance against Iran. At the same time, Azerbaijan has established bilateral political, economic and cultural ties with Iran. Nevertheless, Iran moved to expand its relations with Armenia, keeping in mind its concerns over "the Azerbaijan Republic's unification with the territories in northern Iran densely populated by Azerbaijanis". From Iran's viewpoint, Armenia fulfills the emerging task of protecting western and northern Iran from the influence of the Turks. On the other hand, capitalizing on the Armenian community's political clout in the United States and Europe meets Iran's interests.

As for Armenia's reasoning, it considers Iran as a country capable of revitalizing its economy and its approach to bilateral relations remains unchanged.¹⁵ Other factors contributing to the strengthened Iranian-Armenian relations included Turkey's growing geopolitical influence in the region, Azerbaijan and Georgia's close relations with Turkey and the differences between Turkey and Armenia.¹⁶

Iran's regional policy during different stages dwelled upon creating suitable conditions for strengthening Armenia's positions. As mentioned above, Armenia facilitates "protecting western and northern Iran from the influence of the Turks". Therefore, Tehran has shaped up its policy on the South Caucasus region in view of its goals and potential threats.

The causes of the expanded Iranian-Armenian relations also include Armenia's growing tension with Azerbaijan and Turkey due to Yerevan's allegations regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and "genocide" claims, the embargo imposed on Armenia by both countries, as well as Armenia's risk of complete economic, military and energy dependence on Russia.

Landlocked Armenia needed Iran's support to open up to the rest of the world. It is an undeniable fact that Armenia faces dire constraints and challenges due to its geographical location. Ruben Yegoryan, a former Armenian cabinet minister, commented on further prospects for Iranian-Armenian cooperation.

*"Iran is our future. Our top priority is to take advantage of land and maritime routes linked to Iran. This will provide us with an outlet and access to Iranian markets and seaports in the Basra (Persian) Gulf", Yegoryan said.*¹⁷

This approach is also illustrated by the remarks of Serzh Sargsyan, a former Armenian president, who underscored Iran's importance for Armenia. Sargsyan also admitted that Iran was the only country Armenia was pinning hopes upon economically.

*"Iran is a very important country for Armenia and it is not because we have been neighbors for many centuries. There are other reasons for this as well. In fact, Iran is one of the two countries when it comes to our communication with the outside world. Iran's facing problems means gradual narrowing of Armenia's breathing tube", Sargsyan said.*¹⁸

Iran's weaponry aid to Armenia during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and its doorway into the Indian Ocean significantly assisted in Yerevan's efforts to overcome Turkey and Azerbaijan's economic bans. Iran's closely following and its stance on this conflict was beneficial for Armenia. This allowed Iran to act as a mediator in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and wield influence in ongoing developments in the Caucasus. As a result, the Azerbaijani side had blamed loss of its territory on sporadic Iranian mediation efforts. Armenia, for its part, used Tehran's mediation in peace talks as its tactics aimed at gaining time for military maneuvering.¹⁹

Another reason for the Iranian-Armenian rapprochement is Armenia's being Iran's only Christian neighbor. According to the Dialogue among Civilizations, a concept introduced by Mohammad Khatami, a former Iranian president, comprehensive bilateral relations were considered a crucial opportunity for Iran to display exemplary

¹⁵Nazmi Gül, Gökçen Ekici, "Ortak tehdit algılamaları ve stratejik ittifaklığa doğru ilerleyen İran-Ermenistan ilişkileri", *Stratejik Analiz, Aylık Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Stratejik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2002, C. 2, S. 22, p. 39.

¹⁶Arzu Celalifer Ekinci, "Türk dış politikası bağlamında Türkiye-İran ilişkilerinin önemi", *Türk Dış Politikası. Uluslararası III. Türk dış politikası sempozyumu tebliğleri. Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırmalar Kurumu (USAK) yayınları*, Ankara 2009, p. 245.

¹⁷Mesut Çaşın, "İran silahlı kuvvetleri", *Avrasya Dosyası, Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Stratejik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, ASAM yayınları, Ankara 1995, C. 2, S. 1, p. 48.

¹⁸"Эхо Москвы/Передачи/Интервью/Четверг, 27.1.2011: Серж Саргсян, президент Армении", <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/744902-echo.phtml>

¹⁹P.Ş.Səfərov, *90-ці illərdə Azərbaycanın beynəlxalq vəziyyəti və xarici siyasəti*, N.Tusi ad. Azərbaycan Dövlət Pedaqoji Universiteti, Bakı 1999, p. 30.

fraternity between Islam and Christianity to the world community. Moreover, the Iranian-Armenian relations would demonstrate the mild side of Iranian fundamentalism.²⁰

In a nutshell, Iran viewed its policy regarding Armenia as part of “a dialogue among civilizations”. Nonetheless, Iran accused Azerbaijan of establishing close ties with Israel and the U.S. and allegedly “betraying” Islamic values. At the same time, Iran, itself, has established multi-faceted cooperation in the political, economic, technical, financial and other fields with Armenia, which had invaded over 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory, driving more than 1.2 million Muslim Azerbaijanis out of their homes, ruined and desecrated Islamic shrines, turning them into weaponry storehouses.

The mentioned conclusions clearly cite examples of Iran's coordinated activity with Armenia. Undoubtedly, Iranian companies and entrepreneurs cooperated with Armenia in using the occupied Azerbaijani territories, destroying homes and dismantling and taking away railway tracks. Iran failed to take stock of the fact that Azerbaijan takes generally accepted norms as a basis in its foreign policy and its foreign and domestic policy is not based on religious principles. In addition, Iran should have realized that Azerbaijan never served as a tool for anti-Iranian policies of the United States and Israel and expressed its firm stance in this regard in line with its national interests.

Some media reports suggested that the U.S. and Israel were planning to use Azerbaijan as a “starting point” for a possible attack on Iran’s nuclear reactors. However, the Azerbaijani government strongly opposed such a move, saying it would not allow using Azerbaijani territory for any offensive on Iran.²¹ Baku, which believes such a clash may cause bitter ramifications for the region, is opposed to harming its relations with the neighboring country for the sake of superpowers’ interests.

Despite the afore-mentioned facts, Iran continued to maintain multilateral relations and comprehensively supporting Armenia, which has turned into a tool of major world powers. The course of developments revealed that Armenia, a country regularly causing political tension in the region, played a certain role in Iran’s geo-political agenda.

3. Iran’s Stance Amid New Geopolitical Realities During and after Second Karabakh War

The analysis of past developments leads to a conclusion that although new geo-political realities emerged in the South Caucasus region during and after the 44-day war, Iran has been attempting to destabilize the situation ever since due to its reluctance to accept the facts. Unsurprisingly, ample evidence is available concerning Iran's cooperation with both Armenia and the separatist entity, as well as its involvement in joint illegal activities in the Azerbaijani territories that were under Armenian occupation for nearly 30 years. Even during the 44-day war Azerbaijani state-run media outlets circulated videos showing supplies of Russian arms and military equipment to Armenia via Iran.²² In addition, Turkish sources cited facts suggesting that about 300 PKK terrorists had arrived in Karabakh via Iran’s territory during the war.²³

Suspicious goods have long been smuggled by trucks to Karabakh and Armenian-populated areas from Iran. These vehicles are allowed to enter the area by Russian peacekeepers who are temporarily on duty in the Lachin corridor. Although Azerbaijan has sent several messages on the matter to Iran and relevant video footage has been circulated online and broadcast on television, the Iranian side has persistently dismissed this footage as nonsense.

Following a pertinent diplomatic note from Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry, an Armenian TV channel confirmed on August 11 that Iranian trucks had left for Khankandi through the Lachin corridor. It is beyond doubt that Iran is transporting cargo slated for the separatists through this corridor.²⁴

In fact, Iran’s position with regard to Armenia and Azerbaijan comes as no surprise. In the past 30 years, Iran has been instrumental both in the presence of separatists in Karabakh and in preventing Armenia’s isolation from the rest of the world. Available facts also prove Iran’s assistance to Armenia and the separatists in Karabakh during Azerbaijan’s Patriotic War.

Armenia’s destructive policy during the current period, which requires focusing on delimitation of borders and the opening of transportation and communication links, should be condemned and Yerevan should be urged by such regional states as Iran and Russia to fulfill the clauses of the trilateral statement. However, both

²⁰Nazmi Gül, Gökçen Ekici, “Ortak tehdit algılamaları ve stratejik ittifaklığa doğru ilerleyen İran-Ermenistan ilişkileri”, *Stratejik Analiz, Aylık Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Stratejik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2002, C.2, S. 22, p. 43.

²¹Ömer Kocaman, “ABD ve İsrail Azerbaycan’dan yardımını umuyorlar?” <http://www.turksam.org/tr/yazilar.asp?kat=5&yazi=788>

²²“Video footages spread regarding weapons and military equipment transport from Iran to Armenia – VIDEO”, https://apa.az/en/xeber/nagorno_garabagh/Video-footages-spread-regarding-weapons-and-military-equipment-transport-from-Iran-to-Armenia-coloredNEW-FACTScolor-coloredVIDEOfcolor-331624. 29 september 2020.

²³“Turkey: Armenia transports hundreds of PKK militants to fight Azerbaijan”, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200930-armenia-transport-hundreds-of-pkk-militants-to-fight-azerbaijan/> 30 September 2020.

²⁴Zaur Məmmədov, “İran nə istəyir? – təhlil”, <https://apa.az/az/xeber/siyasi/iran-ne-isteyir-tehlil-656532>.

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countries are unfortunately encouraging unrealistic hopes of the separatist rabble in Khankandi instead. This support and hope is given not only to Karabakh Armenians, but also the Republic of Armenia. Certainly, supporting Armenia and separatists is in line with Iran's conventional interests. The use of Azerbaijan's occupied territories had allowed Iran to create drug trafficking links with Armenia. However, Azerbaijan blocked an international drug trafficking route as part of the emerging geo-political realities in the region. Iran is certainly perturbed over this new reality, given that revenues from illicit drug trade are, in fact, one of the three most profitable fields in the world. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Iran used the occupied territories of Azerbaijan for drug-trafficking transit in the past jointly with Armenia.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the issue while addressing a session of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Heads of State Council held in video conference format on October 15, 2021.

“Over the past year, Azerbaijan has regained control over the 130-kilometer section of the state border with Iran that was under the Armenian control for about 30 years and thus blocked a drug trafficking route from Iran to Armenia through the Jabrayil district of Azerbaijan and onward to Europe. The volume of heroin we have seized in other parts of the Azerbaijani-Iranian border has doubled compared to the same period of previous years. This means that Armenia, acting in collusion with Iran, used the occupied Azerbaijani territories to carry out drug trafficking to Europe for about 30 years”, President Ilham Aliyev said.²⁵

In addition, it is common knowledge that Karabakh was isolated from the outside world with no visible prospects for its development. Therefore, this territory was being used for money laundering. Since those areas were controlled by Armenian armed forces, extensive drug plantations were created there. Furthermore, drugs were transported to Russia and Europe through Iran, which yielded significant profit. It is no coincidence that Iran, which faces international sanctions, created a money laundering scheme in Karabakh due to the lack of international oversight over those areas during the Armenian occupation. Illegal funds brought to Karabakh from Iran were transferred to banks controlled by Iranians in Armenia via affiliated banks and thus “laundered”. Undoubtedly, the money was also used to finance terror groups, along with other purposes. Moreover, such transactions were merely a small part of the illegal activity carried out by Iran during the occupation of Azerbaijani land. Armenia, which is the defeated party in the war, and Iran, whose plans were apparently upset, were deprived of this foothold for their activities. One of the main reasons of Tehran's unwillingness to come to terms with current geo-political realities was its attempt to maintain a lucrative money laundering system.²⁶ On the other hand, Tehran was illegally transporting material slated for weapons and ammunition to Armenia and Karabakh, Azerbaijan's legal territory, as Russian peacekeepers idly looked on, or purchasing those goods from Europe for their further delivery to Iran. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan took control over this strategic route. As the owner of the Gorus-Gafan road, Azerbaijan reserved a full right to inspect such cargo. Once the inspections were carried out, an apparent shift was traced in Armenia-Iran relations toward Azerbaijan.

Iran has voiced a number of allegations against Azerbaijan, mainly blaming Baku for establishing ties and cooperating with Israel. However, first of all, cooperating with any country is Azerbaijan's sovereign right. Secondly, as mentioned above, Azerbaijan has never authorized any country to use its territory against neighboring states. At the same time, the Azerbaijani government has consistently stated its stance regarding a potential military intervention into Iran by the U.S., Israel or any other party. Azerbaijan has decisively opposed a strike on Iran via its territory for several reasons, including potential damage to a gas pipeline extending to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Iranian territory, risks posed to tens of millions of Azerbaijanis residing in Iran, the threat of a northward exodus and derailing relations with neighboring states, etc.²⁷

Considering the above-mentioned facts, it would be appropriate to ask the following question: ***Why is Iran, which evidently deems the U.S. and Israel as its arch-foes, failing to put forward a clear-cut and fair stance with regard to Armenia?*** Astonishingly, the US diplomatic mission in Armenia is the largest among the embassies based in the former Soviet states in terms of staff. The United States, which is considered by Iran as its fiercest enemy, has also included Iran into the list of “evil” states. Iran should reflect upon these issues and thoroughly reconsider its allegations against Azerbaijan. ***In particular, it is mind-boggling that Iran has established a close relationship with Armenia, which is under a significant US clout. Considering all these facts, is Iran entitled to blaming Azerbaijan for anything?***

On the other hand, it is known that Azerbaijan is seeking to resolve such key issues as demarcation of the state border, which is of great importance for future security and stability in the region. Therefore, Azerbaijan

²⁵“İlham Əliyevin MDB Dövlət Başçıları Şurasının iclasında çıxışının mətni”, <https://oxu.az/politics/537742>

²⁶See: Sadraddin İsmayilov, “Iran hiding behind Armenia – COMMENTARY”, <https://report.az/en/analytics/iran-hiding-behind-armenia-commentary/>; “İrannın Azərbaycana qarşı aqressiyasının əsl səbəbi: Narkotrafik Tehranın əlindən çıxır – TƏHLİL”, <https://apa.az/az/xeber/siyasi/iranin-azerbaycana-qarsi-aqressiyasinin-esl-sebebi-narkotrafik-tehranin-elinden-cixir-tehlil-665324>

²⁷“ABŞ və İrannın Cənubi Qafqazda geosiyasi maraqları və Azərbaycan”, <http://huquq.org.az/az/publication/geopolitical-interests-of-the-u-s-and-iran-in-the-south-caucasus-and-azerbaijan/>

aspires to assert its territorial integrity in accordance with internationally recognized borders of states. As part of these efforts, Azerbaijan launched the demarcation process following the signing of the November agreement, using Soviet-era maps and the Global Positioning System (GPS).

Pursuing anti-Azerbaijani propaganda and blocking the demarcation and delimitation activities is detrimental to the peace process. Iran, which is increasingly concerned over regional stability, supports the idea of unchanged borders and Armenia's position on the matter. *But does this imply that Iran is seeking to undertake the commitment of CSTO, which includes both Russia and Armenia, to protect the existing borders?*

In addition, Iran has adhered to a defiant stance on the Zangazur corridor issue, although Armenia, itself, provided its consent in this regard in the Trilateral Statement dated November 10, 2020. Undoubtedly, Iran is utterly frightened and worried over the issue regarding its northern territories, i.e. "South Azerbaijan", which has become a major slogan of the Azerbaijani people. Furthermore, the strengthening of a strategic alliance between Turkey and Azerbaijan and the expanding cooperation and integration in the Turkic world in general come into play. Overall, Turkic unity is an underlying cause of Iran's inability to grasp the current geo-political realities in the region. On the contrary, Iran defies these realities, trying to cause roadblocks and undermine stability.

Iran definitely perceives Turkic unity as a threat. Therefore, it has consistently backed Armenia instead of supporting Azerbaijan, and this is currently the case as well. Tehran's stance is clearly illustrated by recent Iranian military exercises on its border with Azerbaijan dubbed "**Khaybar fatehs (conquerors)**".²⁸ However, those drills were apparently a merely ostentatious measure. Otherwise, the measure would draw ire from the Azerbaijanis living in Iran. At the same time, Turkey's close involvement would be inevitable in case of any military moves against Azerbaijan.

June 15, 2021 was a remarkable date in the history of the Turkic world as Azerbaijan and Turkey signed the **Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations** in the Azerbaijani city of Shusha. The historic document covered joint coordination of efforts on regional and international strategic issues of common interest. The two republics also expressed their commitment to comprehensive mutual support on key issues within the framework of international and regional organizations, in line with the "One nation, two states" concept.

The Shusha Declaration is of tremendous importance as it was the first-ever document that underscored "an alliance" between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Thus, the strategic partnership established as a result of the cooperation and agreements inked by the two countries in the past reached the level of allied relations. Remarkably, this alliance covers a wide range of issues pertaining to the whole region. The notion of the Turkic world was also emphasized in the trailblazing document signed in Shusha.²⁹

In addition to Turkey, Azerbaijan has established strategic cooperation with Pakistan. On **July 27, 2021**, the three countries signed **Baku Declaration**, which meets "national security" interests of the signatories. The scope of cooperation is not limited to the territorial integrity of a single country. The declaration envisages joint efforts in developing inter-parliamentary, legislative and diplomatic relations, driving economic growth, improving people's living standards, as well as a more rapid development of the strategic partnership between the three countries. At the same time, the document issued a terse message to invading countries with regard to ensuring peace in the region.

CONCLUSION

Based on the conducted scientific, political research, and comparative analyses, it is possible to characterize Iran's policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan as follows:

Despite having historical and cultural proximity with the Azerbaijani people, who are carriers of Turkic and Islamic civilization, the Islamic Republic of Iran has, at certain periods, clandestinely endorsed Armenia's policy of occupation while openly extending support to it during other periods, even with Azerbaijan being a Muslim country. Particularly during the Second Karabakh War and its aftermath, Iran has clearly pursued an anti-Azerbaijan policy and provided comprehensive assistance to Armenia.

This attitude is because of the concerns that a stable Azerbaijan could interfere with Iran's own national integrity. The concern that Iran is feeling, namely opposing the Azerbaijanian Turks nation is because of Iran's tendency to be against ethnic tensions. The number of Azerbaijanian Turks that live in Northwestern Iran is 3-4 times (about 40 millions) the number of Azerbaijanians that live in Azerbaijan. This fact scares Iran of a potential separatism among its own Turks. As Iran intends to prevent this scenario from happening, it deems a weak Azerbaijan essential for its own existence. With tendencies to integrate within Southern Azerbaijan and

²⁸"İran Azərbaycanla sərhəddə hərbi təlimlərə başlayıb", <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan-58732755>. 01 Oktyabr 2021.

²⁹Araz Aslanlı, "Şuşa beyannamesi bölgəsel barış və işbirlişinin teminatı", <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/susa-bevannamesi-bolgesel-baris-ve-is-birlişinin-teminatı/2280430?fbclid=IwAR0IHcaCOljQ7YEX8LVzKvyfGk2lfrBzj0ERXsd2jluYtmJJqVCv8oWc>

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Northern Azerbaijan, Iran's regional policy requires strengthening Armenia. Armenia is also a factor that protects Southern Azerbaijan from the influence of the Turks. In other words, as Iran believes that Turkey would play an important role in a possible request for independence among its population with a Turkic origin, it is developing its ties with Armenia rapidly. Another reason that approximates Iran to Armenia is that Armenia is the only Christian neighbor of Iran. Iran, the country intended to show the good relations between the two countries as a brotherhood example and by this way make the Iranian fundamentalism seem more moderate.

As Armenia is a landlocked country with no access to the sea, Iran is one of the spots from which it can open to the world. This is an unchangeable reality enforced by the geography where Armenia lies. Iran is a very valuable country for Armenia. If Iran confronts any problems that would be as if Armenia's trachea narrows. In this regard, the listed factors shaped the strategic alliance policy between Iran and Armenia.

Iran tries to demonstrate its good relations with Armenia as an example to the brotherhood of Islam and Christianity and it accuses Azerbaijan of forming good relations with Israel and the USA and betraying the religion of Islam. However, Iran is willing to cooperate with Armenia in every field even though Armenia displaced around million people once occupies 20% of Azerbaijan, a member of the Islamic civilization, and it uses the holy buildings as armories. This figure proves that Armenia is not a country that can be sacrificed in terms of Iran's geopolitical interests.

Peaceful co-existence with neighboring states is one of the basic principles of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Unfortunately, Iran has been adhering to an extremely biased stance in this regard. Azerbaijan liberated its territory from the Armenian occupation as a result of the 44-day Patriotic War, which led to the emergence of new geo-political realities in the South Caucasus. Evidently, Iran is utterly perturbed over this situation, given that the new geo-political environment increases the influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey in the region as part of their cooperation. Iran's recent position on issues concerning Azerbaijan is not in line with the spirit of relations and cooperation among regional states. Having liberated its territories from occupation militarily and politically, Azerbaijan has a new role to play in the system of international relations and cooperation. Therefore, the tactics of heightening tension with Azerbaijan would not yield any result or benefits for Iran whatsoever. To the contrary, Iran's relinquishing controversial policies and taking a course toward good neighborly ties would merely contribute to overall regional stability.

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