

Before the Azerbaijan-Armenia War: Karabakh in Iran's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Since the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has generally pursued an ideological foreign policy. While Iran's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh has shown occasional variations, it has maintained a consistent approach within its own framework. Overall, Iran has approached the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which has persisted for thirty years, with considerable sensitivity. The primary source of this sensitivity is the significant Turkish population in Iran, particularly the South Azerbaijani Turks. However, Azerbaijan's growing alliance with Turkey, the strengthening of Turkey's influence in the Caucasus, and Azerbaijan's developing relations with the U.S. and Israel have raised concerns in Iran. Despite ostensibly supporting Shia-majority Azerbaijan, Iran has often aligned its policy with Armenia. This study aims to outline this process in broad terms. Additionally, it highlights the impact of Iran's foreign policy on establishing the geoeconomic and geostrategic equation in the region and emphasizes how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become a key, if not deadlocked, element in Iran-Azerbaijan relations.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Karabakh, Iran, Turkey, Armenia, energy, Caucasus, Russia

1. Introduction

Nagorno-Karabakh has been the primary focus of the Caucasus region over the past thirty years and, due to its sensitivity, has attracted the attention of global powers such as the U.S., China, and the European Union, beyond the neighboring states directly involved. The presence of an Armenian minority in Nagorno-Karabakh, which covers approximately 20% of Azerbaijan's territory, has occasionally framed the region as a clash between Islamic civilization and the Christian world. Armenia occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding regions following the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to the displacement of over one million Azerbaijani Turks. Additionally, according to official Azerbaijani sources, 230,000 Armenian citizens migrated from Azerbaijan to Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia.

Between 1988 and 1994, Nagorno-Karabakh witnessed conflicts between Azerbaijani forces and Armenian forces under Russian patronage. Armenian forces perpetrated the Khojaly Massacre on February 26, 1992, which became a defining moment in these disputes.

This article primarily focuses on the foreign policy Iran has pursued in this region since the beginning of the conflict, particularly in its role as a neighboring Islamic republic that shares religious ties with newly independent Azerbaijan. Naturally, we expected the Islamic Republic of Iran to openly support Azerbaijan, a Shia state with a majority of Muslims. However, Iran's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh has varied, reflecting its shifting foreign policy priorities. These variations have included indifference, mediation efforts, occasional emphasis on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, fostering good relations with Armenia, and supporting sectarian groups against the Azerbaijani state.

1.1 Methodology: Analytical Framework for Assessing Iran's Foreign Policy

This study employs a qualitative analytical framework to investigate Iran's foreign policy toward Azerbaijan in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from 1988 to 2025. The research integrates historical analysis with contemporary geopolitical evaluation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the bilateral relationship and its regional implications. Data collection relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data encompass official statements, diplomatic records, and interviews with policymakers, offering direct insights into

Iran's strategic decision-making processes. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic literature, historical accounts, and regional media reports, which collectively provide a broad evidential base for analyzing policy shifts and their outcomes.

2. A Historical Perspective on the Karabakh Region

The Karabakh region is located to the east of Armenia and southwest of the Republic of Azerbaijan, stretching from the highlands of the South Caucasus to the plains between the Kura and Aras rivers. Since the Safavid era, Karabakh had been one of the politically divided regions ceded to Tsarist Russia after the Treaty of Gulistan. The province of Nagorno-Karabakh remained the name of this region until 1840, when it underwent a name change to the Shusha region. During the Safavid period, Karabakh, centered in Ganja, was one of Iran's major provinces. One of the branches of the Qajar Turkic tribe in Karabakh held the position of Beylerbey in the 10th century, inheriting it from tribal chiefs of the Qizilbash nomads.

Following the Ottoman-Russian Wars, the Armenian population in the eastern part of the Ottoman Empire allied with the Russians and rebelled against the Ottoman government. Following their victories in this war, the Russians forced Armenians to migrate within Russian borders, with the aim of changing the demographic structure of Yerevan and Nagorno-Karabakh in their favor (Talebi, 2008: 56).

With the weakening of Qajar influence in the Caucasus, Muslims began migrating from Tsarist territories to other regions. During the second Iran-Russia war, Abbas Mirza relocated Yoruks from Karabakh to Iran. Bakikhanov writes on this matter:

Amir Khan Qajar and Jafar Quli Agha led a group that the governor sent to Karabakh to resettle the Jebrail and other Karabakh Yoruks in Iran. (Bakikhanov, 2003: 97)

After this event, the Russians attempted to transform Karabakh into a region with an Armenian majority. However, in 1918, with the independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan from the Russian Empire, sovereignty disputes over the region began. Despite Nagorno-Karabakh being a historically and politically Turkish region, Armenians attempted to destabilize it through conflict. Certain figures in the Iranian government, such as Foroughi and Timurtash, opposed Muhammad Amin Rasulzade's efforts and sought to prevent the annexation of Azerbaijani territories to Turkey. These acts of sabotage continued until the era of Qajar Prime Minister Seyyed Zia Tabatabai. Despite Rasulzade's extensive correspondence with the Qajar government, some individuals persisted in advocating for Armenian migration from Iran to Karabakh (Irvani, 2005: 37).

Following the occupation of the region by Soviet forces in collaboration with Armenian forces, the mountainous part of Nagorno-Karabakh, which had a tiny Armenian population, declared independence as the artificial Republic of Artsakh. Within the borders of Soviet Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh had a population consisting of 90% Muslims. However, during the 1990s, the Armenian administration pursued policies of occupation and genocide, resulting in the complete eradication of the Muslim population. The United Nations Security Council repeatedly recognized Armenia as an occupying force, demanding its immediate withdrawal from the region, despite never acknowledging accusations of ethnic cleansing and war crimes.

Finally, in 2020, Azerbaijan successfully reclaimed its territories within the framework of international law, ending a 30-year occupation. During this time, Iranian officials consistently called on both sides to refrain from conflict, emphasizing the need for negotiations and expressing concern about clashes occurring near its borders. Confronted and unable to use Georgian territories, Iran provided support to Armenia. According to local sources cited by the Turkish newspaper *Yeni Safak*, a convoy of 50 trucks carrying Russian armored vehicles passed from Iran's Bandar Anzali port to the Norduz border near Julfa and then into Armenia. Reports indicated that approximately 200 trucks were awaiting transport to Armenia. Azerbaijani Turks in the region protested Iran's role in facilitating the transport of weapons to Armenia (*Yeni Safak* newspaper, 2021).

3. A Turning Point in Iranian Foreign Policy: The Popular Front Government

After the popular Front came to power in Azerbaijan on June 7, 1992, Iran's sabotage efforts significantly increased. Initially, Iran sought to influence Abulfaz Elchibey and Azerbaijan by appealing to shared Shia cultural heritage and swiftly recognizing the Republic of Azerbaijan. Elchibey's ascent to power within the popular Front government revealed a clear preference for Ankara, and he viewed Russia as his primary adversary, a perception that alarmed Russia due to its involvement in Azerbaijan. Following Russia's support for Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran ostensibly appeared to side with Azerbaijan but, in practice, sought Armenian supremacy. In May 1992, during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran hosted a meeting in Tehran involving the acting Azerbaijani president and the Armenian president at the time. While Iran's mediation efforts officially declared the cessation of hostilities, the strategic city of Shusha was occupied, and 20% of Azerbaijani territory

was taken with Armenian support, thwarting Iran's diplomatic efforts. Despite being part of the Minsk Group alongside Russia, the U.S. and France since 1994, Iran continued to support Armenia (Golkarian, 2021).

How was Iran's attitude toward Azerbaijan during Elchibey's tenure? According to Iranian expert Mesiaqa Mammedi:

- The openly pro-Western policy of the Azerbaijani leadership, the excessive expansion of the prestige of Turkey's historical rival, and the strengthening of national consciousness in this context did not align with Iran's strategic goals.
- Iran maintained permanent political and economic relations with Armenia, which occupied 20% of Azerbaijan's territories. Additionally, Azerbaijan's secular state model and its objective influence on the ethnic self-awareness process of Iranian Azerbaijanis posed a challenge to Iran.
- Geopolitical and ideological considerations dominated Iran's foreign policy. Despite concerns from its Muslim population, Iran expanded its relations with Armenia to curb Turkey's influence, its traditional regional rival.
- Geopolitically, Iran opposed the strengthening of separate geopolitical influences by the U.S. and the West or by Russia, Turkey, and China in the region. In military-political affairs, Iran sought broader regional ties with Russia and China rather than with the U.S., the West, or their allies such as Turkey.

However, Elchibey's tenure saw the achievement of several diplomatic milestones between Iran and Azerbaijan.

- The decision to establish an Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran took place on August 5, 1992. In the same month, the Azerbaijani foreign minister paid an official visit to Iran, resulting in agreements on several key issues. They opened consulates in Nakhchivan and Tabriz, agreed on gas supplies from Iran to Azerbaijan, and facilitated travel to Nakhchivan through Iran.
- On October 8, 1992, a State Commission for the Development of Economic, Commercial, and Humanitarian Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Azerbaijan was established. The first meeting of the intergovernmental commission took place from November 16 to 20 of the same year. These talks resulted in the signing of a memorandum and nine agreements, which laid the legal foundation for Azerbaijan-Iran economic, commercial, and humanitarian relations.
- In 1993, Iran became Azerbaijan's second-largest trading partner after Russia.

During this period, Iran made two mediation attempts in the Karabakh conflict:

1) The first mediation attempt by Iran in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict occurred in February 1992. At that time, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Bakû, Yerevan, and the Karabakh region to negotiate a ceasefire. However, the Khojaly Massacre committed by Armenians on the night of February 25-26 undermined these efforts.

2) Iran's next mediation attempt began in March 1992. On April 20, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi visited Bakû and Yerevan to consult on organizing a meeting between the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents. As a result, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, along with the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, convened a conflict resolution meeting in Tehran on May 7, leading to the signing of a ceasefire document. However, Iran's mediation failed again when Armenian armed forces occupied Shusha on May 8 (Ehmed, 2019).

4. Hashemi Rafsanjani Era

His personal diary is a key aspect that sheds light on Iran's stance during the First Karabakh War under Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency. To clarify the issue, here are some excerpts from his memoirs regarding peace negotiations:

May 10, 1992 (Sunday): I sent Mr. (Mahmoud) Vaezi to mediate in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

June 23, 1992 (Saturday): In the evening, the Supreme National Security Council discussed the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the conflicts between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, and Afghanistan, and the incidents in Arak. We needed to agree on sending observers to Nakhchivan and Armenia. Let's assist Azerbaijan and urge Armenia to restore its pre-summit status prior to the Tehran summit.

August 19, 1992 (Wednesday): The foreign minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan [Tofik Kasimov] arrived. From a weak position, he called for more cooperation. He expressed regret over their recent hostile attitudes, stating they did not wish for the war with Armenia to continue and believed in a political solution. I told him that we were ready to help; write down your requests and coordinate with us.

April 13, 1993 (Monday): The Vice President of the Republic of Azerbaijan [Mr. Panah Huseyn] came. He brought a letter from their president. Earlier, Dr. Habibi gave a brief report on the negotiations. They are very

unhappy about their recent defeats in Armenia. From a weak position, they requested military, food, and political aid and admitted that the Popular Front had mistakenly taken anti-Iranian stances. They generally act immaturely and rashly. I promised aid and advised cooperation.

On June 20, 1993 (Saturday), reports surfaced that Elchibey had left Azerbaijan. Work continued until 10 a.m. Mr. (Mahmoud) Vaezi informed me by phone that at Heydar Aliyev's request, he warned Armenia not to exploit Azerbaijan's internal turmoil in Karabakh, and they accepted.

On September 7, 1993 (Tuesday), the Armenian president requested a phone call, which [Deputy Foreign Minister] Mr. Mahmoud Vaezi arranged. Over the phone, I said that if they agreed, there would be flexibility in Armenia's military intervention in Azerbaijan.

September 8, 1993 (Wednesday): In the evening, the Armenian president called. I criticized Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories. He stated that they had withdrawn from Kubatli and would not make further progress, slowly leaving Karabakh, and that good decisions would soon be announced in the upcoming Russian negotiations. I underscored the importance of fulfilling these promises, particularly in light of the Armenians' actions that contradicted the understandings established after the Tehran summit. He had previously tried to contact me several times, but I had declined.

Iranian television aired a documentary named "Mountain of Karabakh" in 2021, seemingly validating Hashemi Rafsanjani's statements. Hashemi's condescending view of Azerbaijan and his disdain for the country stem from the same anti-Azerbaijani perspective he maintained during his years in office. Ali Motahari, a former member of Iran's Islamic Consultative Assembly, highlighted this significant point during the Second Karabakh War by approving the racial dimension of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and Iran's lack of support for Azerbaijan, pointing directly to Hashemi Rafsanjani and his administration's stance (Hashemi, 1998: 38).

Iran's former ambassador to Baku, Afshar Soleimani, stated in an interview with Reza Talebi:

"In May 1992, during the occupation of Karabakh, Iran, under Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, held a meeting in Tehran with the leaders of Iran, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. However, due to Russia's lack of participation in the meeting and its refusal to acknowledge Iran's mediation, it hindered Iran's ability to play a role. This, in turn, enabled the occupation of Shusha by Armenian forces, including those under its control in Azerbaijan and Armenia. This pressure coincided with the announcement of peace in Tehran."

It is true that Russia played a significant role in reducing Iran's influence, but instead of utilizing its effectiveness in establishing peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran was more interested in exporting the revolution. Iranian and Azerbaijani Turks staged protests in front of the Armenian embassy in Tehran during the early days of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. For the first time, apart from the Palestinian issue, a segment of the population took to the streets. In a private meeting in Tabriz, Hashemi Rafsanjani expressed his concerns, reportedly saying, "If the Turks take over the country, I would prefer to live under the British flag."

The severe arrests in Iran stemmed from the fear reflected in Rafsanjani's memoirs. Rafsanjani saw the Nagorno-Karabakh war as an opportunity to infiltrate Azerbaijan's political system, provoke Islamist and pro-Iranian efforts, and continue aiding Armenia. During Süleyman Demirel's tenure, it is true that Turkey tried to undermine Iran and Russia's influence by infiltrating Armenia through the sale of electricity and wheat, but the melancholy of Pan-Aryanism between Iran and Armenia hindered this.

In the early years of the conflict, coinciding with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran provided military training and financial aid to the Republic of Azerbaijan. In his 1993 memoirs, Hashemi Rafsanjani wrote:

"I called Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati and informed him that Afghan fighters might apply to cross into Azerbaijan. The parties requested the supply of weapons and ammunition and the protection of the Hudafarin Dam site in Azerbaijan against the Armenians. The Defense Minister, Muhammad Forouzandeh, announced the signing of a \$30 million arms and ammunition deal with the Azeris (Azerbaijanis). (Hashemi, 1998, p. 67)

Iran welcomed the change in Azerbaijan's leadership from "Abulfaz Elchibey" to "Heydar Aliyev" and began a shift in its policy towards the Republic of Azerbaijan, including its support against Armenia. Iran's policy of supporting Armenia ran counter to the Islamic Republic's ideology of supporting Shia Muslims. During the First Karabakh War, Iran sided with Armenia, which officially occupied Azerbaijani territories and merely sought to influence Azerbaijan in words. (Iranwire, 2020, p. 2)

Ali Abdul Alizadeh, who was the governor of East Azerbaijan during Hashemi Rafsanjani's government, described Iran's advisory assistance to Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh war as follows:

"At that time, a group of dedicated young people from our country, who were also frontline fighters, tried to help

the Azeris. We organized some of them, but since we did not have the right to intervene in the war, we sent a few individuals as advisors to Azerbaijan. Afterwards, the war's course shifted, leading to significant success for the Azeris. (Abdolalizadeh, 2005, p. 26) However, in his memoirs, the same individual wrote about assisting Armenia for profit.

"In the meantime, the war with Azerbaijan had besieged Armenia, leading it to seek refuge in Iran." One of the essential needs of the Armenian people was the supply of potatoes, which replaced bread in the consumer basket. We supplied them with rice, flour, potatoes, sugar, and oil, generating a substantial profit. This made provincial merchants very active. Conversely, we maintained strong political ties with both countries. (Abdolalizadeh, 2008, p. 29)

What is clear is that the Islamic Republic under Hashemi feared both Russia and Turkey and sought to infiltrate its northern borders. This dual game exemplified the ideological contradiction of the Islamic Republic, which was rooted in its fear of Turkophobia. Mohsen Rezaei, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps at the time, interrogated the governor of East Azerbaijan about sending fighters to the Republic of Azerbaijan and demanded his return and trial in a military court in Tehran. However, as relations changed, Rezaei himself became involved in the matter. Iran remained concerned about Azerbaijani protests within its borders while continuing its Caucasus infiltration. Iran itself even requested the presence of Afghan forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Islamic Republic of Iran needed this issue to legitimize Armenia's occupation policy.

In addition to these diplomatic efforts, Azerbaijan's Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Rovshan Javadov, went to Afghanistan and met with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Prime Minister of the Burhanuddin Rabbani Government. The Washington Post published a report on November 8, 1993, stating that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar consented to dispatch a significant number of Mujahideen fighters to the war. Armenian occupation forces shot down an Iranian plane in the "Khankandi" region in 1993. The passengers of this plane were the families of Iranian diplomats returning to Iran from Moscow on Nowruz night. The crash claimed the lives of 32 passengers, including two children buried alongside their mothers. However, Iran did not protest, which was a very clear example of its policy of silence and cover-up in the face of Armenian crimes.

In August 1993, Mujahideen entered Azerbaijan under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The Washington Post reported that Western diplomats in Baku said the number of fighters had risen to between 1,500 and 1,500. Iran directed these shipments. Mansour Haghghatpour, purporting to be a friend of Martyr Javadov, asserted that they prioritized training Afghan forces over Iranian ones. If Iran had been honest, it could have trained the Azerbaijani army. Naturally, Javadov's request was also in opposition to the involvement of thousands of Armenians from the Armenian diaspora in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. What is certain is that Azerbaijan was alone in this war, and aside from Turkey's financial and moral support and the presence of many Turkish volunteers from Iran and Anatolia, other countries were pursuing their own interests.

5. The Nagorno-Karabakh Issue in the Context of Iran-Armenia Relations

One of the persistent factors negatively affecting political relations between Iran and Azerbaijan has been Iran's close ties with Armenia. In fact, Iran began to strengthen its relations with Armenia after Turkey and Azerbaijan imposed trade sanctions on Armenia's energy and food reserves in 1994. Meanwhile, in the early 1990s, there were rumors in Azerbaijan suggesting that Iranians believed Armenia's secret military forces, which used force against Azerbaijan, did not directly influence the government of Nagorno-Karabakh. (Meybodi, 2016:124)

The Azerbaijani government believes that without Iran's economic support and political ties, Armenia would not have been able to withstand the crises and challenges of 1991–1993. For example, in April 1992, during one of the most critical periods of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran agreed to supply natural gas and fuel to Armenia and improve transportation links with the country. Thus, Azerbaijani authorities were convinced that without Iran's support, Armenia would not have been able to maintain its existence while in conflict with them. (Shaffer, 2003:16)

According to Morten Anstrop, Iran fears Azerbaijan's potential irredentist approach and, considering the Turkish minority in its northern regions, has turned to Armenia as a potential counterbalance to Azerbaijan. Therefore, Iran's interest in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue lies in supporting Armenia. (Rosenkvist, 2005) From the beginning, Iran treated the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as a matter of national security and chose to side with Armenia rather than Shia-majority Azerbaijan. Moreover, Iran viewed Armenia as a barrier against Turkish influence in the region, aiming to curb Turkey's growing presence. Over the past two decades, trade volume between Iran and Armenia steadily increased, reaching 1 billion USD by 2010. Additionally, the two countries significantly improved their transportation infrastructure. Despite diversifying its economic opportunities following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) on February 5, 2003, Iran remains one of Armenia's largest economic partners.

(Moniquet & Racimora, W, 2013)

According to Wigan Baghumian, an activist in Iran-Armenia relations, the foundations of their bilateral relations are not easily alterable. Tehran-Yerevan relations rest on two main axes: one is the historical, cultural, and familial ties between Iran and Armenia, while the other is the strategic geopolitical axis, which has existed for ages due to the relatively stable geopolitical conditions. The coming to power of the pro-Western Pashinyan government in Armenia and the successful maintenance of friendly relations and cooperation between Tehran and Yerevan in the face of U.S. pressure demonstrate that strengthening Tehran-Yerevan relations transcends external pressures from other countries.

In summary, "For over 20 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged as Armenia's most reliable ally." (Moniquet & Racimora, 2013:3)

6. The Reformist Approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh Issue in Iran

Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997 as the first president of Iran's reform movement. During Khatami's tenure, which is generally referred to as the reformist era, relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan experienced a significant decline compared to the previous period. This was due to several factors, including Azerbaijan's discomfort with sectarian activism in Iran, disputes over the Caspian Sea, and the expansion of Azerbaijan-Israel relations. Nonetheless, in August 2004, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami met with Ilham Aliyev. This marked the first visit by an Iranian president to Azerbaijan since its independence. Hopes for improving bilateral relations were raised, although in practice, tangible results were not achieved. Additionally, the volume of trade and economic relations between the two countries decreased compared to the presidency of Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. (Pourahmadi Meybodi & Mohammad, 2020)

During this period, Iran's general diplomatic stance on Nagorno-Karabakh adhered to several principles: reducing violence, excluding Western powers from the process, and recognizing Russia's role in the conflict. (Azizi, H. & Hamidfar, H. 2020)

7. Obstacles in Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

The friendship between Iran and Armenia is undeniable but has limited effects. In 1996, Armenia accounted for only 3.8% of Iran's exports, while trade between Iran and Azerbaijan was relatively more active, albeit without any major peak: 2.1% of Iran's exports in the same year went to Azerbaijan. For many years, Iran has sought to establish comprehensive relations with Azerbaijan. Since Azerbaijan gained independence in 1995, relations between the two countries have been relatively less strained. However, issues such as Iran's support for Islamic groups, Azerbaijan's backing of the Turkish cause in Iran, the Caspian Sea border dispute, and Iran's reluctance to host the Eurovision Song Contest in 1995 (which Iranian clerics labeled a "gay festival") have caused friction between the two countries. Although these tensions never escalated into a serious conflict, they led to a cooling of relations by the end of the year.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani took steps to maintain warm relations with Azerbaijan during their presidencies. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has pursued a balanced and independent foreign policy based on numerous contacts with neighboring powers, particularly during a period when U.S. influence waned. During his father Heydar Aliyev's rule, the United States was the main ally of the country and the region. Ilham Aliyev aims to enhance cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan in areas like security, where he signed a non-aggression pact in 2015, energy, where he and Ahmadinejad facilitated the opening of a pipeline to supply gas to Nakhchivan, and commerce. Until 2001, when Azerbaijan gained independence, both sides refrained from taking risky decisions against each other, avoided crossing red lines, and sought to maintain policies that did not provoke violent actions. During the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami, both countries tried to mask their dissatisfaction and tensions in their relations.

8. The Caspian Sea Dispute

In 1997, Iran protested Azerbaijan's unilateral exploitation of the Caspian Sea by writing a letter to the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, emphasizing that the Caspian Sea resources belong to all littoral states. (Koolae & Hafezian, 2010:8) Iran aims to control 20% of the Caspian Sea, as opposed to 12%, seeking to divide the area into five equal parts. The most prominent difference between Iran and Azerbaijan in this regard is the hydrocarbon-rich Araz, Alov, and Sharg blocks, covering 1,400 square kilometers and containing approximately 700 billion cubic meters of natural gas. Azerbaijan controls this field, which Iran refers to as "Alborz." (Sardashti & Ahmadi, 2016:9)

9. The concept of “Greater Azerbaijan”

After the Iran-Iraq War, while Iran faced a severe economic crisis, many Turks in Iran saw the emergence of a new, resource-rich country as an opportunity to improve their lives. In 1989, the Turkish population on both sides of the border quickly established strong familial ties by engaging in economic and trade exchanges, effectively removing the physical boundaries between Iran and Azerbaijan (Nakhchivan). The Azerbaijani people claim that the Iranian and Russian empires divided the nation, with Northern Azerbaijan under Soviet control and Southern Azerbaijan remaining part of Iran. After 1991, Northern Azerbaijan gained independence from Russia, while Southern Azerbaijan remains under Iran’s control. Iran’s greatest fear has been the possible unification of Iranian Turks with Northern Azerbaijan, a concern that surfaced during the presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey in 1992. Abulfaz Elchibey, the former president of Azerbaijan, expressed his dream of a unified Azerbaijan based on territorial integrity, suggesting that Iran might not receive recognition in this pursuit. (Koolae & Hafezian, 2010:14)

10. Shia Expansionism

Azerbaijan perceives Iran’s propaganda activities targeting Shia Azerbaijanis as a threat to its sovereignty and expresses its dissatisfaction openly. Azerbaijani authorities claim that Iran supports the publication and production of the newspaper *Sada-ye-Islam* in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Additionally, Iran operates two networks in Azerbaijan, *Sahar* and *Sahar 2*, broadcasting in English and Russian. Another avenue of influence for Iran is through religious schools that teach the Quran alongside Iranian government literature and ideology. However, in the late 1990s, Heydar Aliyev banned Iranian clerics from engaging in mosque activities. (Javadi Arjmand, Rezazadeh & Hazratpour, 1393:6)

11. Israel-Azerbaijan Relations

In 1997, Heydar Aliyev met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Baku for the first time, declaring that Iran posed a threat to the cooperation between the two countries. Following the assassination of Iran’s nuclear scientists, Iran accused Azerbaijan of collaborating with Israel and summoned the Azerbaijani ambassador to express its discontent. In April 2006, former Iranian National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani threatened to attack the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline if Azerbaijan agreed to field cooperation with Israel. (Göksel, 2015:13) Iran believes that Tel Aviv aims to “Lebanonize” Azerbaijan with a new encirclement doctrine. This means that Tel Aviv seeks to establish a new peripheral region and encircle Iran with its presence in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Republic of Azerbaijan. (Abbasi, 2013:17)

12. Turkey and the West

Another important issue between Iran and Azerbaijan is Baku’s positive relations with Western countries, NATO, and especially Turkey. For years, Iran has feared Turkish influence in the Caucasus, and one of the most significant factors behind Iran’s support for Armenia is Turkey’s very active role in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Turkey’s deep cultural and political ties with Azerbaijan have always concerned Iran. Despite all its efforts, Iran has never managed to achieve a position in Azerbaijan comparable to that of Turkey.

13. Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated that his country's relations with its neighbors and other countries largely depend on their stance regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis (Nichol, 2013: 7). Therefore, Iran’s position on this crisis has always influenced political relations between the two countries. In fact, Azerbaijan has had certain expectations from the Islamic Republic of Iran, hoping that Iran would, like Turkey, side with it in the war and crisis with Armenia. However, Iran adopted a neutral stance on the matter, a position that caused dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan (Shaffer, 2017: 9).

Former Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov stated, “We do not trust Iranians because of Iran’s support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.” In an interview with *Hurriyet Daily* in October 2012, he remarked that if Armenia is being obstinate in the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, it is because of the support it receives from Iran and Russia.

In May 2015, Iran’s ambassador to Azerbaijan declared that Iran would not recognize the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and would not acknowledge any elections held in the region (Davoodi, 2016: 5).

When it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, considering Iran’s historical, cultural, religious, and ethnic ties with Azerbaijan, which are far stronger than those with Armenia, Iran was expected to unequivocally support Azerbaijan. However, despite appearing neutral, Iran in practice supported Armenia. Thirty years ago, Iran’s then-Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati explained Iran’s support for Armenia to Subhi Tufayli, the first Secretary-General of Hezbollah in Lebanon, saying, “Armenia is a barrier to Turkey’s passage to the Turkic republics. Our

policy is to prevent Turkey from reaching the Turkic countries.” This policy more or less continued until the outbreak of the last war on September 7.

Armenia indirectly exploited Tehran's pre-war stance, which aimed to control Azerbaijan and Turkey and maintain the status quo, from the outset. When the conflict erupted, Iran initially tried to maintain its passive emphasis on supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. This was because maintaining the status quo forced Azerbaijan to rely on Iran for access to Nakhchivan and ensured Azerbaijan's continued dependence on Iran. Similarly, the status quo compelled Turkish investors to use Iranian territory for road access to Central Asia. Iran sought to retain this advantage. On the other hand, Tehran feared that Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh could have psychological effects on Iranian Turks and strengthen separatist movements. Indeed, one cannot interpret the Iranian Foreign Ministry's call for an "immediate ceasefire" in the early days of the war in any other way. Undoubtedly, if the conflict had ceased at that point, Azerbaijan would not have achieved what it has today.

Not only did Tehran refuse to label Armenia as an “occupier,” but it also raised concerns, without providing any evidence, about jihadist groups allegedly entering the conflict from Syria in favor of Azerbaijan. Moreover, various media outlets portrayed Azerbaijan's right-wing activities as Turkey's destabilization plan for the region. Media outlets and research centers published numerous analyses based on this claim. From Iran's perspective, the practical purpose of these claims was to shape public opinion, particularly among Iranian Turks, regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, the narrative of Syrian extremist groups fighting alongside Azerbaijan could potentially undermine the legitimacy of the war among Iranian Turks.

While Iran continued to declare its neutrality, videos of Russian military equipment being transported to Armenia through Iranian territory were circulated on social media, provoking anger among Iranian Turks.

When faced with significant support for Azerbaijan from Iranian Turks, the Islamic Republic attempted to appease them by having the Supreme Leader's representatives in the country's western provinces declare, “Karabakh is Azerbaijan!”

Alireza A'rafi, the head of the Qom Seminary, where many Azerbaijani students study, and former head of the Al-Mustafa Society, emphasized that Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan and described the protection of territorial integrity as a "religious, moral, and human duty of Muslims." In addition, some religious authorities, who typically refrain from commenting on international issues, openly expressed their support for Azerbaijan. In early October, Mohammed Said al-Hakim, one of the senior religious figures in Najaf, called on the United Nations to enforce its resolutions and end the occupation of Azerbaijani territories. Nouri Hamedani adopted a similar stance, while Makarem Shirazi underscored the importance of supporting the liberation of Palestine and other Islamic countries from occupation, in addition to the liberation of Karabakh.

However, despite these statements, Iran's official stance did not change. Yet, when the Islamic Republic realized that the war was entirely in Azerbaijan's favor and that its final outcome was clear, Khamenei openly supported Azerbaijan's right to reclaim its territories in a speech on November 4.

Although the Islamic Republic justifies its support for certain countries in the region with an ideological cover, it pursues goals that go beyond ideological matters. Its main reasons for providing such support are its desire to maintain influence over regional countries, consolidate its position as the dominant power in the region, and secure economic interests. Rahim Safavi, Khamenei's chief advisor, stated that Iran helps any Muslim or non-Muslim country that requests assistance, but in return, it charges them. “We signed contracts with the Syrians in exchange for what we provided.”

In such a situation, some media outlets reported that the UAE and Iran transferred a number of PKK elements from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the accuracy of this report remains questionable. Officials familiar with the matter are aware of claims about an organic, win-win relationship between Iran and the PKK.

If we want to provide a psycho-political interpretation of the allegations regarding the deployment of extremist groups to Nagorno-Karabakh, we can say that Tehran, using its defensive mechanism, attributed unacceptable intentions and ideas to Turkey. It is worth recalling former Ardabil governor Mansour Haghghatpour's suggestion to Aliyev to form armed militias like Hashd al-Shaabi, Ansarullah, and Hezbollah to liberate Karabakh.

In this context, Dr. Seyed Ghaem Mousavi, a professor of Political Science and International Relations, told Anadolu News Agency, “Iran announced that it was ready to mediate, but it would likely sympathize with Armenia. Of course, the best strategy in the face of challenges from neighbors is active neutrality, but Azerbaijan's behavior also influences Iran's approach.”

14. Iran's stance on Karabakh within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation

The Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently asserted its claim to leadership in the Islamic world since the 1979 revolution. Within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Iran's position has remained passive, officially recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial integrity without taking substantial steps beyond rhetorical assertions. In 1997, the 8th OIC session included a clause that condemned Armenia's occupation and demanded its immediate withdrawal from Azerbaijani territories. However, according to some sources, this session witnessed a dispute between Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev (Iranwire, 2020).

Despite presenting itself as the defender of Shia Islam and voicing support for the Shia Muslim population of neighboring Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran has, in practice, maintained a pro-Armenian stance.

15. Iran-Azerbaijan Relations After 2020

15.1 Policy of Iran during the Second Karabakh War (2020)

Iran's posture in the South Caucasus was much changed by the Second Karabakh War (27 September–10 November 2020), which resulted in Azerbaijan's reclaiming of most seized territory. Iran subtly supported Armenia, despite historical ties to Azerbaijan, including the Safavid and Qajar dynasties founded in Karabakh. Advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Akbar Velayati urged Azerbaijan to unilaterally stop even though Armenia started hostilities (Tashkent, 19 Kasım 2020). Reports of armament shipments from Iranian territory to Armenia set off mass demonstrations among Iran's Turkic people, who torched so-called humanitarian aid vehicles and called for support of Baku (Tashkent, 19 Kasım 2020). Ayatollah Khamenei and Velayati supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity following its victory, which restored 132 kilometers of its 765-kilometer border with Iran (Erim, 2020), while MP Mahmoud Ahmadi Bigash accused Turkey of meddling and Foreign Minister Zarif attacked Turkish troop presence in Moscow (Tashkent, 19 Kasım 2020).

15.2 The 2020 Agreements and Later Tensions until 2023

With Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia omitting Iran, the tripartite agreement of November 10, 2020 changed regional geopolitics. Threatening Iran's transit importance, it cut the Iran-Armenia border to 40 kilometers and opened the Zangezur corridor linking Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan (Erim, 2020). Russia sent 1,960 peacekeepers to Karabakh and set up a joint surveillance center with Turkey; Iran stayed underactive and made unfounded allegations of Syrian fighters supporting Azerbaijan (Başar, 2020). On 31 March 2023, Iran sought answers from Baku, claiming an anti-Iranian front with Israel. On 5 April, its parliament denounced Azerbaijan's embassy inauguration in Tel Aviv and warned of repercussions. Azerbaijan responded by calling Iran's posture a political provocation and arrested people, including Rufat Akhundzadeh and Bakhtiyar Bayramov, for allegedly creating an Iran-backed resistance group to stage a coup following an attack on MP Fazil Mustafa (28 March 2023), which Baku linked to Iran (Özgenç, 2021). Khamenei raised tensions by refusing any boundary adjustments in Zangezur in 2022.

15.3 Developments up to 2025 and Continual Dynamics

Iran-Azerbaijan ties remain tense by April 2025 in view of geopolitical and security conflicts. While Azerbaijan blames Iran with internal involvement through Shia groups, shown by arrests in November 2022 and April 2023, Iran charges Baku with supporting Israel and Turkey against its interests. Though Iran's border activities in 2024 and 2025 highlight ongoing conflict in response to Azerbaijan's growing defense links to Israel, a 2023 gas accord foreshadowed de-escalation attempts (Özgenç, 2021). Iran saw Erdogan's performance of the Aras poem in Baku (2020) as a separatist provocation, therefore souring ties even more (Deutsch Welle, 2020). These days, both countries view each other as possible causes of conflict despite different obstacles, including the Turkic community in Iran, the legal system of the Caspian Sea, and Israel's involvement. While Baku sees Tehran's actions as a danger to its sovereignty and security, the Zangezur problem and Azerbaijan's increasing regional prominence challenge Iran's strategic posture.

16. Conclusion

Between 1988 and 2020, the Nagorno-Karabakh region emerged as a persistent epicenter of conflict, culminating in Azerbaijan's reclamation of the territory in 2020, which restored a degree of stability after over three decades of unrest. Throughout this period, Iran's foreign policy toward its southern neighbor, Azerbaijan, remained characterized by a passive yet distinctly non-neutral stance. Despite intermittent diplomatic gestures and official statements, Iranian authorities exhibited little genuine goodwill toward Azerbaijan. Several factors underpinned this position, including apprehensions over the political mobilization of Iran's substantial Turkish-speaking population, Azerbaijan's deepening ties with the United States and Israel, and the intensifying Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance, which Tehran perceived as a threat to regional equilibrium (Tashkent, 19 Kasım 2020). Iran's alleged

support for anti-government factions within Azerbaijan, coupled with unresolved disputes over the Caspian Sea's legal regime, further elucidates its strategic preference for Armenia and its reluctance to bolster Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Erim, 2020).

The post-2020 landscape has only amplified these tensions, extending the scope of bilateral friction into the mid-2020s. The tripartite agreement of 10 November 2020, excluding Iran, reconfigured regional dynamics by reducing the Iran-Armenia border and opening the Zangezur corridor, thereby undermining Iran's transit role and prompting concerns over its geopolitical leverage (Erim, 2020). By 2023, Iran's condemnation of Azerbaijan's embassy opening in Tel Aviv and Baku's arrests of alleged Iran-backed groups underscored mutual distrust, exacerbated by Azerbaijan's expanding defense cooperation with Israel (Özgenç, 2021). Iran's military exercises near the border in 2024 and 2025 reflect its unease with Azerbaijan's growing regional influence, a concern echoed in its rejection of Zangezur border changes articulated by Ayatollah Khamenei in 2022 (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Today, despite occasional pragmatic engagements, such as the 2023 gas agreement, both nations regard each other as potential sources of instability—driven by issues ranging from the ethnic Turks in Iran and the Caspian Sea framework to Israel's role—highlighting a persistent and evolving rivalry in the South Caucasus.

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