

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

To cite this article: Alizada, Nazrin. “Iran and the South Caucasus: The 44-Day Karabakh War in the Changing Geopolitical Equation”, *Review of Armenian Studies*, Issue 50 (2024): 141-162.

Received: 23.09.2024

Accepted: 29.10.2024

IRAN AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: THE 44-DAY KARABAKH WAR IN THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL EQUATION

(İRAN VE GÜNEY KAFKASYA: DEĞİŞEN JEOPOLİTİK
DENKLEMDE 44 GÜNLÜK KARABAĞ SAVAŞI)

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Abstract: *The Karabakh issue, which appeared between the two Transcaucasian countries Azerbaijan and Armenia and resulted in the occupation of the former's lands, has become one of the significant issues in the geopolitical equation. In this context, the attitude of Iran, one of the regional actors, towards this problem has attracted special attention. Since Iran accepts the South Caucasus region, especially Azerbaijan, as a part of its historical plateau, that's why it has been closely interested in the wars that happened in the region.*

Considering this, in the article will be first discussed Iran's South Caucasus policy and the reasons that make the South Caucasus important for it; and then will be examined the Iran's stance on the Karabakh war, especially in 2020 and afterwards, after creating a background by briefly examining the historical process that led to the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict over Karabakh. Additionally, Iran's attitude towards the Karabakh war in the context of the protectionist realism theory and the conflicting discourse-action rhetoric of the state in question are detailed. In parallel, the main findings of this article are that especially when it comes to the Karabakh

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issue, Iran shaped its South Caucasus strategy and its attitude towards the war; in the light of attitudes of regional actors and the new geopolitical equation that emerged. In this context, the hypothesis of the article is based on Iran's biased and neutral stance during the recent Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Iran, South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Karabakh War

Öz: İki Transkafkasya ülkesi Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında meydana gelen ve adı geçen ilk devletin topraklarının işgaliyle sonuçlanan Karabağ meselesi jeopolitik denklemde adından bahsettiren özel öneme haiz konulardan biridir. Bu bağlamda bölgesel aktörlerden İran'ın konuya yönelik tutumu dikkatleri çekmiştir. İran; Güney Kafkasya bölgesini, özellikle Azerbaycan'ı kendi tarihi platosunun bir parçası olarak gördüğünden söz konusu bölgede meydana gelen savaşlarla da yakından ilgilenmiştir.

Karabağ konusunda Azerbaycan-Ermenistan çatışmasına götüren tarihi süreci kısaca irdeleyerek bir arka plan oluşturduktan sonra incelemeye tabi tutulan bu çalışmada ilk önce İran'ı Güney Kafkasya'ya doğru iten dinamikler ele alınmış, devamında ise özellikle 2020 yılı ve sonrasında meydana gelen Karabağ Savaşı'na yönelik İran'ın korumacı realizm teorisi bağlamında sergilediği tutum ve söz konusu devletin çatışan söylem- eylem retoriği detaylandırılmıştır. Ayrıca çalışma kapsamında İran'ın Güney Kafkasya stratejisini ve özellikle Karabağ meselesi söz konusu olduğunda savaşa yönelik tutumunu, bölgesel aktörler ve oluşan yeni jeopolitik denklem ışığında şekillendirdiği elde edilen esas bulgular sırasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Güney Kafkasya, Azerbaycan, Ermenistan, Karabağ Savaşı

Introduction

Iran is one of the major strategic and militarily powerful countries in the Middle East, but what connects it to the Caucasus is that it is a transit country for important trade routes from this region. Due to its geostrategic importance, one of the most important issues on the international and national agenda is the security problem in the region and its impact on Iran's political strategy. The security problem is a concept related to the ensuring of a security environment in order to meet the national interests of states and to ensure that the domestic policy strategy remains free from any risk of danger.

In this context, Iran sees Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Türkiye, its desire to establish closer ties with the West and Israel, and the fact that this state has a secular government structure, despite the predominance of the Shiite sect, as a source of danger. At the root of this danger lies the possibility that hostile forces could use Azerbaijani territory as a springboard for military operations against Iran. Although this possibility is unfounded, developments in the South Caucasus region are worsening Iran's security concerns.

In this scope, there is a discrepancy between discourse-action rhetoric regarding Iran. In the case of the South Caucasus, Iran emphasizes the historical and religious aspects related to Azerbaijan, yet it sides with Armenia. In other words, while Iran-Azerbaijan relations are moving along the axis of incompatibility despite their religious fellowship, Iran-Armenia relations are progressing within the framework of sincere neighborliness.

In this manner, the hypothesis of this work is that Iran's policy towards Azerbaijan and Armenia in the South Caucasus framework has been based on a *biased and neutral stance* during the recent Karabakh War. In line with this hypothesis, the main purpose of the study is to first analyze Iran's South Caucasus policy in general and the factors that make the region important for Iran, and specifically examine Iran's attitude towards the Karabakh War, and also to elaborate on Iran's strategy in the context of the recent Karabakh War.

Considering the complex nature of the subject, a qualitative method based on the analysis of dispositions was adopted in order to reach the relevant data. In this context, an inductive approach was used in the article.

Throughout the work, it can be said that Iran's stance towards the region is shaped on the axis of protectionist realism theory. Iran has attempted to preserve its existence by spreading the Islamic Revolution beyond its borders, to ensure its national security through geopolitical factors, and to establish its national integrity through the Persian language and Shiism, and has tried to

adapt to the changing post-Cold War environment in the South Caucasus with a pragmatic approach. In this context, Iran has attempted to approach the new geopolitical equation in the region from the security axis by putting aside its religious identity (ideological priorities). In parallel to this, Iran has developed its relations with Armenia in a gradually increasing course, while its relations with Azerbaijan have fluctuated. Iran's voicing of the status quo on the Karabakh issue from time to time, as well as its concern that the Turks living within its borders would be influenced in terms of national consciousness had a significant impact on this situation. It has also been observed that Iran, which bases its foreign policy on the ideology of revolution, can overlook its religious identity and sectist approach when it comes to the South Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan.

Iran's South Caucasia Strategy

The South Caucasus, which is in the focus of interest of powerful neighbors, regional and international actors, as well as international organizations, has a fragile political and ethnic structure. The Karabakh conflict, characterized as a political and ethnic-based issue, has played a major role in this. Therefore, Iran has tried to make decisions by taking socio-economic and security concerns into account when determining its strategy in the South Caucasus. This is also due to the fact that Iran views the South Caucasus region as part of its historical interests.¹ In the article written by M. R. Jalili, Transcaucasia, which is referred to as the South Caucasus, is not mentioned as a region to be alienated for Iran. According to Jalili, the main reason behind Iran strategically gravitating towards this region today is that it has believed since ancient times that the South Caucasus is part of the Iranian plateau.²

In this context, while the three states of the South Caucasus regained their independence in parallel with the political developments in the international arena since the end of the 20th century, Iran's regional policy was revised by the Hashemi Rafsanjani government and the pragmatic era of Iran's foreign policy covering the years 1989-1997 began.³ Subsequently, the foreign policy strategy revised by the Rafsanjani administration was characterized as an *initiative towards the South Caucasus and Northwest Asia*. At this time, it became necessary to answer the following question. When talking about newly

1 "Iran in the South Caucasus: Adjustment and Evolution", *Royal United Services Institute (Rusi)*, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/iran-south-caucasus-adjustment-and-evolution>.

2 M. R. Djalili, "Iran and Caucasus: Maintaining Same Pragmatism", *The Quarterly Journal* 1, no.3 (2002): 49.

3 Е.Х. Калбизаде, "Прагматизм во внешней политике ирана и отношениях с Арменией", *История, Археология и Этнография Кавказа*, no.3 (2022):686.

independent states, did these states pose a real threat to Iran? Or were there other reasons that pushed Iran to such a change of strategy?

After the dissolution of the USSR, some groups in Iran wanted to take their place in the newly created regional order, and therefore, one group considered the dissolution process as an ethnic nationalist development. Another group perceived the developments within a religious framework and argued that Islamic states should come together under one roof.⁴ As such, Iran has sought to regain its former political, economic and cultural influence with its northern neighbors in order to increase its influence in the region. Moreover, in this scope, it has aimed to play a key role in the political and economic restructuring of the region. In fact, this new situation created interesting partnership opportunities, especially in economic and political terms. In this regard, Iran has attempted to get its piece of the pie in the traditional big political game with Türkiye, and Russia to a lesser extent.⁵

In addition to this, the desire to control the nationalist movements between North and South Azerbaijan, which were ready to break out at any moment, were among the reasons that encouraged Iran to gravitate more towards the region. As it is known, the Gulistan and Turkmenchay Treaties of 1813 and 1828 divided the Azerbaijani territories into two parts, and thus the descendants of the same race began to live under the control of two different forms of government.⁶ Since the Iranian state saw the North Azerbaijani Turks, who regained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a triggering factor regarding their compatriots in South Azerbaijan, it preferred to increase its activity there by applying the “*keep your enemy close*” strategy, instead of staying away from the region it perceived as a threat.⁷

Another influential dynamic has been the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, rather than its relations with the West, and the subsequent agreements on the supply of military ammunition. Iran, which called Israel the “little satan”, does not accept the absolutization of this state’s position in the South Caucasus and prefers the strategy of supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan. Above all, it is known that the South Caucasus is a region rich in energy resources. In this context, Azerbaijan uses the energy factor as a tool of political influence and implements Western-backed energy projects at the same time.⁸

4 C. Keremi, “Bazi bozorg-e cedit der Gefgaz ve peyamedhay-e emniyati an Beray-e İran”, *Mecelleye-e Siyaset-e Defayi* 8, no.1-2 (1378): 12.

5 J. Zarifian, “Iran and Its Two Neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan: Resuming Relationships under America’s Suspicious Eyes”, *Iran&the Caucasus* 13, no.2 (2009): 386.

6 “*Güney Azərbaycan tarixi məqalələr (1828-1917)*”, (Bakı: Elm Nəşriyyatı, 1985): 6-7.

7 А.Х.Ибрагимов, “Прагматичная внешняя политика Ирана на Южном Кавказе”, *Постсоветские исследования*, no.6 (2022): 621.

8 A. Tibold and V. Cillessen, “Geo-strategy in the South Caucasus”, *Clingendael Institute Report*, (2006):11.

This leads to geostrategic competition in the energy field. This hinders Iran's plan to capitalize on the energy resources in the South Caucasus at a time of increasing geostrategic competition in the energy field. This is the main reason why this country has put its economic projects on the agenda, especially in the context of Armenia.

As can be understood from the cases explained above, Iran has shaped its South Caucasus policy in the context of its political, economic and security interests through its opposition to the West/US and Israel. However, if we specifically examine its relations with Azerbaijan, it can be said that they are mostly formed in the context of the *South Azerbaijan, the Caspian and Karabakh question*.

The main dynamic shaping Iran's stance on the *South Azerbaijan* question stems from the concern over the ideology of Azerbaijanism. First of all, Iran sees the main source of the issue in the name of the Azerbaijani state. This issue was voiced at different times by the official circles in Iran, and even in 1918, when the Azerbaijan People's Republic was declared, Iran stated that the name Azerbaijan belonged to the south of the Aras River and that it would not recognize the state created under the same name in the northern part.⁹ The Iranian administration even objected to the Azerbaijani officials concerning this issue, believing that the newly established Turkish republic had territorial claims against Iran.¹⁰ Hamid Ahmadi also touched on this issue and emphasized in his book that the name Azerbaijan is unique to Iran and that problems related to this may arise in the future.¹¹

As can be seen, Iran did not accept the name Azerbaijan in the context of its foreign policy strategy in the early 20th century. It focused more on the ideology of Azerbaijanism in the context of its revised foreign security strategy in the 21st century and wanted to especially make the South Azerbaijani Turks accept that it is not based on Turkishness and that Azerbaijani Turks are Turkified Iranians. The most important reason for this is that approximately 30 million Azerbaijani Turks live in Iran¹² and they want to unite with their compatriots in the North. The other reason is to prevent other ethnic groups within Iran from gravitating towards their compatriots living across the border.

In this context, the Iranian government has tried to limit and restrict the Azerbaijani Turks and first referred to the Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran as

9 S. Yusifova, S. "The Recognition of the Independence of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in Paris Peace Conference and the Attitude of Iran", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no.19 (2014): 356.

10 T. Nüsretoğlu and O. Alizade, "İran'ın Azerbaycan Siyaseti; Karabağ Savaşları Örneğinde", *Cihannüma Sosyal Bilimler Akademi Dergisi* 1, no.1, (2022): 130.

11 H. Ahmadi, "İran: Ulusal Kimlik İnşası", (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2009):192.

12 J. Minahan, "Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations", (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002): 1765-1766.

Azeris. With this, the strategy of making the South Azerbaijani Turks forget their identity gained momentum. Subsequently, a newspaper called *Iran-i Juma*, which is affiliated with Iran's official news agency IRNA, tried to send them a social message by including a caricature in which Azerbaijani Turks were referred to as *cockroaches*.¹³ An attempt was made to create a perception that the language of the insect that speaks in Azerbaijani Turkish is not understood and that they should be killed in order to prevent such a conflict in Iran, which led to protests by Azerbaijani Turks.¹⁴ As a result, tear gas was used by Iranian security forces against the protesters and the newspaper responsible for publishing the caricature was shut down to prevent the protests from escalating further.¹⁵

With these protests, which were referred to as the caricature crisis, the Iranian administration saw for the first time that Azerbaijani Turks were united as a whole when it came to Turkishness. The second most obvious example of this was during the Karabakh War in September 2020. The fact that the Iranian administration, which claimed to be neutral during this war, did not close the Nurduz Border Gate¹⁶ and supported Armenia under the name of food aid from here led to protests by the Turks of South Azerbaijan. Chanting slogans such as “*We are not on the side of Azerbaijan, we are Azerbaijanis*”, the South Azerbaijani Turks expressed their unconditional support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh War.¹⁷ This is a clear indication of why Iran is sensitive regarding South Azerbaijan.

The *Caspian basin* is both rich in hydrocarbon reserves and geostrategically important.¹⁸ As a buffer zone, the Caspian's energy resources are diversified through pipeline projects, while the littoral states benefit from this within the framework of their legal rights. However, such a strategically important region has long had an unresolved legal status issue. Due to the intransigent attitude of the littoral states grouped along the axis of Russia-Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan and Iran-Turkmenistan, this issue has been negotiated in bilateral and multilateral talks for many years. In particular, the Iranian side has argued for

13 O. Erkan, “Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti'nin Kurulmasının Güney Azerbaycan Türklerine Yansımaları”, *21. Yüzyılda Eđitim ve Toplum* 12, no.36 (2023):851.

14 “Iran: Cartoon Protests Point to Growing Frustration among Azeris”, *RFERL.org*, accessed May 31, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1068797.html>.

15 İran'da Karikatür Krizi”, *BBC*, accessed May 23, 2006, https://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/05/060523_iran_cartoon.shtml.

16 Yalçın Sarıkaya, “İran'ın İkinci Karabađ Savaşı Tutumu: Takke Düştü Kel Göründü”, *Giresun Üniver-sitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi* 7, no.1, (2021):94.

17 “Baku's Successes on Battlefield Echoing Among Azerbaijanis of Iran”, *Jamestown Foundation*, accessed October 22, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/bakus-successes-on-battlefield-echoing-among-azerbaijanis-of-iran/>.

18 F. Oral, “Role of the Caspian Region within the Context of Energy Security”, *Bölgesel Arařtırmalar Dergisi* 6, no.2 (2022): 422.

the equal use of the Caspian Sea, that the 1921 and 1940 agreements provide sufficient background on the issue and that there is no need for new regulations.¹⁹ One of the main reasons for Iran's position on the legal status was its desire to bypass Western-backed energy projects, to get a larger share of the Caspian Sea, and to strengthen its hand economically and strategically. However, at a time when the international conjuncture was complicated, Iran made concessions on the issue of the Caspian Sea's legal status in order to get rid of the containment strategy implemented against it by the US and the West and to establish a problem-solving position as a regional actor, and this issue was resolved in 2018.²⁰ With this, Iran and Azerbaijan, which have been on different axes regarding the Caspian issue for many years, were able to find common ground.

The other important and most fundamental factor is related to the Karabakh issue. Since this issue is directly related to the subject of this article, it is discussed in detail below.

The Historical Period That Led To The Karabakh War

All so-called conflicts between states have a historical background. The Karabakh War is also treated as a frozen conflict in some sources and as an ethnic conflict in others. So far, there have been four major wars between the parties. Additionally, small and medium-scale border disputes have continued from time to time. It is important to look at the etymological meaning of the region in question before talking about the Karabakh war in 2020 and after, which is the subject of the research, in order to prevent the spread of distorted information on the subject.

The word Karabakh, which is shown as an integral part of the *Greater Armenia* strategy (which has been transformed into a project by Armenians since the beginning of the 20th century) etymologically belongs to the Turks. The first two syllables of the word Karabakh, *kara*, means *thick, dark, big* not only in Azerbaijani Turkish but also in different Turkic dialects used by Turkic tribes.²¹ Furthermore, in the article titled "Nagorny Karabakh Conflict" written by H. Krüger, a comprehensive research was conducted on the ethnic groups living in the Karabakh region and their history. Karabakh was included in the Muslim state structures in the period following the dissolution of the Albanian state in the region. Afterwards, it was subjected to the occupation of the Mongols. In

19 A. Akdevelioğlu, "İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin Orta Asya ve Azerbaycan Politikaları", *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 1, no.2 (2004): 144.

20 F.Ş. Kahraman, "Hazar Denizi'nin Hukuki Statüsü", *KAÜİİBFD* 11, no.21(2020):437.

21 Y. Mahmudov and K. Şükürov, "*Qarabağ: Real tarix, faktlar, sənədlər*", (Bakı: Təhsil Nəşriyyatı, 2005):11.

the following period, it was a part of the Turkish states of Karakoyunlu, Akkoyunlu and Safavid.²² In the 18th century, the region was included in the Azerbaijani khanates.

In general, the process of resettlement of Armenians in Karabakh corresponded to the period after the First Russo-Iranian War, and with it the process of resettlement of Armenians in Azerbaijani lands began. In fact, before the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, the Karabakh khan had submitted to the Russian emperor with the Treaty of Kurakchay in 1805. With the Kurakchay Treaty, which was the beginning of the tragic fate of Karabakh, the Karabakh Khanate was placed under the protection of Russia.²³ According to the terms of this treaty, which is considered as one of the important documents on the relations between Russia and Azerbaijan, the Karabakh Khanate was deprived of the right to maintain relations with other foreign countries and it was decided to send one thousand chervons to the Tsar's treasury every year.²⁴

With the Treaty of Gulistan signed as a result of the First Russo-Iranian War, the process of partitioning the Azerbaijani territories officially began. This process ended in the 19th century with the Treaty of Turkmenchay, which brought the end of the Second Russo-Iranian War. According to the treaty signed on 10 February 1828, the remaining part of the Azerbaijani lands was divided and the Russian-Iranian border line was determined.²⁵ Article 15 of this treaty is related to the Armenian question, which continues to this day. According to this article, the migration of ethnic groups living in South Azerbaijan to the South Caucasus without religious and ethnic discrimination was legalized.²⁶ Armenians were the most affected and they were forced to migrate to the aforementioned lands.

From this time onwards, Armenians began claiming rights and their organized and state-supported claims reached their peak in 1988. This led to the outbreak of the First Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It resulted in the loss of important locations in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and a ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994.²⁷ Subsequently, the parties did not accept the

22 H. Krüger, "The Territorial Status of Nagorno-Karabakh," in *"Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict"*, (Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer, 2010):6-7.

23 A. Asker and S. Şeyban, "Kürekçay Anlaşmasının Tarihi Arka Planı, Hukuki Niteliği ve Siyasi Sonuçları", *Giresun Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi* 7, no.1 (2021): 45.

24 R. Sadıgov, "Çarlık Rusya'sının Azerbaycan'ı İşgali", in *Rus Dış Politikasında Orta Asya ve Kafkasya*, (ed) M.Mammedli, (Ankara:Nobel Yayınları, 2021): 11.

25 С. Байрамзаде, "Туркманчайский договор: искаженные географические названия", *История* 65, no.5 (2013): 23.

26 İ. Nuriyeva, "*Azərbaycan tarixi (ən qədim dövrlərdən bu günə qədər)*", (Bakı: Elm və Təhsil Nəşriyyatı, 2019): 242.

27 R. Dadaşova, "Armenia's Military Aggression Against Azerbaijan: Violation of the Rights of Captives and Hostages", *Avrasya İncelemeleri Dergisi-Journal of Eurasian Inquiries* 9, no.1, (2020):69.

plans and proposals put forward to resolve the conflict, and during this period, Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders were violated by Armenia.

The second large-scale conflict between the parties broke out in 2016. This war, ignored by many sources, had significant results. Described in some sources as an unintentional military action and in others as a deliberate provocation²⁸, this war broke out in response to Armenia's violation of Azerbaijan's borders, and some small but important regions were liberated from occupation by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces.²⁹ In fact, with this war, the Azerbaijani side has shown that it has the power through military force to take back the territories that it could not take back peacefully. In this respect, it would be accurate to consider the war that took place in 2016 as the event that paved the way for the Karabakh war in 2020.

The Karabakh War, called the *Homeland War* by Azerbaijan, occurred on 27 September 2020 and was covered by the international media with its impacts.³⁰ With this war, Azerbaijan legitimized the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, which were adopted but not implemented, with its own military power.

As a result, after the liberation of the pearl of Karabakh, the city of Shusha, from occupation by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia on 9 November 2020 with the mediation of Russia on the cessation of all hostilities in the Karabakh region. In this framework, officials of the states parties to the conflict and President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin declared the terms of the agreement.³¹ This agreement led to the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces³² in the region, under the control of which the Armenians were to be expelled from all occupied territories within a short period of time.³³

28 C. Cavanaugh, "Renewed Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh", *Contingency Planning Memorandum*, (2017): 2.

29 Sarıkaya, 86.

30 M.N. Alkan and M. Mehdizadehyoushanlouei, "Birinci ve İkinci Karabağ Savaşlarında Türkiye-Azerbaycan İlişkileri", *UPA Strategic Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2023): 218.

31 Ü. E. Ertuğrul, "2020 Azerbaycan-Ermenistan Ateşkesine Göre Yerinden Edilenlerin Dağlık Karabağ'a Geri Dönüşü", *Bilig*, no.101 (2022): 60.

32 Immediately after the Trilateral Declaration was signed between the parties, the Russian Peacekeeping Force was sent to the region. Within this time frame, both the attitude of the Peacekeeping Force in Karabakh, which serves Russia's strategic interests, and the discourses created in Russia regarding Karabakh have shown that the rights of the Azerbaijani side have been violated. This brought to mind the question that the Russian Peacekeeping Force would not leave the region. Following the developments in the region, Azerbaijan launched anti-terrorist operations in 2023, especially after the Peacekeeping Force did not intervene against the provocative actions carried out by Armenians. With this, there was no need for the presence of the Russian Peacekeeping Force in the region. As such, the Russian Peacekeeping Force gradually began to leave Azerbaijan's territory. Read: A. Asker, "II. Karabağ Savaşı Sonrası Gelişmeler ve Rusya'nın Azerbaycanın Egemenlik Haklarını İhlali", in *Karabağ, Dünü, Bugünü, Yarını* (eds) O. Yeşilot, B.G. Köksal, (İstanbul: Selenge Yayınları, 2021): 326-331.

33 C. Abdullahzade, "Dağlık Karabağ Sorununda Ermenistan'ın Rolü ve Sorumluluğu", *Ankara Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi* 69, no. 4 (2020):1566.

The Karabakh War in September 2020 and Iran's Stance Afterwards

On 27 September 2020, as a result of military provocations made by the Armenian army against Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani army launched a large-scale military counter-offensive to ensure the safety of the civilian population. It is known that during this war, the Armenian army mainly used Russian weapons such as BM-30 Smerch, Tochka-U tactical missile system and Scud missiles, while Azerbaijan actively used Russian-made weapons, as well as modern Turkish and Israeli weapons and UAVs.³⁴ Moreover, during the war, Armenian forces attacked the cities of Ganja³⁵ and Berde using the above-mentioned missiles. As a result of the attacks, it is known that 9 civilians were killed in Ganja and 35 people, including children, were injured.³⁶

Since the outbreak of the Karabakh War, Iran has expressed its support for regional peace and security. At the same time, Iran has emphasised that the inviolability of borders are Iran's red lines and Tehran will not tolerate any territorial changes in the region.³⁷ In addition, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made similar statements in early October in the midst of rising tensions with Azerbaijan. Another statement revealing Iran's stance towards the war was made by Shahriar Heydari, deputy head of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee. In an interview with Hayat analytical website, Haydari stated, "*Maintaining the border with Armenia and respecting the territorial integrity of Armenia is Iran's red line. But unfortunately, Azerbaijan, with the collaboration of the Zionist regime [i.e. Israel], Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia, seeks to change the geography of the region.*"³⁸

In the light of all these statements, it is revealed that Iran adopted a pro-Armenian stance during the Karabakh War in September 2020. It is necessary to address the reasons that led the country in question to adopt such an uncompromising stance.

Brenda Shaffer, who pointed out that Iran's policy towards the region is guided by five main factors, emphasized that among these dynamics, factors such as *national security, the influence of Turkish nationalism and the desire to become*

34 "44 günlük Qarabağ müharibəsi: Səbəb və nəticələr", *Air Center Hesabatı*, (2021): 8.

35 Ganja is a city located far away from the frontline zone. By targeting civilian populated areas, the Armenian side wanted to provoke Azerbaijan to do the same, but throughout the war Azerbaijan carried out military operations only in the Karabakh region.

36 Y. Acer, "The War Crimes of Armenia International Law and The Military Acts of Armenia in and around Karabakh", *SETA Analysis*, no.70 (2020):12.

37 "Iran Reaffirms 'Red Line On South Caucasus Borders'", *Azattyun* accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/31621670.html>.

38 "Shahriar Heydari: Maintaining Border with Armenia is Iran's Red Line", *News.am*, accessed September 19, 2023, https://news.am/eng/news/781573.html#google_vignette.

*a regional transit center*³⁹ shaped the attitude of the state in question towards the Karabakh War in different dimensions periodically. In this respect, one can say that Iran's attitude towards the Karabakh War in 2020 and after was formed within the scope of some national and regional concerns.

The first one is that the new political and economic situation in the South Caucasus being shaped primarily by Azerbaijan and its strategic ally Türkiye as the victor of the war. Iran is concerned about the impact of this on the Turkic population. This is because, on the one hand, Azerbaijan has become a centre of attraction after the war with its military, defence, economic and energy investments, as well as its increasingly growing national consciousness.⁴⁰ In parallel with this, the fact that Turks living within Iranian borders supported Azerbaijan during the Karabakh War and chanted slogans such as “*Karabakh belongs to us and will continue to belong to us!*” on the streets has increased Iran's concerns on this issue.⁴¹ This is because, according to Iran, these sociological effects will affect the balance of power as Azerbaijan regains control of its southern borders. Commenting on this, Dr. Musa Haqqani, President of the Iranian Research Institute for Contemporary Historical Studies, said the following: “*The Republic of Azerbaijan was initially established with the aim of dividing Iran, and we see the effects of this, especially in the context of the recent Karabakh War, in Khuzestan and other provinces. Azerbaijan encourages state separatism. In other words, the problem is not the first and second Karabakh War, the problem is that the main strategy of this state serves the scenario of Iran's disintegration. In this context, by raising the issue of Azerbaijan within the borders of Iran, an attempt is made to disintegrate the whole of Iran.*”⁴²

Another situation that Iran sees as a national security threat in the context of the South Caucasus is the development of Azerbaijan-Israel relations, including military-technical and security cooperation. This is because Israel is an essential arms supplier of Azerbaijan. This brings to the forefront issues such as internal balances and Israel, which is an enemy country, solidifying its presence in the region by cooperating with Azerbaijan.⁴³ Evaluating the Azerbaijani position on this issue within the scope of the protectionist realism theory, Iran considered this state as an export point of the Israeli military industry and drew attention to the fact that the Azerbaijani army is under the

39 B. Shaffer, “Iran's Policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia”, *The Central Asia- Caucasus Analyst*, (2022): 2.

40 Nüsretoğlu & Alizade, 142.

41 “Traktor azərkeşlərindən Azərbycana dəstək şüarları: Qarabağ bizimdir, bizim olacaq!”, *Press.az*, accessed September 4, 2020, <https://press.az/az/news/62944>.

42 Hoshdar-e ceddi-e karshenasan az saye-e tahdidat tahavolat Ghafghaz bar amniyyat İran, *Khabaronline*, accessed Azer 23, 1400, “<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1582607/%>”.

43 G.K. Yaşın, “The Caucasus in Iran's Foreign Policy”, *AVİM Analysis*, no.18 (2023):2.

patronage of Israel.⁴⁴ However, what was overlooked at the time is that Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev has repeatedly reiterated at different times: *Azerbaijan will not open its territory to any threat to the sovereignty of another state.*⁴⁵

The issue of the Zangezur Corridor, which Iran sees as an obstacle to its transformation into a regional transit hub, is another important reason for this state's distant attitude towards Azerbaijan. Following the opening of the corridor, Azerbaijan's land connection with Nakhchivan will be ensured and access to Central Asian states will be provided through this route at the same time. As such, Türkiye will be the state that will provide the connection. Commenting on this situation, Dr. Jahangir Karemi, a lecturer at Tehran University, pointed out that the events of recent years point to important developments in the geopolitics of the Caucasus and underlined that this is a pre-indication of geopolitical changes in the region. In this context, Karemi signalled that Türkiye's power will be redefined in the region and subsequently Russia's power may weaken.⁴⁶

In particular, Iran, which, unlike all other countries, sees Türkiye as an actor that does not support ceasefire and deescalation in this region and displays an aggressive approach,⁴⁷ tries to protect its position as a transit country by opposing the opening of the corridor. This is because Iran is interested in playing an important role in the railway and road transport systems linking Asia and Europe, passing through Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as serving as an export point for trade to and from the landlocked Caspian region.

In this context, the Iranian side has also expressed its concerns about the Zangezur Corridor, which will have a multiplier effect in the region. The Strategic Council on Foreign Relations in Tehran, whose director is Iran's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamal Kharazi, warned against the construction of the Zangezur Corridor in an article titled "*NATO's Conspiracy to Create the Torani Corridor*". In this article, the council indicated that the corridor's completion would have significant geopolitical consequences for Iran, Russia, and China. This corridor has been introduced to NATO's "*Torani Corridor*," a project supported by Israel and NATO. Moreover, it has been

44 Abou Mohammad Asgarkhani; Sobhan Mohammadi; Mohammad Bagher Mokarrampour; Saleh Veisi, "Tehlil-e eqdam-e nezami-ye cumhuri azerbaijan der qebale mesele-ye nagorni gharabagh ve cumhuri artsakh, ve hemchenin berresi ecmaliye mevazee cumhuriye eslamiye İran", *Neşriyyeye Elmiye Modiriyet ve Pejuheşhaye Defai*, no. 92 (1400):171-173.

45 "*Ermənistan-Azərbaycan Dağlıq Qarabağ münaqişəsinin həllində Azərbaycanı zəfərə aparan yol*", (Bakı: Qanun Nəşriyyatı, 2021):46.

46 Hoshdar-e cedit-e karshenasan az saye-e tahdidat tahavolat Ghafghaz bar amniyyat İran, *Khabaronline*, accessed Azer 23, 1400, 23 11:15 <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/15826>.

47 İbrahim Mearaji, "Täsir-e tâarozat-e hoviyyeti dar tashdid monazeât siyasi: Motalee moredi bohran Qarabagh", *Fasnam-e Elmi Khavarmiyân-e 2*, no.104(1399): 21.

claimed that by building this corridor, Türkiye and Azerbaijan will fuel ethnic unrest in Turkic populated areas in Iran.⁴⁸

The point that needs to be emphasised at this time is that if a state with regional objectives is trying to absolutize its position in the region in question, then it should transform the situation that seems to be against it in its favour or try to take a step forward by taking advantage of the benefits of the current situation. Considering this point, the Iranian side should not ignore the economic benefits that will arise after the opening of the Zangezur Corridor. However, despite all these, Iran has tried to justify its close relations with Armenia by drawing attention to the Armenian community living within its borders and emphasising that they have been living together in peace for centuries.⁴⁹

In this framework, Iran's 64-kilometer border with Armenia has been turned into one of the most strategically important territories; by deploying approximately 50,000 troops to the border region in 2022, Iran has signalled to both NATO member Türkiye and neighbouring Azerbaijan that it will not tolerate any change in the borders in the region.⁵⁰ With this, Iran has made it clear that any action that would disqualify Armenia from being a neighbour is a red line.

While there is a tendency of rapprochement in Iran-Armenia relations as emphasised above, in the context of Azerbaijan, tensions between the parties have escalated considerably. The main incident that fuelled this tension was the attack on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Iran. On 27 January 2023, the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran was attacked with automatic weapons, and the Azerbaijani side declared that this act was a terrorist attack, evacuated the embassy staff and the body of the deceased security chief from the country and brought the incident to the agenda of international institutions and society.⁵¹ Iran, on the other hand, claimed that the incident was caused by personal enmity. However, due to the very poor response of the Iranian security forces during the attack, Azerbaijan did not accept Iran's statements and emphasised that the attack was the last link in the hostile rhetoric and behaviour against Azerbaijan for the last two and a half years.⁵²

48 "NATO's Conspiracy to Create the Torani Corridor", *SCFR.ir*; accessed December 23, 2023, <https://www.scfr.ir/fa/300/30101/145964/توطئه-ايجاد-دالان-تورانی-ناتو-با-پیما>

49 Sarikaya, 93.

50 "The Zangezur Corridor: A Pathway for Prosperity or to War?", *Energy Intelligence*, accessed October 16, 2023, <https://www.energyintel.com/0000018b-37c7-d20c-a9ef-bfdf44760000>.

51 "Terrorist Attack on the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Iran", *Bulletin of Air Center* (2023):2.

52 "Past and Present of Iran-Azerbaijan Tension", *IRAM*, accessed February 13, 2023, https://iramcenter.org/en/past-and-present-of-iran-azerbaijan-tension_en-2216.

In the light of the developments in the region in 2023, Iran, whose relations with Azerbaijan have started to suffer significantly, signalled a change in its strategy. Analyzing this situation, Dr. Vali Kaleji, a member of the Institute for Iran & Eurasia Studies (IRAS) Scientific Council, pointed out that relations between Tehran and Baku have long been volatile and that despite the perception of mutual threats, the frequent tensions between the two countries have not gotten out of control and have not led to a military conflict. Kaleji pointed out that the relations between the two countries have been in a continuous cycle of *escalation and deflation* over the last three decades, and that there have been no military conflicts between the two sides, citing a number of reasons for this. The first main reason is the economy and trade. This is because more than 50 percent of Iran's trade with the South Caucasus is conducted through Azerbaijan, which is almost equivalent to the combined trade of Armenia and Georgia.⁵³ This makes the country an important economic and trade partner of Tehran in the region. The second factor that plays an important role in deescalation is the issue of transit and transportation. Iran is the only direct and low-cost transit route for Azerbaijan to reach the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the countries of the Arab world and especially Pakistan, which has a close and strategic partnership with Baku. The third factor relates to the significant strengthening of Türkiye, especially the Baku-Ankara axis, in the aftermath of the Karabakh War in late 2020. In this case, if Iran exerts undue pressure on Azerbaijan, it could put Baku in a security and strategic dilemma, with the likely consequence of further strengthening military and security ties with Türkiye and Israel.⁵⁴ Taking these dynamics into account, Iran changed its strategy with regard to Azerbaijan, which was concretized by the events of September 2023.

In this context, it would be appropriate to briefly mention the developments in the region in 2023. Armenian armed groups violated the agreement signed between the parties after the Karabakh War and committed provocative acts against members of the Azerbaijani army.⁵⁵ As such, Azerbaijan launched anti-terrorist operations on 19 September 2023.⁵⁶ Commenting on the events, Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Nasser Kanaani called for an end to the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which border Iran, and

53 "Shabake-ye pichid-e vabastegi motaghabel va movazene-ye tahdid miyan Cumhuri Eslami İran ve Cumhuri Azerbaijan", *İras*, accessed Ferhverdin 19, 1402, شبکه- پیچیده- وابستگی- مقابل- و- موازنه-ته

54 Ibid.

55 O. Ağır, "Dağlık Karabağ Sorunu Bağlamında Türk Dünyası Jeopolitiği", *İnönü Üniversitesi Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 12, no.2 (2023):236.

56 "No: 229, 19 September 2023, Press Release Regarding the Military Operation Launched by Azerbaijan in Karabakh" Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-229_-azerbaycan-tarafindan-karabag-da-baslatilan-askeri-operasyon-hk.en.mfa#:~:text=Due%20to%20the%20long%2Dstanding,operation%20which%20targets%20exclusively%20military.

After the 44-day Karabakh War, the new geopolitical conditions that emerged in the South Caucasus, especially the strengthening of Türkiye in the region, the deepening of Israeli and Azerbaijani relations, and Iran's perception that it was marginalized in many issues, including the Zangezur corridor, led the country's political elite to search for a new solution. In this context, it can be said that one of the main reasons for the problems in Iran's policy towards the region and especially towards Azerbaijan in recent years is the inability to find a place for itself in the new regional configuration. At the same time, Iran's lack of power to significantly influence the processes in the South Caucasus has also played a major role in this.

This being the case, Iran has preferred to exert pressure on Azerbaijan through Armenia instead of directly pressuring Azerbaijan to change its stance. In this way, Iran is trying to keep Baku under control and show that it is still a significant actor in the South Caucasus. However, Iran should also take into account that there are many factors limiting Iran's influence over Armenia and that this strategy is unlikely to succeed in the long run. For this reason, Iran has tried to maintain or reestablish diplomatic channels with this state, especially after the anti-terrorist operations carried out by Azerbaijan in 2023.

At the same time, Iran also plans to become one of the guarantors of Armenia's security in the coming years and to have a say in Azerbaijan-Armenia relations through its influence on Yerevan. Another important factor pushing Iran towards this strategy is Israel becoming a part of the region's security structure. In this context, Iran was concerned that a new front would be created by Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus in parallel to Israel's containment strategy against Iran in the Gulf countries and the Kurdish region of Iraq. For this reason, Iran has sometimes tried to influence Azerbaijan by using Shiism and sometimes by using the Armenia trump card.

However, considering the changes in the South Caucasus in general and Azerbaijan in particular, it does not seem realistic to say that a serious and long-term softening or change in Iran's South Caucasus and Azerbaijan policy will take place as long as Azerbaijan's strategic relations with Türkiye and Israel continue and the nature of the regime in Iran does not change significantly.

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