IRAN'S IDENTITY POLICY PURSUED IN ITS CONSTRUCTION AS A PROXY POWER: THE CASE OF THE ISLAMIC RESISTANCE MOVEMENT OF AZERBAIJAN (HÜSEYNÇİLƏR/HUSAYNIYYUN)

İRAN'IN VEKİL GÜÇ İNŞASINDA İZLEDİĞİ KİMLİK POLİTİKASI: AZERBAYCAN İSLAMİ DİRENİŞ HAREKETİ (HÜSEYNÇİLƏR/HÜSEYNİYYUN) ÖRNEĞİ

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Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran faced severe security problems shortly after the Islamic Revolution. The experiences gained from these threats have thoughtfully shaped Iran's defense strategy in the following years. Forward defense and deterrence concepts are essential toIran's defense strategy. The proxy power strategy, which has been actively carried out since the Revolution, can also be considered an extension of Iran's forward defense and deterrence concept. In this context, Iran is in contact with and manages many groups, large and small, over a wide geography, from Afghanistan to Nigeria and Yemen to Syria. Thus, it seeks to meet potential threats beyond its borders and increase its sanction power in these countries by building groups that will act in parallel with its own policies. He establishes affinity with these groups largely through an identity-based discourse. The Azerbaijan Islamic Resistance Organization (Hüseynçilər/Husayniyyun), which has started to work for the Republic of Azerbaijan since 2013 and whose activities have become visible since 2015, is one of the proxy forces that Iran supports within the scope of these policies. In this study, the background and organizational structure that form the basis of the discourse and activities of this organization, through which Iran is directed and managed within the scope of the proxy power strategy, will be discussed

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan Islamic Resistance Movement, Huseynciler, Husayniyyun, Iran, Constructivism.

Öz

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti, İslam Devrimi'nin gerçekleşmesinden kısa bir süre sonra bir dizi ciddi güvenlik problemleriyle karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Söz konusu tehditlerden edinilen tecrübeler sonraki yıllarda İran'ın savunma stratejisini ciddi anlamda şekillendirmiştir. İleri savunma ve caydırıcılık konsepti İran'ın savunma stratejisinde oldukça önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Devrim'den bu yana aktif bir şekilde yürütülen vekil güç stratejisi de İran'ın ileri savunma ve caydırıcılık konseptinin uzantısı olarak değerlendirilebilir. Bu bağlamda İran, Afganistan'dan Nijerya'ya, Yemen'den Suriye'ye kadar çok geniş bir coğrafyada irili ufaklı birçok grupla temas halindedir. Böylece olası tehditleri sınırlarının ötesinde karşılamayı ve çevre ülkeler üzerinde kendi politikalarıyla paralel hareket edecek gruplar inşa ederek bu ülkelerdeki etkisini artırmak istemektedir. Bu gruplarla büyük ölçüde kimlik temelli bir söylem üzerinden yakınlık kurmaktadır. 2013 yılından itibaren Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti'ne yönelik çalışmalara başlayan ve 2015'ten itibaren faaliyetleri gözle görünür hale gelen Azerbaycan İslami Direniş Örgütü (Hüseynçiler/Hüseyniyyun) de İran'ın bu politikaları kapsamında desteklediği vekil güçlerden birisidir. Bu çalışmada İran'ın vekil güç stratejisi kapsamında sevk ve idare ettiği bu örgütün söylemlerinin ve faaliyetlerinin temelini oluşturan arka plan ile örgüt yapılanması ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, Azerbaycan İslami Direniş Örgütü, Hüseynçiler, Huseyniyyun, İran, Konstrüktivizm.

Introduction

Immediately after its foundation in 1979, Iraq attacked the Islamic Republic of Iran compelling it to fight a defensive war. Iran, which suffered heavy losses, made some changes in its defense concepts after the Western countries sided with Iraq. One of them was to contact and support in every way the groups in the neighbouring and surrounding countries with which it would quickly strengthen its relations and establish ties. Within this scope, the Lebanese Hezbollah was formed in 1982 and was directed and managed as an element of asymmetric warfare against countries such as America and France that supported Iraq. Moreover, as elements of asymmetric warfare proxy forces such as Hezbollah were also linked to the Iranian policy of exporting the Islamic revolution to other countries, especially neighbouring countries. In this context, from Nigeria to Afghanistan, from Iraq to Yemen, dozens of organisations, large and small, with which Iran is directly associated or has created. In line with this policy, there are also groups associated with Iran in the Republic of Azerbaijan, and this situation causes tension between the two countries.

Iran, which even in its constitution defines itself as a country on the side of the oppressed and Islamic countries, has often been accused of supporting "Christian Armenia" instead of "Muslim and Shiite Azerbaijan" in the First Karabakh War, but these accusations have not been proven due to the lack of clear and conclusive evidence in this direction. In fact, Iran has often stated that, contrary to what has been said, it did provide assistance, and a video has even been released in which Iranian commanders claim to have provided training assistance to Azerbaijani soldiers. However, the events of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and Iran's public stance against Azerbaijan in its aftermath have reignited these criticisms and led to increased criticism that Iran is contradicting the discourse it has been building since the revolution. As will be discussed in this study, Iran has attempted to legitimise the fact that it has sided with Armenia for various reasons, particularly through its proxy forces in Azerbaijan, with a different discourse, thus attempting to show that there is in fact no contradiction.

Iran largely controls the aforementioned groups through the Quds Force, and individuals and communities are indoctrinated through various channels and centres into the founding philosophy and revolutionary discourses of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These identity-based discourses are, in fact, the determinants of Iranian politics and are often used to construct or legitimise its policies. In the first part of the study, the nature and character of these discourses and identity-based policies will be analysed and the main framework of how these identity-based discourses are used in the construction, management, and dispatch of proxy power will be given. Then, the formation process and the main actions of the organisation of the Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan (Husseinists/Husseiniyyun) that Iran has tried to build against Azerbaijan will be mentioned, and the parallels between the discourse of the organisation and the discourse of the Iranian establishment will be revealed.

1. The Theoretical Framework of the Study: Constructivism and Identity

The main purpose of the study is to reveal the ways in which the Husayniyyun organisation engages with the Islamic Republic of Iran, its foreign policy in general, with Azerbaijan and the Caucasus in particular, as well as the kind of identity politics it engages in at the discursive level. Since the central concept of the study is "identity", the study is analysed in the light of constructivist theory. After the end of the Cold War, conflicts in different parts of the world at different levels were mostly characterised by "ethnic, religious, or sectarian" motives, which made the existing mainstream theories insufficient to explain these conflicts (Wendt, 1999:4). This situation brought social construction to the fore, and in the 1990s, constructivism, with its focus on the concept of social construction, came to the fore.

Nicholas Onuf, another important figure in the theory, explains the perspective of the theory with the following three assumptions:

- Society and the individual continuously construct each other. This is also true of the international system.
- Language is given special importance because it is through language that man becomes an actor, articulates his desires, and transforms them into goals.
- Rules transform material goods into resources. Thus, the asymmetrical structure in the creation of opportunities for control and in the distribution of benefits arises spontaneously. Because the rule is by no means neutral in its content, the user of the rule gains the ability to control others (Onuf, 1994).

The fact that constructivism draws attention to "social construction" and mutual interaction, and that neorealist and neoliberal theories have added an abstract element such as "thought" to the material elements of "interest," "power," and "institutions" is important for this study. This is because this study argues that Iran, as an "Islamic Republic," is focused on the identity it has constructed from the very beginning, starting with its name and the symbols on its flag, and that it constantly seeks to gain legitimacy from this identity and ideology in the process of policymaking. Moreover, the issue of the importance of language, which Onuf points out, plays a crucial role in Iran's management and use of its proxy forces. This is because all indoctrination is done through narrative and symbols. It is no coincidence that the flag of the Lebanese Hezbollah and the flag of the Hosseinists (Hüseynçilər) are almost identical. It is also no coincidence that the organization chose the name Hosseinists, as will be briefly discussed later. In this context, the Hosseinist organization, which is considered a terrorist organization by Azerbaijan, acts in parallel with the values and sources of legitimacy represented by the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this context, the question of how the identity-based discourses used by Iran's official discourses in directing and managing the Hosseinist organization, which is Iran's proxy force operating in Azerbaijan, are used by this organization constitutes the research question of this study. This study also aims to introduce the Huseyniyyun organization.

2. Conceptual Framework of the Study: Deterrence and Advanced Defense Concepts in Iranian Security Policies with the Concepts of Mostakbir-Mostazaf

Iran generally formulates "self and other" in a dualistic discourse based on the concepts of good and evil. As stated in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iran is on the side of the mostaż'afin [oppressed] against the mostakberīn [oppressors]. Iran's quest for legitimacy by positioning itself on the side of the oppressed can be interpreted as a reflection of a dualistic structure that existed in ancient Iran and continues to this day. In fact, it can be said that the dualistic understanding stemming from the Zoroastrian conflict between Ahriman and Ahura Mazda, that is, the conflict between good and evil, is still alive in some form. Accordingly, Ahura Mazda represents good, and Ahriman represents evil. At the end of the struggle between these two, Ahura Mazda, the good, wins. Iranians take the side of Ahura Mazda, the representative of absolute good, against Ahriman, the demon and representative of absolute evil. This attitude towards "absolute evil" is also often treated in Shiite teachings. Shiism is against the "cruel" Yazid. It is on the side of the "oppressed" and "innocent" Hussein and the Imams. All 12 Imams resisted oppression and injustice and (except for the last Imam) were eventually martyred as oppressed. Article 3, paragraph 16 of the Iranian Constitution emphasizes that the Iranian state is on the side of the oppressed all over the world by stating that "Foreign policy is based on Islamic principles, adherence to the principles of brotherhood with all Muslims, and protection of all oppressed of the world. Furthermore, Article 154 of the Constitution states that "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers human happiness an ideal at the level of all humanity. It recognizes the rule of independence, freedom, justice, and righteousness as the right of all peoples of the world. Consequently, it supports the just struggles of the oppressed against their oppressors in all

parts of the world while completely refraining from any interference in the internal affairs of other nations." In light of this information, it can be concluded that for Iran, siding with the "oppressed" and developing a discourse accordingly is an element of its identity. In order to understand Iran's policy toward the United States and Israel, which it defines as "oppressors" and the "Great Satan," it is necessary to take into account these discourses and motivations that Iran carries from its past and brings to the present, as well as realpolitik.

The foreign policy discourse based on this allegory is the focus of this study. This discourse and the perspective of positioning oneself on the side of what is "right" and "good" are also intensively practiced by the proxy forces under Iranian rule, and these discourses ensure influence and recruitment. In the case of the Husseinists, as the name suggests, this organization positions itself on the side of Hussein and claims to be his supporters. In this way, the organization aims to penetrate the people of Azerbaijan, which has the second-largest Shiite population in the world after Iran. Most of the members of the organization are in hiding in Iran or have been captured by the security forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Although they have lost much of their power in the country due to the efforts of the Azerbaijani security forces, especially after the Ganja attack, their efforts to infiltrate Azerbaijan from inside Iran through social media and Internet publications continue.

In general terms, the study assumes that this organization is trying to influence the masses in the country by positioning itself on the side of Hussein and portraying Ilham Aliyev and his government as a "lost identity," "Hussein-less," and Zionist "collaborators," thus drawing the people it has managed to engage into a parallel line with the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This study discusses Iran's strategy of exporting the revolution in general terms, mentions the identity-based threats perceived by Azerbaijan and Iran, and introduces the Husseinist organization and discusses its activities.

Mostafa Chamran, who organized Shiites in Lebanon and became Iran's first defense minister after the revolution, laid the foundations of the proxy force strategy in the late 1970s (Tasnim, 2016b). Later, with the establishment of the Quds Force (قدس نیروی) under the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the management and deployment of these groups began to be carried out by the Quds Force. The activities of Qassem Soleimani, who commanded this unit for many years, were also effective in reflecting this strategy on the ground.

Iran's proxy power strategy is directly related to two concepts on which Iran bases its self-defense. The first is the concept of forward defense, and the second is the concept of deterrence. The concept of forward defense generally refers to keeping the conflict or threat as far away from one's borders as possible, and meeting it on or near enemy territory. Many senior figures, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, have stated that this concept of defense has not only military but also cultural and economic aspects (Hamidreza Azizi, 2021:8). Deterrence, as the name suggests, is about taking measures to prevent enemies and threats from taking action (Hamidreza Azizi, 2021:8). With the impact and experience of the devastating eight-year war with Iraq, Iran believed that it needed to take measures to increase its deterrence and built its next defense strategy on deterring war before it started. Iran's proxy power strategy is based on developing relationships with local actors, both culturally, economically, and politically, and using soft or hard power elements through these actors to eliminate any perceived threat to Iran. In this way, Iran seeks to increase its sanctioning power over countries that it perceives as threatened by Iran through actors that directly or indirectly serve its political goals. Many large and small groups and organizations, such as Hezbollah (Lebanon), Fatimiyyun Brigades (Syria), Ansarullah (Yemen), etc., operate over a wide area extending from Syria to Nigeria. In addition, under many institutions and organizations such as cultural centers, hospitals, and friendship associations, Iran is trying to gain supporters through soft power tools.

The Husseinist (Husseiniyyun) organization, which is the subject of the study, is only one of the policies implemented by Iran to further increase its influence in the Republic of Azerbaijan and to gather supporters. This organization is very disturbing for Azerbaijan today, and a large part of its supporters and leadership are active in Iran. Although Azerbaijan has demanded the arrest and extradition of these names from Iran, these demands have remained unanswered by Iran.

3. Originality and Limitations of the Study

The fact that there is no direct academic study on the aforementioned organization constitutes the original value and importance of this study. In this study, which is planned as a qualitative study, a discourse analysis will be conducted in light of the data collected from the organization's websites, Telegram, and YouTube channels, which are mainly broadcast in Azerbaijani from inside Iran. For this reason, the aforementioned study was conducted mainly in Azerbaijani Turkish, Turkish, English, and Persian online and from open sources. Although the limited literature on the subject is the main limitation of the study, the information found in open sources published in Persian and Azerbaijani Turkish provides a very rich and comprehensive picture. In particular, open sources published in Azerbaijan provide extensive information about the organization. Finally, personal interviews were conducted with some names close to the security bureaucracy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and their views are summarized in the last part of the study.

3.1. Iran's Strategy in the Export of the Revolution

Iran sees its defense beyond its borders and seeks to counter any potential threat from beyond its borders. The safest way to do this is to have governments in power in the region, especially in neighboring countries, that share its politics and ideology. The fact that Iran bases its ideology on Islamic discourse and Shiite rhetoric allows it to easily find allies in the region. In Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and even Nigeria, Iran is rapidly forming alliances with Shia groups and providing them with material and logistical support. It also seeks unity with non-Shia groups through the concept of "*wahdat*" and operates under the umbrella of Islamism. Iran's soft power instruments play a critical role in its proxy power strategy. Cultural and political representations, friendship associations, and the activities of universities such as Al-Mustafa are the engines of this soft power policy.

In his book *The Dynamics of the Islamic Revolution*, Masil Mohajiri expresses the issue of exporting the revolution in the following words: "The oppressed nations of the world should learn from the experience of the Iranian Revolution. The Iranian people want to show the nations of the world how to liberate themselves from the occupiers. This will be done by organizing conferences, publishing books, and mass media" (Mohajiri, 1991:181).

As can be seen from these statements, Iran is carrying out its policy of exporting revolution through soft power instruments. Ayatollah Khomeini's lectures to his students laid the groundwork for how the "Islamic state" should be structured and how it could be legitimized from a religious perspective. This form of government, legitimized by the theory of Velayat-e Faqih, is entwined with a rhetoric emphasizing the dichotomy between the oppressed and the oppressor. Accordingly, Muslims should fight for the overthrow of oppressive regimes, and Iran will stand by all oppressed peoples of the world as the protector of the oppressed (Khomeini, n.d.). Khomeini wrote: "In order to achieve the unity of the Islamic Ummah, it is imperative that we establish a government to liberate the land of Islam from the occupation and influence of the imperialists and their puppet governments. In order to achieve the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples, we must overthrow the oppressive governments established by the imperialists and establish a government of Islamic justice that will serve the people". (Khomeini, n.d., para. 26) According to

Ayatollah Khomeini, the superpowers have emerged to destroy the Muslims. Therefore, in order to counter these threats, unity should be established between Sunnis and Shiites and these countries should fight together. The Islamic revolution in Iran should be exported to other countries to ensure the unity of the Islamic world (Marschall, 2003:13).

The "Aliyev dictatorship is a puppet state" discourse, frequently voiced by the Hosseinists, currently being voiced by the Iranian public (Jahannews, 2022), is consistent with these discourses. According to this discourse, Ilham Aliyev and his government are "puppets" and the real people of Azerbaijan are the "oppressed" Muslims who are oppressed under this "cruel" rule. Likewise, as will be discussed in the next section, there is no such republic as Azerbaijan. It is a piece of history that was stolen from Iran and will be returned "hand and foot". Therefore, it is a constitutional obligation for Iran to establish a true pro-Husseini, Muslim government against the government there.

3.1. Identity-Based Threat Perceptions in the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran

With the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813 and the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, Russia's dominance over the Caucasus increased, and Iran lost its influence in the region it had historically considered part of its own. After nearly 160 years, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) disintegrated, and Iran found itself facing new independent states in the geography it had historically claimed. Both Türkiye and Iran saw this power vacuum as an opportunity and competed to fill it. In general, Iran wanted to strengthen its position in the region by expanding its cultural and economic ties with these newly emerging countries and increasing its influence. It also hoped to break the isolation imposed on it, especially by the United States of America (USA), with the new position and relationships it would gain here (Sinkaya, 2014:143).

There are two dimensions to this competition. The first is to be a model country for these countries that have just established their systems and have just become states. Against the possibility that Iran might try to export its regime to these countries based on the aforementioned defense strategies, the Western countries have tended to support Türkiye, a secular, democratic, and market-oriented country, as an alternative model to Iran. The second dimension of the rivalry was to establish spheres of influence in these regions through the development of political, economic, and cultural relations (Sinkaya, 2014:143-144).

The establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan has raised some questions about what kind of policy Iran should adopt towards this country. Prof. Dr. Yalçın Sarıkaya lists these questions as follows:

- To recognize or not to recognize Azerbaijan,
- To export or not to export ideology to Azerbaijan,
- To use or not to use the issue of religion and sect,
- To use or not to use the influence of own Azerbaijani population in its approach to Azerbaijan,
- To bring their own Azerbaijani people closer to Azerbaijan or to keep them away from it,
- Wanting Azerbaijan to develop and prosper or not,
- Being for or against Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue,
- Having a negative attitude towards Azerbaijan's relations with the West,
- Negative attitude towards Azerbaijan's relations with Moscow,
- Interfering or not interfering in the affairs of the administration in Azerbaijan (Sarıkaya, 2008:300)

As it can be seen, since the beginning of the existence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran has been faced with many questions and problems directly affecting its domestic, foreign, and

economic policies and has had to conduct a policy accordingly. Many people in Iran, especially nationalists and pan-Iranians, consider Azerbaijan a part of Iran and do not recognize it as a "real country". On the contrary, it is considered a piece that was stolen from Iran (irdiplomacy, 2019). For this reason, especially after the Second Karabakh War, when relations were strained, the term "Government of Baku" was used in many places in the Iranian media instead of "Republic of Azerbaijan".

In this sense, the attitude and style of Abolfazl Zohrevand, Iran's former ambassador to Afghanistan and Italy and an important figure in the nuclear negotiations, in the audio recording leaked to the press after the Second Karabakh War are very interesting examples. Throughout the recording, Zohrevand made very harsh insults and expressions, calling the Turks "scoundrels" and "dishonorable". "The lower part of Karabakh belongs to the Turks, but in reality, these Turks are not Shiites. The problem here could have been solved differently. Without fighting in Karabakh and without displacing the Armenians, the lands could have been returned to the Turks. The Armenians could then have been administered either by themselves or by Yerevan. However, the administration of the region passed out of the hands of Karabakh and Yerevan into the hands of Baku, and this was to our detriment". As can be understood from these statements, the fact that the Azerbaijani Turks are closer to Turkishness than they are to Shiism is very disturbing for some groups in Iran. In fact, the Husseinist organization is based on reversing this tendency and establishing a parallel Azerbaijan to Iran by bringing Azerbaijani society closer to Shiism and Velayat-e Faqih (i.e., Iran).

In the same speech, Zohrevand said, "Azerbaijan is a place where NATO can settle and the dismemberment of Iran can begin. Azerbaijan will play the role of a cancerous mass until it is returned to Iran". In the same speech, Zohrevand touched on another of Iran's concerns: its relations with the West and Israel. Finally, referring to Azerbaijan, he said, "Moreover, by creating an identity for the Azerbaijanis living in Iran, they claim that they are Central Asian Turks". (Dana, 2022). The perception of Azerbaijan by some groups in Iran not as a state but as "an artificial administration created and separated from Iran" is based on the allegory of "hand and arm" in some publications. According to this, Iran is the original. In other words, it is the arm. Azerbaijan is a hand cut off from this arm. Those who talk about this allegory usually have the idea that sooner or later Azerbaijan will return to Iran, that is, to the real countries to which it belongs, by asking such the question "Will the hand return to the arm or the arm to the hand?" According to this idea, which is also conceptualized through the concept of Iran-e farhangi (Cultural Iran), Iran is a country that has been reduced in size by foreign powers due to political issues, and the real Iran is much larger than its current political borders (Başar, 2020).

The general approach of the Husseinists before the Second Karabakh War was that the Aliyev government was the main reason for the "failure". According to them, the Republic of Azerbaijan has forgotten its history and culture, turned its back on the existing historical values, and instead of thousands of years of depth, it is acting on the basis of a 30-year artificial historical narrative. This makes the Azerbaijani people rootless and leads to failure. The details of a speech by Tali Bagirzadeh, a political activist known for his discourse in the same ideology and direction, although he has no direct organic connection with the Husseinists, provide insight into this discourse and how the cultural and identity bond between Azerbaijan and Iran is framed. In the relevant speech, Bagherzadeh said, "Turks are proud that we are Ottomans in Türkiye. They have the right to be. They are proud. We should also say that we are the heirs of Shah Ismail. We have Shah Tahmasb, Javad Khan, and Shah Abbas. Furthermore, have our history. We have our own identity. One day, these young people should be told that if we want to liberate these lands (Karabakh), you must be like Shah Ismail. It must be in the spirit of Husseini. There is no freedom without faith. When you look at 20 years of statehood, you feel faithless and weak. But if you say I have history, I have Shah Ismail, then things change" (Bagirzadeh, 2015).

As can be seen from the arguments in this speech, the history of Azerbaijan constructed by Bagirzadeh is quite parallel to the concept of Iranian Pherheng. This is because Azerbaijan is historically part of Iran, and Azerbaijanis are one of the components of the Iranian nation. Another basis for the arguments is the issue of the "Hosseini spirit". According to this point of view, which is also very relevant to the name of the organization, Azerbaijan has a government that has moved away from its beliefs as much as it has moved away from its history. The fact that it has moved away from the "Husseini spirit" is cited as the main reason for Azerbaijan's failure in many issues, especially the Karabakh issue. On the contrary, there is propaganda that such failures would not have occurred if Azerbaijan had shown an attitude "in favor of Hussein", that is, if it had been "Husseinist".

For the Republic of Azerbaijan, the fact that Iran imposes itself and its sectarian policy on the basis of religion and finances individuals and groups who defend its political agenda in the country on the basis of religious arguments creates a lot of discomfort in the country. This issue has been on the agenda of Azerbaijani public opinion since the day Azerbaijan declared its independence, especially due to the activities of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijan has the second-largest Shiite population in the world after Iran, it does not pursue religious and sectarian policies and, unlike Iran, has adopted a laic-secular political system. Even in Azerbaijani textbooks, the fact that Shiism became a political-ideological tool during the Safavid era is criticized and described as a "mistake" (Turan, 2015:367). Therefore, sectarian approaches within Azerbaijan are not welcomed by the Azerbaijani state and are considered an attempt against the system.

The national security doctrine of the Republic of Azerbaijan consists of four main sections. These sections are as follows;

- Security environment,
- National interests of the Republic of Azerbaijan,
- Threats to the national interests of the Republic of Azerbaijan,
- Main aspects of the national security policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Mammadzade, 2018:646).

Although the doctrine emphasizes the occupied territories of Armenia, Azerbaijan defines itself as "an integral link in the Euro-Atlantic security mechanism that embraces the contemporary values of Europe" and states that it is "part of the Islamic world and shares the heritage and understanding of this culture" (Mammadzadeh, 2018:647). Therefore, although Azerbaijan does not directly position itself on the side of the Western bloc, it does not position itself on the side of Iran and sees its security in acting together with countries that Iran defines as "adversaries" or "rivals". For this reason, the anti-system activities of pro-Iranian groups in the country are defined as a "security problem" for Azerbaijan.

The current problems in relations between the two countries can briefly be categorized as follows:

- The existence of a secular and laicist Azerbaijan against the theocratic political structure of Iran,
- Maintaining relations with Israel and the West at the highest level,
- The concern is that Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran will be influenced by any gains made by Azerbaijan by showing a state reflex and that the already existing anti-government sentiment within the population will gradually develop into an ethnic tandem.
- Iran's fear of losing its influence in the region is in inverse proportion to Azerbaijan's growing influence.

- Türkiye's growing influence in the region and the fact that Iran will lose its position as a transit country for Türkiye with the opening of the Zengizur corridor.

3.2. Formation, Activities, and Incitementsof the Islamic Resistance Organization of Azerbaijan (Husseinists/Husseiniyyun)

The organization known as the Azerbaijan Islamic Resistance Organization (Azərbaycan İslam Müqavimət Hərəkatı), also known as the Husseinists (Hüsseinçilər) or Husseiniyyun, was founded in 2015 with the collection of names such as Tovhid Ibrahimbeyli, Orhan Mammadov, and Musa Esedzade, who are directly linked to the IRGC (Günaz, 2018). The organization's logo has a similar shape to that of the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah. However, unlike other groups linked to Iran, this group tries to present itself more as a religious-cultural organization and attaches great importance to soft power elements and propaganda activities. In this context, it pays special attention to video sharing and chat content on almost every social media platform. There are more than 25 YouTube channels in the name of Tohid Ibrahimbeyli, the founder of the organization.

The Azerbaijani media regularly publishes the channels and networks associated with this organization and warns the public about them. For example, according to the news published in the Azerbaijani press on October 24, 2022, the following are the channels of the organization operating with the aim of "manipulating the love of the Ahl al-Bayt and gaining influence over the believers in Azerbaijan":

Table 1: Social media accounts of Huseyniyyun Organization (*)

	YouTube Channels	Facebook Groups and Pages	Telegram Channels
1	Müsəlman xalq – Azərbaycan araşdırma mərkəzi	Personal accounts of members of "Huseyniyyun"	Yağlı Xəbər
2	Az-Rad TV	İslam-Eşq Dini	Azərbaycan İslam İnqilabına Doğru
3	Kərimə dövləti	Həqiqətləri bil	Zühura Hazırlıq
4	Həqiqətləri bil	Azeri İslam Group	Həzrət Zeynep Məktəbi
5	Əmmar Media	Kərimə dövləti	Orxan Məmmədov
6	Əli Aşiqləri_313		Əmmar Media
7	Virtual müqavimət		Azərbaycan İslam Müqavimət Hərəkatı
8	Huseyniyyun TV		
9	HİCAB.AZ313		
10	Yağlı Xəbər Plus		

Source: *Yenipress, 2022*

(*) Telegram channels are added by the author.

In addition, the organization creates dozens of pages and groups under various religious names and conducts propaganda activities through thousands of fake accounts. It is active on social media platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok (Yenipress, 2022). Here, the views and comments of the organization's members are served, especially the excerpts of religious conversations, Velayat-e Faqih propaganda, and current political issues.

The most well-known myth surrounding the formation of the Husseiniyyun is that it was founded by 14 madrasa students, led by Tohid Ibrahimbeyli, to combat DAESH in Syria. For this

purpose, 14 students of Azerbaijani origin, selected from the scholarly basins of Qom and Mashhad, gathered in Qom at the workplace of Isgender Husseinov, the owner of Nur Translation Company. After spending a day there, they were transferred to a military unit near the Syrian capital, Damascus. According to the sources, Tohid Ibrahimbeyli stated that they should be prepared not only for the fight against DAESH but also for armed conflicts within Azerbaijan, and these students were subjected to 25 days of military training for this purpose. After their training, these students were divided into groups of 4–5 people. Tohid Ibrahimbeyli took one of these groups, stayed in Syria for another 20 days, and then returned to Mashhad. The same group was sent to Syria for military training at Ibrahimbeyli's suggestion, but Elmir Zahidov, one of the students in the group, refused military training after ten days and returned to Mashhad. According to sources, after his return Tohid Ibrahimbeyli allegedly insulted Zahidov in Mashhad. As a result, Elmir Zahidov left the Khoy Madrasah where he was studying and returned to Azerbaijan in 2018. According to another source, Elmir Zahidov is one of the organization's senior figures in Syria and was detained in Sheki prison in 2021. Finally, it is reported that between 2013 and 2016, Tohid Ibrahimbeyli sent a number of students to Syria for training (Müsavat, 2018).

On July 3, 2018, the assassination attempt on the mayor of the Azerbaijani city of Ganja, Elmar Veliyev, was the most high-profile action carried out by this organization in Azerbaijan. The perpetrator of the assassination attempt, Yunis Seferov, who also held Russian citizenship, turned out to be one of the people who went to Syria for training. According to sources, Seferov, who was sent to Syria via Qom, took part in the training in exchange for financial benefits. Within the framework of the investigation conducted by the Azerbaijani security units, it was established that Taleh Hasan oglu Goyushov and Tohid Ibrahimbeyli's close relatives, Habib Akbar oglu Ibrahimli, Perviz Alimusa oglu Musayev, and Elmir Savadhan oglu Ziyadov attended secret meetings organized by Tohid Ibrahimbeyli in Qom together with Ganja assassin Yunis Seferov and received training by joining armed groups in Syria. Taleh Goyushov was later found to have played an active role in instigating the knife attack on police officers in Ganja. Immediately after this attack, Azerbaijani security services arrested and detained these men, who were the relatives of Tohid Ibrahimbeyli (Baku Post, 2018).

A list of 20 names that President Ilham Aliyev personally gave to the Iranian president for extradition was not executed by Iran. Similar efforts have also failed, as evidenced by the Prosecutor General's list of 41 individuals delivered on August 30, 2022. In one-on-one interviews with local insiders, the informed parties stated that these groups do not have a base in Azerbaijan to be taken seriously. One of the sources said, "In Azerbaijan, religious activities could be taken seriously by the public, but since these people are acting from inside Iran, they are not taken seriously by the public. Especially after the Karabakh war, these groups began to earn the hatred of the people". Nevertheless, some sources report that people in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, as well as in Lankaran, Ganja, and rural Baku, have some religious discontent with the government, which is why they have been able to find a base, albeit a limited one. Similarly, although the dissatisfaction with the Azerbaijani government seems to be cloaked in religion, the sources also state that the people in the problematic regions do not have a Turkish ethnic identity and that more problems arise, especially in Tat-dominated villages. Again, according to the sources, the insiders of the organization are financed in three ways: 1- The money obtained from the free donation of goods provided by Iran and their sale in the country; 2- The money obtained from the sale of drugs that also come from Iran; 3- The money that the members of the organization bring in and out of Iran by carrying cash on their persons.

Isgender Husseinov (Husseinzadeh), the owner of the organization's Nur Civilization Center (Nur Mədəniyyət Mərkəzi) and its website, is one of the most important figures of the organization, although he does not appear directly in the founding cadre. Born on January 26, 1966, in Jalilabad, Isgender Husseinov (Husseinzadeh) has been living in Qom with his family since 1996 and has been directly involved in activities against Azerbaijan. In 2008, he was

indicted for his crimes and reported to Interpol. He and several others are on the Azerbaijani state wanted list for "crimes against the state". Although he is not as well known in Azerbaijan as Tohid Ibrahimbeyli, he is well known by Iranian groups and has strong connections within Iran. As it is understood from the sources, he has a position even higher than Tohid Ibrahimbeyli and has direct connections with the Iranian state. Likewise, although Tohid Ibrahimbeyli's name was prominent in the process of sending students to Syria for training, it is clear from the sources that Isgender Husseinov played a key role in this process.

In an interview with him, Tasnim News Agency described him as "an Azerbaijani revolutionary with a heart full of love for Khomeini" (Tasnim, 2016a). Husseinov first established an institute called Hak Yolu in Qom and a website of the same name. From there, he openly published anti-Azerbaijani articles and activities. During the same period, Iran's Ahl al-Bayt news website, which publishes anti-Azerbaijani publications, based many of its news stories on Husseinov and his website. In 2013, he founded the Nur Civilization Center, which is still active today. He also founded Nur-Az.com, a website that acts as a publishing organ of the Husseinists and is vehemently anti-Azerbaijani with a pro-Iranian stance. In the "About Us" section of the website, they explained their field of activity by saying, "Azerbaijani Turks and lovers of Azerbaijan living in the Islamic Republic of Iran and different countries of the world gathered in the holy city of Qom on October 16, 2013, for the establishment of the Nur Civilization Center". The absence of the name of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the phrase "Azerbaijani Turks living in the Islamic Republic of Iran and other countries of the world" is clear.

Conclusion

As part of its advanced defense concept, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks security beyond its borders. Iran seeks to eliminate threats before they enter Iran or reach its borders. In this context, it seeks, on the one hand, to increase its deterrence and, on the other hand, to create governments in its neighbors and countries in its region that act in parallel with it and, if possible, share the same ideology. By increasing its deterrence, it seeks to prevent any threat to its country in its infancy. In addition to issues such as the nuclear program, ballistic missile activities, and increasing drone capacity, it seeks to increase its sanctioning power in other countries by building groups that will act with it in many countries. It uses elements of soft power and often uses identity and ideological discourse to direct and manage groups in these countries. Through cultural centers, universities, press and broadcasting activities, associations and foundations, and even hospitals, it seeks to create proxy forces that will carry out activities for its own political purposes by directly recruiting citizens from the target country.

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is in a different position than Iran's other neighbors. Especially for Iranian nationalists, Azerbaijan is not an independent country, but a "polity" detached from Iran. It is historically tied to Iran. Moreover, its laic-secular form of government contradicts Iran's official ideology. At this point, the biggest problem for Iran is the concern that millions of Azerbaijani Turks inside Iran are ideologically approaching the position of the Republic of Azerbaijan while distancing themselves from the central government of Iran by moving away from the idea of Velayat-e Faqih. In fact, for Iran, which has had many experiences in the past in the name of independence, the Republic of Azerbaijan is not a place that can be kept out of its control.

Shiism as a political tool and the spread of these ideas in the country are considered a threat to the system and a concern for national security in Azerbaijan. Institutions and organizations that embrace such ideas and perceive Shiism as a political instrument are targeted. In this context, the Azerbaijan Islamic Party, which was active in the early years of Azerbaijan, was quickly banned. The Republic of Azerbaijan, which does not allow any of these or comparable political

organizations, regards each of these organizations as "pawns" tied to Iran and furthering Iran's ideology.

The Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan, known as the Husseinists, is one of the groups trying to operate in Azerbaijan along the lines of Velayat-e Faqih. Unable to operate in the country, almost all the group's leaders are based in Iran. Despite repeated requests from Azerbaijan for the names of the members of this group from Iran, their extradition has not been fulfilled. This organization currently operates in the country through social media and social networks. Following the assassination attempt on the mayor of Ganja in 2018, substantial operations were launched against this organization, and its activities in the country were severely constrained. Today, this organization, which is unable to operate in the country, seeks sympathizers solely through its publications in Iran.

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