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Iran's Influence on Regional Processes During the Second Karabakhk War (2020) and Southern Azerbaijanis

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Abstract

This article examines Iran's position toward Azerbaijan during the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war and the reaction of Southern Azerbaijanis to this stance. Over the past few years, Armenia's increasingly aggressive posture against Azerbaijan, regardless of Azerbaijan's internal socio-economic dynamics, the roles of Turkey and Russia in the conflict, and the broader international context, culminated in Azerbaijan's successful liberation of its historical territories. Armenia's defeat—despite Iran's long-standing support since the onset of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—has exacerbated Tehran's concerns, primarily due to the issue of Southern Azerbaijan, which has

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historical roots spanning two centuries. Iran's strategic maneuvers during the war were largely aimed at addressing the Southern Azerbaijan question and undermining the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The alignment of Southern Azerbaijani nationalist forces—including political organizations, intellectuals, cultural activists, students, and business figures—in support of Azerbaijan expanded significantly. While the Second Karabakh War did not serve as a universal source of inspiration for all socio-political segments of Southern Azerbaijanis, it significantly bolstered national movements and contributed to their consolidation.

Iran's policy regarding the Karabakh conflict, which is based on double standards and favors Armenians, has increased tensions between the Iranian regime and South Azerbaijanis, further deepening ethnic divisions.

Currently, Iran's opposition to geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus, particularly its resistance to the opening of the Zangezur Corridor—which it deems a "red line"—is not solely motivated by geopolitical and geoeconomic concerns but is also intrinsically linked to the Southern Azerbaijan issue.

Keywords: Iran, Southern Azerbaijanis, Karabakh war, support, struggle.

İran'ın İkinci Karabağ Savaşı (2020) Sırasında Bölgesel Süreçler Üzerindeki Etkisi Ve Güney Azerbaycanlılar

Öz

Bu makale, 2020 Ermenistan-Azerbaycan savaşı sırasında İran'ın Azerbaycan'a karşı tutumunu ve Güney Azerbaycanlıların bu tutuma tepkisini incelemektedir. Son birkaç yıldır, Azerbaycan'ın iç sosyo-ekonomik dinamikleri, Türkiye ve Rusya'nın çatışmadaki rolleri ve daha geniş uluslararası bağlamdan bağımsız olarak, Ermenistan'ın Azerbaycan'a karşı giderek daha agresif hale gelen tutumu, Azerbaycan'ın tarihi topraklarını başarıyla kurtarmasıyla sonuçlandı. Ermenistan'ın yenilgisi, İran'ın Dağlık Karabağ çatışmasının başlangıcından bu yana verdiği uzun süredir devam eden desteği rağmen, Tahran'ın endişelerini daha da artırmıştır. Bunun başlıca nedeni, iki yüzyıllık tarihi kökleri olan Güney Azerbaycan meselesidir. İran'ın savaş sırasında stratejik manevraları, büyük ölçüde Güney Azerbaycan meselesini ele almak ve Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti'ni zayıflatmak amacıyla yapılmıştır.

Azerbaycan'ı destekleyen Güney Azerbaycan milliyetçi güçlerinin (siyasi örgütler, entelektüeller, kültür aktivistleri, öğrenciler ve iş adamları dahil) ittifaki önemli ölçüde genişledi. İkinci Karabağ Savaşı, Güney Azerbaycanlıların tüm sosyo-politik kesimleri için evrensel bir ilham kaynağı olmamakla birlikte,

ulusal hareketleri önemli ölçüde güçlendirdi ve bunların konsolidasyonuna katkıda bulundu.

Çifte standartlara dayanan ve Ermenileri kayıran İran'ın Karabağ çatışmasına ilişkin politikası, İran rejimi ile Güney Azerbaycanlılar arasındaki gerilimi artırarak etnik bölmeleri daha da derinleştirdi.

Şu anda, İran'ın Güney Kafkasya'daki jeopolitik değişimlere, özellikle de "kırmızı çizgi" olarak gördüğü Zangezur Koridoru'nun açılmasına karşı direnişi, yalnızca jeopolitik ve jeoekonomik kaygılarından kaynaklanmamakta, aynı zamanda Güney Azerbaycan meselesiyle de iç içe geçmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Güney Azerbaycanlılar, Karabağ Savaşı, destek, mücadele.

Introduction

Iran's policy toward Azerbaijan has remained fundamentally unchanged across various political systems from the early 20th century to the present. This consistency stems from the interconnectedness of Iran's foreign policy and internal security concerns, particularly due to the significant Azerbaijani Turkish population within its borders. This research primarily focuses on the period from 1990 onward, with an emphasis on Iran's position during the 44-day war and the reaction of Southern Azerbaijanis to its stance. Iran's failure to unequivocally support Azerbaijan—whose legitimate claims have been affirmed under international law—has had negative repercussions, exacerbating Tehran's domestic challenges and diminishing its influence among Southern Azerbaijanis and their position at the regional level.

Although all major international actors, including Russia and Iran, have formally recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (with the exception of Armenia), the self-proclaimed administration that facilitated the occupation of Karabakh for 28 years has never been recognized by any state or international organization. The United Nations (UN) has officially classified the situation as an occupation and

has adopted four Security Council resolutions demanding its resolution.¹

Despite international efforts to promote regional and global peace, certain states continue to pose serious obstacles to stability. Armenia's persistent belligerence in the Caucasus, in defiance of international law, exemplifies this reality. Over the years, Armenia's hostility toward Azerbaijan—disregarding Azerbaijan's internal socio-economic progress, the involvement of Turkey and Russia in the conflict, and broader geopolitical dynamics—culminated in Azerbaijan's reclaiming of its occupied lands (September 27–November 10, 2020). Given that the conflict unfolded near Iran's northwestern border, Tehran's apprehensions were unsurprising. The defeat of Armenia, a long-time ally of Iran since the onset of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, further intensified Tehran's concerns. Although Iranian officials publicly asserted their recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, Tehran covertly provided substantial assistance to Armenia, effectively serving as a lifeline for Yerevan. Furthermore, intelligence operations conducted on Azerbaijani territory underscore Iran's insincerity in its official rhetoric.² Iran's unease regarding Azerbaijan's independence was evident from the outset; when Azerbaijan declared sovereignty, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati openly stated, "We do not intend to recognize Azerbaijan's independence".³ Iran's veiled support for Armenia was further exposed during the 44-day war, when it refrained from condemning Armenia's missile attacks on Azerbaijani civilian areas such as Ganja and Barda.

Azerbaijan's post-war diplomatic efforts not only strengthened its international standing but also galvanized the Azerbaijani national movement within Iran, alarming the Iranian clerical establishment. Tehran has consistently employed similar tactics in response to developments concerning Azerbaijan within the international arena. The key question remains: what are the historical underpinnings of

¹ Araz Aslanlı, *Yeni Küresel Mücadelede Kafkasiya ve Karabağ sorunu*, Eko Avrasiya yayınları, Ankara, 2013, p.65-73

² Araz Qurbanov, *Səssiz müharibə*, Bakı, 1999

³ "İzvestiya" newspaper, 27.11.1991



Iran's concerns? The following sections will explore these origins in detail.

The Historical Context of Iran's Stance on Azerbaijan

The roots of Iran's apprehensions regarding Azerbaijan can be traced back to the Second Russo-Persian War (1826-1828), which resulted in the Treaty of Turkmenchay and the subsequent partition of Azerbaijani lands between Iran and Russia. Since then, both powers have engaged in ideological campaigns to sever the cultural and national ties between Azerbaijani Turks. Consequently, socio-political developments in the region have remained under close scrutiny by both Russian and Iranian authorities.

In the early 20th century, Russia expressed concerns over the rise of political activism in Iranian Azerbaijan and the potential for unification between North and South Azerbaijan. The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in 1918 was a significant geopolitical development that caught Iran off guard. Iranian nationalists, asserting a shared historical identity with the people of the Caucasus, disputed the newly independent state's use of the name "Azerbaijan".⁴ From the onset of Azerbaijani autonomy in 1917 until the collapse of the ADR in 1920, Iran maintained a contradictory stance, ultimately recognizing the ADR *de jure* to safeguard its regional interests.

During the 1940s, the Soviet Union strategically supported the national-democratic movement in South Azerbaijan, leveraging the issue as a means to exert territorial claims over Iran. Similarly, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Azerbaijan's subsequent independence, the leadership of Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993) revived the concept of a "Greater Azerbaijan"⁵, which was perceived by Tehran as a direct security threat.⁶ During this period, the occupation of Azerbaijani lands by Armenia, the atrocities committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh

⁴Solmaz Rüstəmova, Cümhuriyyətin "Azərbaycan" adlandırılması və onun tarixi əhəmiyyəti, Bakı, 2021, s.141.

⁵Əbülfəz Elçibəy, Bütöv Azərbaycan Yolunda, Bakı, 2004.

⁶Nəsib Nəsibli, Güneyli-Qüzeyli məsələlərimiz, Bakı, 2013, p.98

and surrounding areas, and the silence of Iranian radio and television and the press gave a strong impetus to the development of southern Azerbaijanis, especially national forces. They considered it their national and conscientious duty to defend Azerbaijan's position and began to hold various protests. These events reflected the students' commitment to their national identity and strengthened national unity among them.

Some Azerbaijani representatives in the ruling structure also began to fight in this direction. Azerbaijani deputies of the Iranian parliament prepared a statement reflecting the need to change the government's attitude to Karabakh policy and signed it to the majority of MPs. The resolution, read on behalf of all Azerbaijani deputies on April 6-13, 1993, condemned the actions of Armenians against Azerbaijanis and demanded that the government protect the Republic of Azerbaijan. On April 13, 1993, Kamal Abidinzadeh, a deputy elected from Khoy, made a speech in the Azerbaijani language on Nagorno-Karabakh in the Majlis, which was already an indicator of the national feelings of political people. Such speeches were also observed among some Azerbaijani representatives of the clergy, the most conservative social group. Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili repeatedly refers to the Karabakh issue in his Friday prayer talks and addresses the northern Azerbaijanis in Azerbaijani and said he shared their grief.

Under the influence of the processes taking place in Northern Azerbaijan, the struggle of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia became mass and took an organized form. In 1993, in a letter sent to Ayatollah Khamenei, the religious leader of Iran, signed by dozens of scientists and businessmen, doctors and writers on the initiative of Dr. Javad Heyat and the authors of "Varlig" magazine recalling the new Crusades against Muslims around the world, it was requested to declare "Azerbaijan Week" to help the Muslims of Karabakh, as well as the Muslims of Bosnia. Dr. Javad Heyat addressed a letter to Turkish President Demirel to help resolve the Karabakh conflict and liberate Azerbaijani lands from the occupying Armenians.

Southern Azerbaijanis in the pages of media outlets such as "Varlig", "Dilməc", "Haray", "Yol", "Oyrençi", "Korpu", "Azerbaijan

sesi", "Tribun", "Azer-Turk International", "Azerbaijan", "Aftab-e Azerbaijan", "Khudaferin", "Comhuri-ye Eslami", "Fajr-e Azerbaijan", "Agri", "Shams-e Tabriz", "Ahrar", "Ava-ye Ardabil", "Omid-e Zanjan" defended the people of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh issue and expressed their ethnic ties with them.

In the pages of periodicals and books, intellectuals such as Javad Heyat, Samad Sardariniya, Tohid Malikzade, Alirza Ardabili, Hasan Rashidi, Boyuk Rasuloglu, Jamal Ayrumlu, Mashallah Razmi, Samed Niknam followed the events in a consistent and systematic way, treats the events correctly and fairly and they demand that the Iranian government treat Azerbaijan fairly and not forget about this issue in its relations with Armenia.

Iran, which claims to raise its equal relations with neighboring countries, the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs to the level of state doctrine, and which attaches "importance" to Islamic values in defining its relations with foreign countries always defended Armenia, preferring national interests to religious ones in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to neutralize the "threat" (related to the national issue) from the Republic of Azerbaijan. The principle of "Islamic solidarity" that Iran used extensively during the Iraq-Iran war failed during the Karabakh war. The Iranian regime's hopes for internal solidarity were not so successful. Its foreign policy towards the Republic of Azerbaijan has weakened the sense of belonging to the Iranian national identity among Azerbaijanis.

Thus, Iran's comprehensive assistance to Armenia has led to the nationalization of a large number of politically active Azerbaijanis, which has strengthened the composition of national forces, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Western historians also note that the socio-political events in the north of Azerbaijan have a serious impact on Iranian Azerbaijan, and that Iranian President Rafsanjani fears that Azerbaijani nationalism will pose a problem for the Islamic government of Iran. Iran is not afraid to openly support Christian Armenia, considering the Karabakh conflict as one of the ways to

weaken Azerbaijan, as he is interested in remaining small and powerless.⁷

The Iranian government's "Karabakh" problem and South Azerbaijanis

Currently, the Karabakh problem is a sensitive issue for almost all sections of Azerbaijanis living in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Azerbaijanis who have been active in the socio-political and cultural spheres since the beginning of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War have focused on this area. When military operations began, the first support was observed in the Ardabil region of South Azerbaijan. Although twenty national activists were detained during the September 29 rally in Ardabil,⁸ on September 30, dozens of national activists again demonstrated support for Azerbaijan, chanting "One nation is behind you, Azerbaijani soldier". Young people from the Zanjan region gathered in front of the Sultanate Dome and supported the operations of the Azerbaijani army, chanting slogans such as "The homeland is beyond the borders on the map," "We are Azerbaijan," "If the world returns to heaven, there will be no Karabakh".

Political organizations created by Southern Azerbaijanis joined mass protests in 2020, as in the 1990s, in connection with the problems facing the Republic of Azerbaijan in the system of international relations, including the region. On the third day of the war, the South Azerbaijan National Liberation Front (GAMAC) stated that millions of Azerbaijani Turks living in South Azerbaijan were awaiting a call from President and Supreme Commander-in-Chief Ilham Aliyev for national mobilization and they stand by the Azerbaijani state in all circumstances and demand that the Islamic Republic of Iran suspend military and economic aid to Armenia.⁹ The Azerbaijani National Movement (ANM) announced in an October 5 statement on the closure of the Nurduz customs that "This time they will hold a mass rally in Babek fortress in Julfa and call for a people's march to close the gates of occupation if the Nurduz customs are not

⁷Svante Cornell, Azerbaijan: A Brewing Hotspot , 2008.

⁸Brenda Shaffer, Iran at Risk From Spillover of Armenia-Azerbaijan Clashes, 2020.

⁹Güney Azərbaycan Milli Azadlıq Cəbhəsi (GAMAC), 29.9.2020.

closed".¹⁰ Giving a legal basis for defending the Karabakh war in pursuance of UN Security Council resolutions, they sharply criticized Iran's pro-Armenian position and declared a criminal regime.

In the early days of the war, the support shown as a separate group began to take on a mass character in early October and took on an organized form. A call issued by national activists on September 30 stated that a peaceful march would be held on October 1 to show support for their North Azerbaijani compatriots. Armenia's aggressive policy was condemned in the actions of the Azerbaijani army in support of the military operations in Karabakh, which took place in various cities of South Azerbaijan, including Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, Zanjan and Tehran "We are ready to die, we are Babek's soldiers!", "O Karabakh, O death!", "Karabakh is ours, it will be ours!", "Protection from Armenia is a crime, a crime!", "Long live Azerbaijan", "He supported Karabakh! ", "Let there be Azerbaijan, let the unwilling be blind! " slogans were chanted.

In a joint statement, 60 prominent musicians, 58 South Azerbaijani poets and writers, and the Human Rights Commission of the East Azerbaijan Bar Association stated that they "unconditionally" supported the full liberation of the occupied territories of the Azerbaijani people. They also demanded that the Iranian Foreign Ministry provide diplomatic support to the Republic of Azerbaijan and implement four resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council.

In the statement (signed by 27 universities) of the South Azerbaijan Student Movement, which has made a great contribution to the most effective activities, protests, actions and positive changes in Iran, for support of Azerbaijan's military operations for the liberation of Karabakh, condemned Armenia's aggressive policy and were sharply criticized various political and social forces within Iran which supported the Armenian regime. It was noted that the support

¹⁰ Azərbaycan Milli Hərəkatı (AMH): "Nurduz gümrüyünü bağlamasanız, özümüz bağlayacayıq" 2020-10-05.

of these forces to Armenia stemmed from discriminatory and hostile positions against the Azerbaijani Turks.¹¹

The ranks of national forces fighting to support northern Azerbaijan have also expanded at the expense of businessmen. Trade facilities in the Tabriz market were closed for three days in support of the Azerbaijani Army's military operation against the Armenian aggressors in Karabakh. "We are not supporters of Azerbaijan, we are Azerbaijan itself!" were posted on the doors of the shops that had ceased operations.¹²

Southern emigrants, through numerous socio-political, national and cultural organizations, conveyed all the nuances of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the realities of Azerbaijan to the world community and showed support. Dr. Mashallah Razmi's online interview with Canada's Payam Radio, Ahmed Obali's interview with Network West Wood One, as well as WMILFM, 77 WABC and WLS radio were very important in this regard. Ahmad Obali took a more correct position when answering the journalist's question about the slogan "Kurdish, Persian, Armenian is the enemy of Azerbaijan" in the recent protests in Iran that "by saying Persian, we mean the whole Persian nation, by saying Armenian, not the whole Armenian nation, but only those who support the occupation of Armenia" he said, noting that Azerbaijanis are far from the spirit of nationalism. Obali noted that the peoples of North and South Azerbaijan are united both historically and nationally, and that the people of South Azerbaijan inspired the North Azerbaijani Army because they knew it as their own army.¹³

The issue of Kurdishization in Western Azerbaijan, a sensitive topic for Southerners, gained prominence during this period, particularly among Southern Azerbaijanis abroad. They compared the Karabakh issue to the Kurdish issue in Iran, advising Kurds to take heed of Armenia's example. Figures like Ahmad Hashimi, Sadig Isabayli, and

¹¹ Azərbaycan Tələbə Hərəkatı" Qarabağ münaqişəsi ilə bağlı Azərbaycana dəstək bəyanatı yayıb 2020-10-06.

¹² بازار تبریز در اعتراض به حمله وحشیانه ارمنستان به گنجه فردا یکشنبه تعطیل خواهد بود (Tabriz Market will be closed on Monday in response to Armenia's brutal attack on Ganja), interaztv.

¹³ Əhməd Obali, My Radio interview on John Batchelor, 22.10.2020.

Karim Asgari interpreted the visit of Azerbaijan's president to Khudafarin as a symbolic step toward the realization of a unified Azerbaijan. Iran's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has led to "greater" results than it expected, as it sees the potential for a stronger Republic of Azerbaijan as a factor that strengthens national pride among Azerbaijanis fighting for national rights in Iran. The issue of the unification of the North and the South began to be raised with open slogans, and the Iranian regime continues to slowly "lose" the Azerbaijani Turks, exposing in this war the Persian nature veiled in Islamic identity.

In the early days of the war, some Azerbaijani MPs in the Iranian Parliament expressed support, mainly through social media. Although Azerbaijani MP Alirza Beygi criticized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran and a number of security organizations for their "Iranian nationalist" approach to the issue and the country's exclusion from the process of resolving the Karabakh crisis,¹⁴ but during the period when the demonstrations became mass, there was no substantial support from him or other Azerbaijani MPs, no joint opposition to the Iranian government. His silence reflected his alignment with the more influential conservative faction in Iran.

Under the influence of the mass demonstrations of Southern Azerbaijanis, some Azerbaijani representatives of the clergy, the most conservative social group (imams of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Zanjan and Ardabil) were also forced to support the operations of the Azerbaijani army. A joint statement said: "There is no doubt that Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan and the occupied territories must be returned to Azerbaijan, the country of the Ahl al-Bayt. The Azerbaijani government intends to act within the framework of completely legal and religious rules to take back these lands and implement the four resolutions of the UN Security

¹⁴ نگرش غلط ایرانشهری عامل انفعال وزارت خارجه در بحران قره باغ بود/ طمع کنار . محمد شهریار (Iran's misstep, coupled with the Foreign Ministry's lack of response to the Karabakh crisis, is causing it to miss opportunities in the region)

Council".¹⁵ Denying Tehran's support for Armenia, the imam called it "propaganda by the enemies of friendly relations between the two countries". In fact, this statement can be considered as a step to reduce social tensions in the South and to restore some of the recently lost confidence (due to support) among the hardline in the North. Politicians and MPs belonging to the conservative wing of the government are trying to demonstrate their relatively fair position in their policies on Azerbaijan and the Karabakh issue. Since they were elected on the basis of the reactionary election law in Iran, the sincerity of their attitude gives grounds for suspicion.

Hundreds of people from all the cities of South Azerbaijan joined the call "We are the essence of Azerbaijan", which started in Urmia (Urmia) in mid-October. Thousands of Azerbaijanis in various regions of South Azerbaijan, including major cities such as Urmia and Tabriz, as well as in Tehran, chanted slogans such as "We are not supporters of Azerbaijan, we are Azerbaijan itself" and stressed the spiritual and cultural ties with the North Azerbaijani Army. The spread of videos showing trucks carrying ammunition belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran to Armenia has deepened protests in the cities of South Azerbaijan. Iran's practical stance has led to the expansion of the protesters, both in terms of quantity and scope. On October 18, the second big demonstration took place under the slogan "Come, my brother, to the square, weapons are going to Yerevan, Azerbaijan side by side, Nurduz must be closed".¹⁶ National-cultural activists demanded an end to the Iranian government's support for the Armenian regime and the closure of the Nurduz customs gate. Iranian security forces responded with arrests, and the government temporarily shut the checkpoint to ease tensions, though military support to Armenia continued.

Despite the regime's pressure, Southern Azerbaijanis continued to celebrate Azerbaijan's victories. They gathered at the border to cheer as Azerbaijani soldiers raised their flag at Khudafarin's bridge.

¹⁵ Mehr News Agency. (دولت آذربایجان در بازیسگیری اراضی قرهباغ قانونی عمل کرد) (The Republic of Azerbaijan acted legally in the recapture of Karabakh territories)

¹⁶ Gunaz. Tv, "Güney Azərbaycanda Quzey Azərbaycana dəstək aksiyalarına çağırış edilib: "Nurduz bağlanmalıdır", 14.10.2020

Following the end of the war on the existing border lines between Northern Azerbaijan and Iran and the withdrawal of the occupying Armenian troops from those territories, Iran sent a large number of troops and equipment of the "25th Karbala Army of Mazandaran" to those regions and The dislocation of propaganda used by the Pan-Farsi and Iranians in this direction, rather than protecting the country's borders, provoked public opinion and formed a provocative step against the Republic of Azerbaijan. It is interesting to see what danger Sepah's move, which is full of such symbolic and various propaganda aspects, is aimed at eliminating. If Iran's goal is only to strengthen the protection of the country's borders, what is the threat to the country's security and citizens living in the border areas, that if the withdrawal of the Armenian occupiers from the border with Iran, the deployment of Azerbaijani troops in those regions and the joy of the people living in the border areas? It can be concluded that all the maneuvers of the IIR were calculated because they were wary of the South issue.

Another step taken by Iran in this direction was in early November, when Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was convinced that "terrorist forces were involved in the Karabakh war" without any justification (no such statement was made later) and brought this issue to the attention of the officials of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Turkey.¹⁷ For 27 years, when the mentioned border areas of Azerbaijan were under Armenian occupation, the Iranian side did not protest against the illegal activities carried out by Armenians in these regions. Zarif's approach can be interpreted as aimed at reducing dissatisfaction with the deployment of Iranian troops on the Azerbaijani border, as well as to shrink the victory in the eyes of the people. Because the reason for Iran's concern over the victory is that Azerbaijan, as a developing country in the region, has emerged victorious and stronger from the war, and another reason is the destabilization of the country.

¹⁷ Kafkassam, از صفحه اینستاگرام افشار سلیمانی سفير اسبق ایران در آذربایجان, (Instagram page Afshar Salimani, Iran's former ambassador to Azerbaijan), 02.11.2020.



Following the reformist maneuvers, high-ranking conservative leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei's statement¹⁸ on the return of occupied territories to Azerbaijan was made in response to Azerbaijan's victory in the South Caucasus and the protests of Azerbaijanis within Iran. However, this was not influenced by internal political struggles within the government. In early November, websites like Mashreq News and Gum News, closely linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, published anti-Azerbaijani articles but later retracted them, claiming they had made a mistake. Despite these retractions, Iran's position on the Karabakh conflict remained unchanged. The Iranian Center for Strategic Studies and the Bureau of Political and International Studies of the Iranian Foreign Ministry stressed that a stronger, "energy-rich Azerbaijan" posed the greatest security threat to Iran in the South Caucasus. This indicates that gestures from Khamenei and others in the ruling structure, depending on the situation, should be viewed with skepticism. These "softening" actions may reflect the sensitivity of the Azerbaijani population and possibly the need to win the vote of Azerbaijani Turks, who form a significant portion of the electorate in the upcoming presidential elections.

While South Azerbaijanis celebrated the liberation of Shusha with fireworks, sacrifices, distribution of sweets and celebrations in Urmia (Urmu), Qazvin, Tabriz, Tehran, Zanjan, Hamadan and other cities in South Azerbaijan, the Iranian official media did not cover Shusha's capture. A few days later, a number of media outlets and Iranian "experts" known for their closeness to Iran's security forces openly acknowledged their concerns about the Republic of Azerbaijan's victory. The media began to cover unfounded allegations that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was provoked by Turkey and that the country was building military bases in Azerbaijan, pursuing strategic and pan-Turkist goals against Iran in line with British and American plans in the Caucasus.

After liberating the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, websites close to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and security agencies portrayed those territories - Karabakh - as Armenian

¹⁸ نیت آرش گنوی (Arsh Gonooni). 14/Abaan/1399 Radio Farda), (What is Azerbaijan's support?, پنهان خامنه‌ای از حمایت آشکار از آذربایجان چیست؟

territory. The Telegram channel of the "Azariha" website, which is controlled by the IRGC and pan-Iranian circles, distorted the liberation of Karabakh as the occupied lands: "Baku allowed a policy of relocating its citizens to areas where atrocities were committed in the 2020 war. Having conquered major cities such as Jabrayil, Shusha, and Agdam in the war, Baku called this new policy the "Great Return".¹⁹

The Iranian website "Farazdaily" made blatantly unfounded claims: "Azerbaijan has effectively become a training ground for Israeli forces in northern Iran, and Baku's insistence on building the Zangezur corridor will reduce a large part of Iran's geopolitical importance in this region". In addition, Iran's continuous attempts to provoke in recent years cannot be ignored.²⁰

In September 2022, while Azerbaijan was conducting anti-terrorist operations against the separatist military junta in the Karabakh region, some news sources announced that Iran had deployed 50,000 troops to the Armenian border.²¹ On September 16, the commander of the ground forces of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Mohammad Pakpour, visited units located on the borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nakhchivan and stated that their level of preparedness was high. Also, Mohammad Baqeri made a threatening statement during a military parade dedicated to the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988): "Iran will not tolerate any changes to the borders in the region and will call on Azerbaijan and Armenia to resolve their issues peacefully and through dialogue." "We do not seek conflicts and wars, but we do not remain silent when it is necessary to help them".²²

On October 21, 2022, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, emphasized at the

¹⁹ گ نند ک ی م چه ما ب ا ی م نطقه ای م شوره (What do we have in common with other countries?), t.me/ir_Azariha/14919

²⁰ faraz.ir/000DU9

²¹ "Iran is deploying around 50,000 troops to the Armenian border", euroweeklynews.com/2022/09/16/.

²² "Maj Gen Bagheri: We will not tolerate changes in borders of regional countries", iranpress.com\2022\22\09\.

opening ceremony of the Consulate General in the city of Qafan, Armenia, that Iran considers Armenia's security to be its own and the region's security. He added that the Syunik region (Zangezur-Y.H.) is one of the main north-south corridors and we consider it one of the important north-south transit routes of Armenia. We are cooperating with Armenia to strengthen, increase this transit route, and accelerate the movement of trucks and their movement.²³ In fact, this statement was a clear message to Azerbaijan, which wants to establish a connection with the Nakhchivan exclave - the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which has been blockaded by Armenia for many years, through the "Zangezur corridor". At the same time, the opening of a consulate in that region is also aimed at hindering Azerbaijan's aspirations regarding the "Zangezur Corridor". Because no Iranian citizen lives or works in that area. Another striking point here is that the Iranian side hastily opened the consulate in a building whose renovation was not completed. Even the Armenian media expressed surprise at Iran's haste.²⁴

Iran's main concern is the growing cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia in the region, and its exclusion from regional matters. The agreement at the war's conclusion, which did not align with Iran's interests, particularly regarding transit routes, contributed to Tehran's dissatisfaction.

The Azerbaijani majority living in Iran does not agree with Iran's stated anti-Azerbaijani policy and voiced their objections whenever they had the opportunity. Despite state repression, solidarity among Azerbaijanis in Iran with the Republic of Azerbaijan reached unprecedented levels. Even religious figures operating in the provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan have issued statements of support for the Republic of Azerbaijan. National activists were brutally beaten by security forces during protests in various Iranian cities supporting Karabakh, with hundreds arrested. The Azerbaijani Human Rights Society - "Erk" has sent statements on the arrests of the Iranian

²³Амир Абдоллахиян: Мы считаем безопасность Армении своей собственной безопасностью (Amir Abdollahian: We consider Armenia's security to be our own security), irna.ir/xjKPgH.

²⁴ «Грапарак»: Почему торопится Иран?, news.am/rus/news/726147



regime in South Azerbaijan to Amnesty International, the United Nations, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran Javid Rahman and international organizations on the rights of national minorities. It should be noted that the arrest of South Azerbaijanis participating in rallies in support of the Republic of Azerbaijan also violates Article 27 of the Iranian Constitution. Iran intervened in these demonstrations and detained some of the participants. It is reported that in 2020, there were about a hundred people arrested in Iranian prisons for this issue.²⁵ (Caner, 2020).

The Islamic Republic of Iran's support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war has only deepened the national identity of Azerbaijani Turks, who make up a significant portion of Iran's population, and intensified ethnic tensions, posing a potential threat to the regime's stability in the country.

Conclusion

The independence of Northern Azerbaijan in 1991 sparked a national awakening in the South, creating a fertile ground for new political perspectives, including those advocating for independence and integration. The occupation of 25% of Northern Azerbaijan's lands by Armenia had instilled fear in the South. However, the liberation of these territories after 27 years has fostered pride and self-confidence in the South, reinforcing their trust in the Northern Azerbaijani government and bolstering their fighting spirit. This has provided significant moral and psychological support to the national movement within Iran. While the Second Karabakh War didn't inspire all social classes in South Azerbaijan, it galvanized the national forces, leading to greater consolidation and widespread calls for the independence and integration of Azerbaijani Turks in Iran.

The Second Karabakh War exposed the position of the Islamic Republic of Iran against the Republic of Azerbaijan with complete nakedness. Iran's maneuvers were mainly aimed at the "South Azerbaijan" issue in Iran and the weakening of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Iran's cover of the real attitude to the events at the

²⁵ Mustafa Caner, "İran'ın Karabağ siyaseti Diplomatik Esneklikle İmkansızlıklar Arasına Sıkışmış Durumda", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 12.10.2020.

beginning of the war with the presence of terrorists in Karabakh and pursue two-headed policy It should be seen as a basis for further escalation and deepening of ethnic conflict in the future by increasing hatred of the regime among southern Azerbaijanis.

As for the easing of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, it should be noted that this issue has become a geopolitical knot. The independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan is the most serious factor influencing the struggle for national rights of Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran. The problems are fundamental and not related to everyday politics or the people who lead the country. Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran pursues a policy that hinders the development of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The comprehensive support Iran has given to Armenia during the ongoing Karabakh conflict, along with its unofficial relations with the separatist regime in the occupied territories, as well as the promotion of anti-Azerbaijani groups in Iran, exemplify this strategy.

It is not difficult to see this policy of Iran even in the course of the processes following the Second Karabakh War. Even during the war, S. Cornell stated: "This is a three-level conflict, which means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to resolve, because external powers have the ability, so to speak, to sabotage any effort to resolve the conflict..." (Cornell, 2020). One of the foreign powers Cornell mentions is Iran. One of the regional actors preventing the signing of a final peace agreement between the conflicting parties is Iran. Iran considers the opening of the Zangezur corridor, a project of not only regional but also global importance, a serious threat to itself. Because the opening of the corridor in question will result in a further increase in Azerbaijan's geopolitical importance, this goes against both Iran's domestic political and regional interests.

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