



IRAN AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

Special Editor: Nareg Seferian (independent researcher)

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Iran and the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War

Introduction by the Special Editor

The South Caucasus has long been viewed in Western scholarship through the prism of the Romanov Empire, later the Soviet Union, and, since 1991, as an implicit or explicit Russian sphere of influence. Indeed, the region was more commonly referred to as the Transcaucasus in the past, reflecting a geographical gaze from Moscow or St. Petersburg. Alongside the discursive shift towards the more neutral term ‘South Caucasus,’ the involvement of Western actors as well as Turkey has been growing noticeably in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, whether in terms of strategic issues, the economy, culture, or other spheres.

Iran has also come to play a role in the three states of the South Caucasus over the past few decades. But there has been relatively limited scholarship on the regional policies of Tehran, its relationships with Tbilisi, Baku, and Yerevan, and the position of the Iranian government on local conflicts. This special issue of the *Caucasus Analytical Digest* seeks to fill in some of that gap.

The papers in this issue address particularly the regional dynamics following the most consequential development in recent years, namely the Second Karabakh War of 2020. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh began in the late 1980s and has continued beyond the active fighting phase in the autumn of 2020. It has drawn in a number of external actors. Iran, on the threshold of the South Caucasus, has found itself having more and more of a foot in the region as a result.

One of the most significant themes permeating all the contributions of this issue is the so-called ‘Zangezur Corridor’—a proposed land connection between Azerbaijan proper and its exclave of Nakhchivan/Nakhichevan. The prospects and modalities of such a route include economic, geopolitical, strategic, cultural, and ideological components, perceived in various ways in Baku and Yerevan, also in Tbilisi, and certainly in Tehran as well.

Besides the security outcomes and aftermaths since 2020, the contributions in this issue also take on historical developments and how they impact current bilateral ties. There is a rough arc to be drawn between the place of the South Caucasus in Iran’s past—considering the Persianate world quite broadly—and how connections were made anew following the Soviet period, during which the two spaces were for the most part closed off from one another.

Two details are worth pointing out regarding this special issue. First, the situation in the region continues to be in flux. Between writing and publication, the analyses presented here may prove already outdated. This is what makes the investigation of unstable political, economic, and social situations both compelling and risky.

Second—on a more personal note—I try as much as possible to point out my Armenian background when researching and writing about the region. Always striving to maintain integrity and high academic standards, I am sensitive to the fact that my identity may invite perceptions of bias. As the issue’s editor, I find myself in a position of particular influence in this case. I would like to emphasise that I wanted to make sure to include Azerbaijani voices when reaching out to potential contributors. It was at the suggestion of an Azerbaijani academic that Alexander Yeo was invited to write about Azerbaijan–Iran relations. He has worked with Azerbaijani scholars and has written a well-rounded contribution on the Baku–Tehran dynamic of the recent past.

As such, all of the analyses here highlight well the various factors influencing the shifts in the region over the past few years. We are also fortunate to be able to include the perspective of scholars based in Iran, invoking the gaze to the South Caucasus from the south. This is a gaze which has always been present, but—except for such outlets as the journal *Iran and the Caucasus*—it has not always been acknowledged and investigated as much as it could in English-language scholarship on the region.

About the Author

Nareg Seferian completed his doctoral studies at the School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, in 2023. He has taught at the American University of Armenia (2013–2016) and Virginia Tech (2019–2023). His published writings are available at naregseferian.com.

The Zangezur Corridor and Threats to the Interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus

Elaheh Koolae (University of Tehran) and Ahmad Rashidi (University of Arak)

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Abstract

After the massive attack by the military forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the recapturing of territories in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region in 2020, the issue of the construction of the 'Zangezur Corridor' has led to some concerns in the political and civil circles of Iran. Based on the plans announced by the Azerbaijan–Turkey alliance, the creation of this corridor through Armenian territory could change the regional balance of power to the detriment of Iran. The progress of this project presents multiple threats against the geopolitical and economic interests of Iran, the most important of which are: the possibility of changing borders through blocking the land connection between Iran and Armenia; the possibility of Armenia's rapprochement with the Western bloc and the intensification of the strategic isolation of Iran; reducing Iran's transit advantages in the North–South Corridor; increasing Turkey's influence in the region; jeopardising the territorial integrity of Iran through the incitement of pan-Turkic sentiments and the revival of Azerbaijani ethnocentrism; and strengthening the presence of NATO and its allies on Iran's northern borders.

Introduction

The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus has always been based on maintaining a balance among regional forces. Within this framework, compliance with the internationally recognised borders and maintaining regional stability has been the priority of Iran's foreign policy. Accordingly, it has never recognised the Republic of Armenia's sovereignty over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. After the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2020, Iran welcomed this agreement within the general framework of its foreign policy.

According to Clause 9 of this agreement, Armenia has committed to allow the construction of a crossing on its territory that will connect the mainland of the Republic of Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan along the current Armenian–Iranian border. The Republic of Azerbaijan considers this crossing, which it calls the 'Zangezur Corridor', a part of a larger transit project called the 'Middle Corridor', which stretches from east to west and passes through Turkmenistan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, and Turkey to reach Europe. The plan to build the Zangezur Corridor has created concerns in the political and civil circles of Iran regarding the motivations and results of this action.

By focussing on these concerns, this paper answers the question of what threats the Zangezur Corridor construction plan poses to Iran's interests. The hypothesis of the authors is that the construction of the Zangezur

Corridor contains threats that will change the balance of power in the region to the detriment of Iran. The most significant areas of disruption and threats to the regional balance of power (as perceived in Tehran) will be described below.

Geopolitics of Regional Borders

The issue of changing borders, blocking the land border between Iran and Armenia, and the land exchange plan between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not unprecedented. Paul Goble¹ first proposed this idea in 1992 and then Turkey proposed the 'double corridor concept' at the same year. A few years later, Azerbaijani and Armenian authorities negotiated the 'land exchange' plan within the same framework, which did not come to fruition due to internal opposition in the two countries. According to this plan, Azerbaijan would recognise Armenia's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh and, in return, Armenia would hand over sovereignty of a part of the province of Siunik (Syunik) bordering Iran to Azerbaijan in order to create a corridor, which would have meant cutting Iran's land border with Armenia (Fuller 2001; Winrow, 2000, p. 12).

The analysis of reactions from Iranian media and scholars regarding the Zangezur Corridor construction programme shows that the greatest concern or feeling of threat is caused by the possibility of changing national borders, specifically the possibility of cutting off the land border between Iran and Armenia. The origin of this

¹ Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

concern is the interpretation of the text of the ceasefire agreement and the announced plans of the Azerbaijani authorities to build this corridor. As Azerbaijan hands over the control of Lachin Corridor to Armenia, Armenia should also hand over the control of Zangezur Corridor to Azerbaijan (connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh), and the ruling regime should be the same. This would mean that Armenia would cede its sovereignty over the Zangezur Corridor to Azerbaijan—a claim that, if implemented, would cut the land border between Iran and Armenia (Bakir, 2022). In response to this proposal, Iran sent a warning message about the geopolitical ramifications of such border changes by holding military exercises on the banks of the Aras River along its border with Azerbaijan (Elahi, 2022). Azerbaijan also held a military exercise with the participation of Pakistan and Turkey, and Armenia announced that it would not allow borders to change (Rashidi, 2023, p. 36).

Rapprochement of Armenia with the West and the Intensification of Iran's Strategic Loneliness

Among Iran's neighbours, only its relationship with Armenia has been stable and has featured to some extent a strategic aspect. This relationship is due to the geopolitical requirements governing Armenia, which is bordered by two hostile countries, Azerbaijan and Turkey, without access to open waters. To get out of this blockade, Armenia must ensure good relations with its remaining neighbours, Iran and Georgia. The implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the construction of the Zangezur Corridor in such a way that is accompanied by the normalisation of Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey could turn Armenia into a key link in the Middle Corridor. In such a situation, Armenia's strategic and geopolitical need for Iran would decrease and, additionally, could be accompanied by alliance with Western governments in opposition to Iran, thus completing Iran's strategic isolation. Also, considering the need of the Western countries for the energy resources of the Caspian Sea to support their attempt to reduce their strategic dependence on Russia in the field of energy and transit, Europe and the United States also support the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor as part of a larger corridor plan with the aim of normalising relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Reducing Iran's Transit Advantages

Iran's primary transit advantage is its location on the international transit route from north to south (Koolae and Norouzi, 2021, p. 792). Iran has implemented programmes to make full use of this transit advantage, such

as the development of Chabahar Port with the cooperation of India and the development of transit lines with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Soltani and Khosravi, 2022, p. 15). The activation of the Middle Corridor, which requires the construction of the Zangezur segment, would greatly reduce the competitive advantage of international transit through Iran. Because the Middle Corridor is shorter, Western countries also support it (Veliyev, 2022). Western sanctions against Iran and opposing geopolitical interests would reduce the likelihood of Western support for a transit route through Iran.

Turkey's Increasing Regional Influence

The Caucasus region has for centuries been a place of competition for influence between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Today, considering Russia's conflict in Ukraine, Turkey seems to see an opportunity to consolidate its power in the region, aiming to secure access to the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea in particular. Now, with the co-operation of Baku and the initiative to build the Zangezur Corridor, this longstanding dream has a path to coming true (Moftafavi, 2021). Iran feels threatened by Turkey's growing influence in the region. Therefore, Iran's opposition to the Zangezur Corridor construction plan can be seen as a measure to counter Turkey's aspirations of regional hegemony.

Pan-Turkism and the Revitalisation of Azerbaijani Ethnocentrism

One of the important aspects of the Zangezur Corridor is the connection of geographically dispersed Turkic-speaking countries through the implementation of the Middle Corridor (Ketanci, 2022). It seems that the authorities of Azerbaijan and Turkey are looking to advance through this project the 'unification of the Turkish world'. The increasing discussion of the union of Turkic countries has been accompanied by statements about the union of all Azerbaijani people (including those living in Iran). For instance, at the meeting of the heads of the Organisation of Turkic States in Samarkand in 2022, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan stressed the strengthening of relations between 'North Azerbaijan and South Azerbaijan', implicitly defending 'the idea of a single Azerbaijan' (Mammadli, 2023).

In defence of this idea, President Erdoğan of Turkey read a poem during his trip to Baku in December 2020. In this poem, he lamented how the Aras River on the border of Iran and Azerbaijan separated the Azerbaijani speakers of the two countries.² The construction of Zangezur Corridor could increase the influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey on Iran's northern border, and subsequently revive the separatist sentiments among Iranian Azerbaijanis.

2 'Şerh خوانی جنجالی اردوغان از ارس / سفیر ترکیه به وزارت خارجه' [Erdogan's controversial poetry reading from Aras], Kabna News, 12 December 2020, <https://www.kebna.com.tr/report/428431> (accessed 31 January 2023).

Strengthening NATO's Presence in the Region

Within the framework of development policies, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) pursues various co-operation agreements with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Koolae et al., 2021, pp. 83, 123–137). These co-operation agreements have led to wild speculations. Regarding Turkey's membership in NATO, some analysts and political elites frame the Middle Corridor as a Western plan to expand NATO along this path to the east, with the ultimate aim of harming the interests of Iran, China, and Russia (Kazemi, 2022). Kamal Kharazi, head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations of Iran, went as far as to characterise this project as the 'Turan Corridor of NATO', which would be pursued by Turkey and Israel to expand NATO's presence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Shokri, 2022).

Expansion of Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel

Israel and Azerbaijan have very strong relations, their strategic and economic partnership developing substantially in recent years. Aliyev compared his country's relations with Israel to an iceberg, only a small part of which being visible (Koolae et al., 2016, p. 3). According to Iranian decision-makers,³ the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor in the framework of the Middle Corridor project will allow one branch—including any desired form of infrastructure, from roads to rails to pipelines—to continue through Turkey to Haifa and Tel Aviv, facilitating Israel's presence on the borders of Azerbaijan and Iran. Tehran accuses Baku of hosting Israeli agents engaged in intelligence surveillance and sabotage operations against Iran's nuclear programme.

The Presence of Russian Troops on the Border of Iran

According to the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russian forces are stationed in the Nagorno-Karabakh region to maintain peace in the contact lines between the military forces of the two countries, as well as to monitor traffic in the Lachin and Zangezur corridors, a presence that can be extended indefinitely for five-year periods. According to the analysis of Iranian experts, this concession allows Russia to maintain its presence in the border region under the pretext of maintaining peace and security, and thus advance interventionist policies in Iran (Osouli, 2022, p. 232).

A broader discussion on this point is beyond the scope of this brief analysis (see Koolae, 2006).

Conclusion

The findings of the research show that the creation of the Zangezur Corridor in Armenia, based on the plans announced by the Azerbaijan–Turkey alliance, would change the regional balance of power to the detriment of Iran. Therefore, the progress of this project includes threats against core Iranian interests.

Among these perceived threats, according to our analysis, the possibility of changing the geopolitical situation and blocking the land border between Iran and Armenia has received the most emphasis in Iranian circles. Based on this possibility, Iran has reacted and warned against the implementation of this plan, going so far as to hold military exercises at border points and activate diplomatic co-operation channels with Armenia and Russia to encourage these countries to oppose this project.

Although these responses may prevent the existing borders from changing, this does not completely negate the broader geopolitical threats posed by the Zangezur Corridor construction programme, because the construction of this corridor and its operation as a part of the Middle Corridor is also theoretically possible without blocking the land border of Iran and Armenia. In this case, it seems that the real threat is the loss of Iran's transit advantages in current supply routes, especially regarding its economically so important energy exports, which would have long-term negative effects on Iran's interests (Koolae, 2008, pp. 47–70). The exploitation of the Zangezur Corridor as part of the Middle Corridor for the transfer of energy resources of the Caspian Sea will affect the geo-energy map of the world: within this framework, European countries could ensure long-term access to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea by circumventing Iran and Russia.

The success of the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor project thus requires attention to Iran's geopolitical concerns and considerations. Iran is an important player in world energy market and wants to play an active role in the South Caucasus as well. Energy security and security of transit of energy along Iran's northern border has an influential role on Iran's broader interests. The participation of all regional actors in the implementation of transit projects can bring many benefits to all countries in the area by harnessing the power of geopolitics to drive economic processes, while at the same time strengthening regional integration. However, political differences and mistrust make such an outcome unlikely.

Please see overleaf for Information about the Author and References.

3 'امیرعبداللهیان: در خصوص زنگه زور، اکنون کریدوری توسط ایران تعریف شده است' [Amir Abdollahian: Regarding Zangezur, a corridor has now been defined by Iran], Iranian Diplomacy, 23 October 2023, <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2022618/> (accessed 13 December 2023).

About the Authors

Elaheh Koolaee (ekolaee@ut.ac.ir) is Professor at the University of Tehran in Iran.

Ahmad Rashidi (a-rashidi@araku.ac.ir) is Associate Professor at the University of Arak in Iran. The research and publications of both scholars focus on Iran's foreign policy regarding Russia and the former Soviet space.

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Azerbaijan and Iran in the Shadows of Karabakh and Ukraine

Alexander Yeo (University of Glasgow)

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Abstract

Iran and Azerbaijan have recently seen a rise in tensions over competing strategic visions for their respective roles in the Caucasus. Events such as the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, seemingly allowed by the Iranian government, as well as Iranian military exercises near the border with Azerbaijan and the escalation of rhetoric coming out of Baku have pushed their relationship into a new era. Drawing on past scholarship and recent developments and analysis, this paper seeks to demonstrate the reasons for this deterioration of relations between the two countries, including the new position of power Azerbaijan finds itself in, the implications thereof for Iran, long-term Iranian policy goals, and other, wider regional changes and trends such as the echoes of the war in Ukraine. This paper argues that Iranian–Azerbaijani relations have reached this point through a mixture of Azerbaijani ascendancy, Iranian strategic failure, and the opportunities presented by Russia’s weakened position in the South Caucasus.

Introduction

At the start of 2023, Iran and Azerbaijan were experiencing particularly high tensions. An attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran led to accusations by Baku that the Iranian government had allowed the attack to happen, Iran held military exercises near the Azerbaijani border and President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan declared that relations between the two countries were at their lowest level ever. Furthermore, Azerbaijani officials have been using more and more hostile rhetoric targeting Armenia and Iran itself, with some officials claiming substantial amounts of territory—up to Tehran, in one instance—as being part of ‘Greater Azerbaijan’ (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023a; Shaffer, 2023).

Yet, in October 2023, the two states held a ceremony laying the foundation of a cross-border bridge as part of a transit route linking Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan (Aghayev, 2023). Taken at face value, this seems a good start towards restoring links and healing the void between the two countries. However, this move is at the very least partially related to Iran’s concern with the planned Zangezur Corridor, which would go through the Armenian province of Syunik and perhaps cut off Iran’s 40-km border with Armenia (and the rest of the South Caucasus outside of Azerbaijan by extension). In this way, as part of a larger transit network, the bridge bypasses the ‘Zangezur Corridor’ entirely, serving as a substitute for it. It is, in that regard, an almost perfect metaphor for the status of Iranian–Azerbaijani relations at the present time—on the surface, an attempt to build up better relations, with an undercurrent of Azerbaijan’s regional ascendancy and Iran’s strategic failings and attempts to counter Baku lying beneath.

This paper seeks to present an analysis of the current relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan. It will do so by first looking to previous scholarship on this compli-

cated relationship before analysing three key themes in the South Caucasus that have led to this state of affairs: first, Azerbaijan’s ascendancy in the region following the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and additional smaller attacks, such as those of September 2023; second, ineffective Iranian foreign policy concerning the South Caucasus; and third, the opportunities opened for both countries with the effective departure of Russian influence and military strength from the region. All three of these issues interact with and affect one another.

Mutual Fear

Like the rest of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan has a long history with Iran. However, in comparison to Armenia and Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran also have close cultural links. Both Azerbaijan and Iran adhere predominantly to Shi’ite Islam; Azerbaijan was also in the past a centre of many cultures with especially strong Persianate and Turkic presences, the region being part of both the Safavid and Turkic Qajar Persian Empires until its annexation by the Russian Empire.

The largest component of this cultural relationship is the fact that Iran has more Azerbaijanis living in its northwest than Azerbaijan does in its entirety. Azerbaijanis form the largest ethno-national minority within Iran. Indeed, this fact alone moves this component of the relationship from ‘cultural’ to ‘ethnic’. Because of Azerbaijan’s existence as an independent state, Iran views its Azerbaijani minority as a potential security threat. In this way, the Azerbaijanis of Iran fall into a group also consisting of Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds, and Baloch in that they are a minority with either a politicised community of the same kin group over the border, or full-fledged states in the case of the Turkmen and Arabs.

Significantly, the level of identification with the Iranian regime among the Azerbaijani minority may not be

as strong as previous scholarship suggests and, while the secessionist movement is weak, there is a growing affinity with the country of Azerbaijan among this group, as well as with Turkish culture in general (Cornell, 2015, pp. 322–325; Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023a). The region of northwest Iran, formed by the administrative units of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, and Ardabil provinces, is referred to as ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ in Azerbaijani nationalist discourse. It borders on the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, as well as all of Azerbaijan’s southern regions, and in recent years has been the site of unrest. Any countrywide turmoil in Iran could lead to an opportunity for the secessionist movement that the Azerbaijani government would be able to exploit to its advantage.

However, the fear is very much mutual. While Iran fears a nascent Azerbaijani nationalist movement, Baku, a firmly secular regime, fears the appeal of Shi’ite Islamism projected by Iran into its own population. A state/elite-led movement of Traditional Islam exists within Azerbaijan—a movement specifically aimed at limiting the influence of ‘foreign Islamic ideas’ in Azerbaijani Islam (Bedford et al., 2021, pp. 691–692). Further to this, Iran has funded Islamist groups within Azerbaijan, for example the militant, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-linked ‘Huseynyun’, though the effectiveness of such groups is minimal, with the Huseynyun serving more as a warning for Azerbaijan (Ahmed, 2021). It is not much of a stretch to identify as a primary source of ‘foreign Islamic ideas’ the Islamic theocracy to its immediate south with a substantial population of ethnic Azerbaijanis who have turned to local Ayatollahs in the past to advance their own interests (Cornell, 2015, pp. 319–320). This phenomenon is something a secular regime would want to counteract. Furthermore, Iran has not shied away from promoting irredentism of its own, with some officials claiming that, rather than leaving Iran, parts of its Azerbaijani population would welcome back the lands lost during the Qajar dynasty (Shlapentokh, 2019, p. 80).

President Abulfaz Elçibey of Azerbaijan, who was in power from 1992 to 1994, provides a link between these ethnic and the geopolitical issues. There was significant hope of a warming of relations between the two countries in the period directly after Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991. However, due to Elçibey’s pan-Turkism and irredentist posturing towards ‘Southern Azerbaijan’, the relationship broke down (Abbasov and Souleimanov, 2022, pp. 139–140). Another scholar describes Elçibey as a ‘nightmare leader’ for Azerbaijan from the Iranian perspective. As this period coin-

cided with the First Nagorno–Karabakh War, Iran gravitated towards Armenia to counteract the irredentism displayed by Elçibey, which acted as the turning point in relations between Iran and its two South Caucasus neighbours (Rice, 2020, p. 353). This pushed Azerbaijan towards Turkey and, by extension, the United States and the West—a relationship maintained by the pragmatic Aliyev regime, eager to access markets for its substantial energy reserves.

Azerbaijani Ascendancy, Iranian Abdication?

The period 2020–2023 was marked by Azerbaijani ascendancy in the Caucasus. From the 2020 Nagorno–Karabakh War onwards, Azerbaijan has been able to project hard power over the region in a way not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. This power has only grown since then, with a deal with the European Union (EU)—specifically, a gas export agreement signed in June 2022 aimed at doubling Azerbaijan’s export to the EU—ensuring greater revenue for Azerbaijani energy exports and the final destruction of the unrecognised Republic of Artsakh (i.e., the Armenian-controlled Nagorno–Karabakh region) in 2023. The latter drew limited international condemnation, with most focused on humanitarian issues. However, as most of the world recognises Nagorno–Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory, voices of dissent were muted. These victories, combined with a relative departure of Russia from the Caucasus due to the war in Ukraine, have led to an increased boldness from Azerbaijan, including state media referring to ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ in irredentist terms (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b).¹ This has been accompanied with claims against Armenia proper, ranging from the Syunik region to Yerevan itself (Fabbro, 2022).

The rhetoric employed reflects a regime confident in its assertions. Making ‘Southern Azerbaijan’ a talking point even before the final assault on Karabakh demonstrates that the Aliyev regime seems to have as an aim not just regional hegemony within the Caucasus, but status as a full-fledged power in the wider region. Partnerships with both Turkey and Israel may help in achieving this aim—both are keen to counteract Iran, and Azerbaijan can act as a reliable partner for both. These partnerships, bolstered in their stability by the enduring positions held by Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara, Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv/Jerusalem, and Aliyev in Baku, might further strengthen Azerbaijani resolve. Further, despite some opposition within the EU following the final assault on Nagorno–Karabakh in 2023, Azerbaijan’s energy ambitions, combined with these other crucial partnerships and Russia’s balanced position suggest the ambition of becoming a wider regional power.

1 “‘South Azerbaijan’ Campaign Starts in Azerbaijan”, *Caucasus Watch*, 10 November 2022, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/south-azerbaijan-campaign-starts-in-azerbaijan.html> (accessed 7 November 2023).

By contrast, Iran's other foreign policy concerns—among others, influence in the Middle East, combatting Saudi Arabia, and containing the Taliban in Afghanistan—have led to a low-priority status for the Caucasus in Tehran. Russia's loss of focus on and waning influence over the South Caucasus due to the war in Ukraine has left Iran and Turkey as the region's major players in principle. Looking at the developments of the 2020 Karabakh conflict, one can see elements of Iranian support for Armenia, from calling for a cessation of hostilities to accusations from both Turkey and Azerbaijan of more explicit assistance through supplying military equipment (Sofuoglu, 2020). In stark contrast to this assistance of Armenia stand Iran's actions vis-à-vis Azerbaijan since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine; while relations had already plummeted, the decisive factor was the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Teheran. It is unlikely that the regime in Tehran orchestrated every aspect, but it is true that the actions of Iranian law enforcement were lax when it came to preventing the attack, both in planning and in action (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023a). This, followed by the holding of military drills on the border, was aimed at showing Azerbaijan that it remains a significant power. These drills began in 2021 and increased in intensity, with very large drills held towards the end of 2022 when the present tensions were growing (Motamedi, 2021; Kucera, 2022).

Moreover, there is the difference in the forms of power utilized—Azerbaijan has the capability to deploy military forces, but relies instead on soft power internationally. While it is certainly in possession of a highly advanced military, the main source of its strength can be seen in its successful diplomacy with the Western powers, particularly in terms of energy politics, partnerships made all the easier by the EU's search for new energy partners to replace Russia. This has not come without pushback, especially where the September 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh is concerned: France, for instance, supports Armenia openly, and the European Parliament passed a negative resolution on the issue.² Despite this, with the war in Ukraine showing no signs of stopping, the EU is still seeking to diversify its gas supply, and Azerbaijan does still provide some of the best means for this.

Iran, meanwhile, has an open network of proxies, and has, as previously noted, made some efforts at cultivating such a proxy within Azerbaijan. Iran may be keen to show that it still maintains some interests in the region, which could explain the relative easing of ten-

sions towards the end of the year. The Aliyev regime has spoken of opening the 'Zangezur Corridor' through Armenia's Syunik region to establish a land link with Nakhchivan; Iran strongly opposes this, and the aforementioned opening of a corridor through Iran instead aims to not only keep the peace in the Caucasus for Iran, but also offers Iran a chance at normalisation, as well as a bargaining chip to use against Azerbaijan (Aghayev, 2023). There is evidence of a cycle in this regard, the most notable example of which being September–October of 2023, as highlighted. To go from stating that relations are at their 'lowest level ever' to facilitating a land corridor is no mean feat (Shaffer, 2023). The cycle is a result of the mutual fear and pragmatism displayed by both states in their relations with one another—they both need to work together to achieve their own (differing) goals, but also regard each other with suspicion for the reasons outlined.

The Russian Gap

The secure position of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh is one important factor behind the emboldened rhetoric coming from Baku and the country's more aggressive recent foreign policy positioning. The reduction of Russian influence in Armenia and Azerbaijan is another factor.

Russia's pursuit of full-scale war in Ukraine meant it had to draw upon its soldiers in the South Caucasus to plug strategic gaps on the Ukrainian front in 2022. A mixture of Russia's inattention to the South Caucasus as well as its previous conduct in the region drew local ire and opened the way for new powers to take a more prominent role in the region. Ultimately, this proved to be an axis between Baku and Ankara (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b). The developments described serve Ankara well in strengthening its own position in the region via Baku: Azerbaijani energy passes to the West via Turkey, and a strong Azerbaijan ensures a constant supply through Turkey—and thus greater Western dependence on Turkey (Balci and Liles, 2020). It is therefore equally valid to call this a Turkish–Azerbaijani policy victory as it is to call it simply an Azerbaijani one.

As for Iran, it has not so much acted as a power filling the vacuum left by Russia as it has reacted to a strengthened Turkish–Azerbaijani regional presence. Iran has many foreign policy goals, and may be distracted by its own higher priorities. Iran and Russia are concerned about increasing Turkish—and, as such, Azerbaijani—influence in the region, and with Russian influence in the region waning, Iran must counter this influence by

2 'Nagorno-Karabakh: MEPs demand review of EU relations with Azerbaijan', European Parliament, Press Release, 5 October 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06132/nagorno-karabakh-meps-demand-review-of-eu-relations-with-azerbaijan> (accessed 13 December 2023).

itself (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023, pp. 126–127; Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b).

Iran is concerned by an increasing Turkish presence meaning greater NATO influence in the region—and since Azerbaijan is also allied with Iran's longtime enemy, Israel, the increased power the two now hold in the region causes Iran discomfort (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023, pp. 130–131). Yet, when looking at recent Iranian actions, it has only reacted—the commencement of construction of a new link to Nakhchivan, for example, only came after the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh offensive. If Iran truly wanted to exert more power in the region, it would have acted faster to achieve this goal rather than wait until there was no alternative—i.e., before Nagorno-Karabakh's fall and the establishment of a wider *de facto* border with Azerbaijan.

Iran's interest in the region, while necessary for pursuing its other foreign policy goals, is in fact a secondary concern when put into the perspective of those other goals. Maintaining influence in Syria and Iraq, managing its relationship with Hezbollah, and combating the Saudis all draw the attention of decision-makers in Tehran more than the South Caucasus; Iran has for this reason been keen to simultaneously remind Azerbaijan of its power and work with this ascending state (Yeo and Souleimanov, 2023b). Ultimately, Iran has many different interests across the wider region; Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is able to (and necessarily must) focus much more of its attention on the South Caucasus. Baku, and by extension Ankara, were better strategically positioned to take advantage of diminishing Russian influence, arguably even before it actually happened; Tehran simply has more interests to weigh up.

About the Author

Alexander Yeo is a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow.

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Conclusion

Azerbaijan–Iran relations and tensions are driven in equal parts by socio-political concerns creating a mutual fear in both states and by foreign policy concerns. The tensions between the two countries have manifested themselves in very different ways: Azerbaijan has become increasingly bold, while Iran has been highly cautious. Confrontation between the two serves neither's purpose at present. Yet with Azerbaijan's prospects looking up, despite some setbacks on the international scene, Baku has the edge when it comes to further consolidating power. Tehran, on the other hand, has many more projects to manage; Azerbaijan may prove another front in its conflict with Israel, yet other fronts—Syria, Lebanon and Iraq—serve a greater purpose in this conflict than a neighbour with whom they have peaceful, if fluctuating relations. Russia's loss of regional influence has been countered with an increased Azerbaijani boldness. Russian peacekeepers not amounting to much in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran not intervening on behalf of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh (instead supporting Azerbaijan's claim to the region), and Iran working with Azerbaijan to prevent conflict rather than counter it more strongly all suggest a shift of power in Baku's favour.

Azerbaijan will most likely continue to project its power for the foreseeable future. Whether Tehran has the capacity, capability, cohesion and will to counter this projection, however, is not fully evident. Azerbaijan's rise to power may have come at the expense of Armenian ambition and Russian influence, and it has in addition kept Iran from exerting meaningful influence in the Caucasus.

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Georgia and Iran: Opportunities and Constraints for Co-operation

George Sanikidze (Ilia State University)

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Abstract

This paper examines the main characteristics of Georgian–Iranian relations since 1991. The following issues are discussed: incompatibility in the perception of historical interactions; Iranian policies towards the South Caucasus states after the dissolution of the Soviet empire and the place of Georgia within it; the influence of political issues on the economic interactions of the two countries; the effect of the Russian factor on Georgian–Iranian relations; and the impact of the Russia–Ukraine war and Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict on Georgian–Iranian relations. It is stressed that the incompatibility of political interests rules out the possibility of rapprochement between these countries.

Introduction

Today, Georgia has no common border with Iran. Still, historically and geopolitically, these two countries can be considered neighbours. For example, though it enjoyed significant autonomy, Eastern Georgia was part of the Safavid state from the 16th to the beginning of the 18th century. Today, relations are normal—although, unlike in the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan, high-level visits between the representatives of the two countries are infrequent because of Georgia's pro-

Western and anti-Russian orientation, which is not in line with Iran's political course. Ultimately, the incompatibility of political interests rules out the possibility of the rapprochement of these countries.

Some main characteristics of today's Georgian politics hinder the two countries from growing closer: (1) the 'cold war' between Russia and Georgia, (2) close relations between Georgia and Turkey, and problems in Iran–Turkey relations, and (3) Georgia's pro-Western aspirations and close ties with the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO), which contradicts Iran's anti-Western stance.

The following questions are discussed in this paper: Does the incompatibility in the perception of historical interactions affect today's relations between the two countries? What is the place of Georgia in Iranian policies towards the South Caucasus states after the dissolution of the Soviet empire? How do political issues influence the economic interactions of the two countries? What is the effect of the Russian factor on Georgian–Iranian relations? And what impact does the Russia–Ukraine war and the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict have on Georgian–Iranian relations?

Incompatibility in the Perception of Historical Interactions

Historically, until the annexation of the Georgian kingdom in 1801 by the Russian Empire, Georgia always had very close relations with Persia/Iran and was often under the direct or indirect control of different Persian states. Generally, the perception of historical interactions does not affect the contemporary political relations of the two countries. However, a different approach to understanding history is explicit. Interactions with Iran are often seen in Georgia as relations between the 'invaded' and 'invader'. At the same time, it is always highlighted that Georgia maintained at least partial independence; Georgian kingdoms and principalities managed to keep a system of local governance under the hegemony of Iran, particularly in the Safavid era (1501–1722).

The Iranian perception is the opposite: historically, Georgia was part of Iran. Even in school textbooks, it is noted that the eastern Caucasus belonged to Iran, but due to the weakening of the Iranian Shahs, the Russian emperors took these lands away from them. Georgia's capital city, Tbilisi, is perceived as a part of the Persianate world (Moradi, 2006–2007, pp. 68, 83; Rondeli, 2014, p. 3).

'Cold Good Neighbourhood'

Iran's policy in the South Caucasus is based on a pragmatic approach and, above all, considers Russia's interests. Milani and Mankoff (2016, p. 7) note that 'Iran's policies in the region have been more pragmatic, more business-oriented, and considerably less ideological than its policies toward immediate neighbours in other regions'. At the same time, Georgia's pro-Western politics and complicated relations with Russia make this country far less attractive to Iran than Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Thus, relations between the two countries are much less intense than Iran's ties with Armenia and Azerbai-

jan. The present Georgia–Iran relations can be described as a 'cold good neighbourhood'. In Georgia's National Security Strategy of 2011, Iran is mentioned only once among the many countries with which Georgia pursues economic cooperation. Generally, 'Georgian–Iranian relations are not simply determined by bilateral decisions but exist in the context of Iran's and Georgia's relationship with the West' (Sanikidze, 2022, p. 159).

After the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, relations between Iran and Georgia, except for minor incidents, thawed to a certain extent (fostered by both sides). For example, in May 2010, Georgia supported a nuclear agreement with Iran initiated by Brazil and Turkey regarding the exchange of enriched uranium, which Washington opposed (Barrionuevo and Arsu, 2010). The visa regime was abolished between Iran and Georgia in January 2011. As a result, Georgia became one of the favourite destinations for Iranian tourists. The visa-free regime also helped intensify economic relations; unlike other Western and Western-oriented states, Georgia has been relatively open to Iran regarding the free movement of people and capital (Nakhutsrishvili and Sanikidze, 2016).

Surprisingly, in 2012, Georgia invited Iran's military attaché to the joint military exercises of US marines and Georgian troops. The Ministry of Defence of Georgia stated that this invitation had followed standard procedure (Corso, 2012). But in the context of that period, when there were signs of warming relations between Iran and the West and when contours for reaching a nuclear deal were visible, this kind of action from the Georgian side seems to have been quite pragmatic—an attempt to mediate between the US and Iran.

However, the unconditional pro-American position of Georgia was illustrated by the fact that Georgia was the only country in the region to openly support the American operation of the liquidation of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. According to an official statement, Washington has the right to protect its citizens anywhere in the world.¹ At the same time, Armenia and Azerbaijan officially expressed condolences to Iran for the death of the general (Kucera, 2020).

Another issue that analysts often discuss is the potential transformation of US–Iranian tensions to an open military confrontation, and the place of the South Caucasus in this possible confrontation. There is a certain fear from the side of Iran that Georgia could be used as a staging ground by the West in the case of military action against Iran. According to analysts, scenarios for Iranian counter-measures in this context could include targeting US embassies or entities in the South Cau-

1 'Georgian FM condemns attack on US Embassy in Iraq', Agenda.ge, 2 January 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/12> (accessed 9 January 2020).

casus, threats to pipelines, or large-scale attacks with accompanying refugee flows and humanitarian crises.

Iran and the Conflicts in the South Caucasus

Iran has no territorial claims over its neighbours. According to the Iranian policy towards the South Caucasus, any issue should be decided by all countries of the region, which, apart from the South Caucasus countries, also includes Iran, Russia, and Turkey. According to Iran's official position, external actors—above all, the United States—should not interfere in the region's internal affairs. Thus, without openly condemning the aggression of Russia in Georgia in 2008, Iran officially declared its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states and upholding all international agreements. Consequently, Iran has also refused to recognise the separatist regions of Georgia supported by Russia (Sanikidze, 2011).

In general, Tehran has been presenting the August 2008 war as a lesson to the countries of the wider region, including the Persian Gulf: Georgia made a mistake in taking US security promises for granted, and now it has to pay an immense price for its naivety. Therefore, from the Iranian point of view, the countries of the South Caucasus would be better off establishing closer links with Iran in the security sphere rather than looking towards untrustworthy America.

After the 2020 Azerbaijan–Armenia war, Turkish President Erdoğan proposed a new '3+3' platform for collaboration in the South Caucasus, including the three South Caucasus countries and three neighbouring powers (Russia, Turkey, and Iran). Platforms with such aims existed earlier, but with no real impact because Iran was not included in 2008, and Georgia refused to join it. Iran needs to become a member of such regional projects. However, this particular 3+3 platform is unacceptable for Georgia due to Russian involvement and could be problematic for Armenia due to the complexity of interactions with the Turkey–Azerbaijan tandem and some cooling of relations with Russia.

Economic Interactions and the Impact of Sanctions on Iran

Economic relations between Iran and Georgia, compared to other neighbours in the Caucasus, are modest. From 2006 to 2018, the total amount of Iranian investments in Georgia was \$26.8 million (Statistical Yearbook of Georgia, 2019, p. 230). If in 2017 Georgian exports to Iran were equal to \$76.7 million, by 2022, this figure had dropped to \$25.6 million. On the contrary, imports from Iran in 2017 were equivalent to \$105.1 million,

increasing to \$145.8 million in 2022 (Statistical Yearbook of Georgia, 2022, pp. 256, 260).

The enhancement of economic relations was quite visible from the beginning of the 21st century. Between 2005 and 2013, bilateral trade with Iran grew by more than 20% yearly. However, the overall trade value remained comparatively low (Kuchins et al., 2016, p. 21). The abolition of the visa regime significantly facilitated the deepening of economic relations. Iranian business became quite active in Georgia; several Iranian companies opened Georgian branches. Free immigration of Iranians to Georgia and the increase in the number of Iranian companies operating in the country caused certain discontent among Georgia's Western partners. They had suspicions that the Islamic Republic was avoiding Western economic and banking sanctions and engaging in money-laundering activities via certain companies registered in Georgia. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps alone was reported to own 150 front organisations in Georgia (Faucon et al., 2013). The visa-free regime was withdrawn in 2013 because of pressure from the United States, though it was reinstated in 2015.

Between 2015 and 2019, 42% of the real estate sold in Georgia was bought by Iranian citizens. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 (in which Iran agreed to roll back parts of its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of some sanctions) created new perspectives for trade and transit between Iran and Georgia. However, despite this progress, significant obstacles for trade remain between the two countries. One of these is the difficulty of bank transfers. Another is the tightening of entry rules into Georgia for Iranian citizens despite the visa-free regime: for example, in the first half of 2019, 13,165 people were denied entry into Georgia, 5,656 (42%) of whom were Iranian citizens. This attitude towards Iranian citizens is connected with the obligation of Georgia to comply with Western sanctions. In 2018, the US left the deal with Iran and reimposed suspended sanctions. This decision had negative consequences for Georgia–Iran relations.

It is worth noting that, in 2019, Armenian and Georgian companies were affected by the sanctions imposed on Iran. The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) of the US Department of Commerce imposed sanctions on the companies Petrochemical and Aviatech registered in Georgia over unlawfully attempting 'to procure and divert export-controlled aluminium tubing via Malaysia to Iran' (Istrate, 2019).

In addition, three Georgian entities faced US-imposed sanctions in 2021 over alleged unlawful technology transfers to the Iranian military.²

2 'აშშ-მ სამ ქართულ კომპანიას სანქციები დაუწესა და ე.წ. შავ სიაში შეიყვანა [The US blacklisted three Georgian companies and imposed sanctions on them]', Tabula.ge, 16 December 2021, <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/677693-ashsh-m-sam-kartul-kompanias-sanktsiebidaucesa> (accessed 16 December 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had even more far-reaching effects. This primarily refers to Georgia and Armenia, where tourism is one of the leading spheres of the economy and where the share of Iranian tourists was significant. For instance, in 2017, 252,984 Iranians visited Georgia; in 2021, this figure was a mere 12,079 (Statistical Yearbook of Georgia, 2022, p. 223).

Iranian Soft Power in Georgia

One of the objectives of Tehran in Georgia is to gain influence over its Azerbaijani citizens—who number around 250,000, representing 6.5% of the country's population—and thereby weaken Baku's position in that context. The common bond of Shi'a Islam should bring Iran and Azerbaijan closer in principle. Yet, in practice this has been a source of estrangement between them, as the secular government of Azerbaijan has been wary of Iran's influence among the more religious segments of its population (Hunter, 2010, p. 171). This obstacle is far less relevant in the Georgian context, and consequently, there is much more possibility for Iranians to propagate the values of the Islamic Republic there.

The competition between Turkish and Iranian organisations is most noticeable among the Azerbaijani population of Eastern Georgia, primarily through humanitarian bodies funded by Tehran and Ankara, respectively. Two main Iranian foundations function in Eastern Georgia, including Tbilisi: one connected with the Great Ayatollah of the Shi'a world, Ali al-Sistani, and one tied to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei (Sanikidze, 2022, p. 109). There are Shi'a *madrassas* and mosques run by both foundations in towns and villages of Eastern Georgia inhabited by Azerbaijanis. In addition, centres for the propagation of Iranian culture have been opened there with the material and technical support of the Iranian embassy.

The Impact of Regional and Global Issues on the Prospects of Future Interactions

Today, Iran and Georgia have mutually exclusive positions regarding the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East. Iran's support of Russia in its war with Ukraine and of Hamas against Israel is opposed to the positions held by Georgia. Even if the ruling Georgian Dream Party is highly cautious and refrains from directly criticising Moscow, Russia remains largely perceived as an enemy that continues occupying Georgia's regions. Moreover, Georgia has very close and friendly relations with Israel (Yellinek, 2020).³

These conflicts, as well as the situation created in the South Caucasus after the Azerbaijan–Armenia war of 2020, have no direct impact on Georgian–Iranian rela-

tions. Still, some issues could affect could affect interactions between the two countries in the mid- to long term between the two countries.

For example, it is in neither Iran's nor Georgia's interest to open the 'Zangezur Corridor' through Armenian territory, which would connect Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhichevan and, via this territory, with Turkey. In this case, Iran will lose its status as the only link between Azerbaijan and its exclave, and Georgia will lose its status as a link for Azerbaijan to Turkey via its railway and Black Sea ports. Although there is, in principle, an initial agreement, several obstacles still exist to implementing this project. In 2011, Azerbaijan and Iran even agreed to construct a railway connecting Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan via Iran, which might make redundant the entire proposal (Isayev, 2013). This project was revived in 2023, and the two countries signed an agreement regarding the construction of the relevant infrastructure (Hajiyeva, 2023).

Together with Russia and India, Iran has also been promoting a project to build an 'International North–South Transport Corridor'. But this project became unrealistic after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—European countries will not use Russian territories as a transit route for trade.

The railway connection from Iran to Georgian Black Sea ports via Azerbaijan can be considered an offshoot of this North–South corridor. It might yet obtain a vital and independent place in trade interactions of Iran with European countries, bypassing Russia. Unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia has access to the Black Sea, therefore representing a significant transit route for the Caucasus and Central Asia. Shaffer (2009, p. 136) calls this strategic position of Georgia 'a central geopolitical prize'. Another transit route project aims to connect Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf with the Georgian Black Sea ports via Armenia. The implementation of such projects, however, depends on the position of Iran on the world stage, and especially on the lifting of sanctions.

Conclusion

Georgian–Iranian relations are determined by the following factors: (1) Iran has no territorial ambitions towards its neighbours, including Georgia, (2) Iran does not want the United States and NATO to gain influence in the Caucasus, so it supports Russia as a counterweight in the region, (3) wider and deeper infrastructure between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia, especially in terms of oil and gas, does not correspond to Iranian economic interests and diminishes the importance of Iran as a transit route, (4) Iran is interested

3 'Israeli president visits Georgia', Civil.ge, 9 January 2017, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29754> (accessed 7 October 2023).

instead in Georgian transit routes to the Black Sea and Europe, and (5) Iran reaches out to the Muslim minorities of Georgia, which leads to competition with Turkey. Considering Georgia's favourable geographical position and Iran's rich energy resources and economic potential, in the case of the complete lifting of sanctions and the

planning and realisation of new vital projects in the mid- and long-term perspective, Georgia can bridge Europe and Iran, in addition to itself acting as a market for business and investments as well as serving as a substantial partner in tourism.

About the Author

George Sanikidze is Professor at Ilia State University, head of the Middle Eastern Studies programme and Director of the G. Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies at the same university. He has been a visiting scholar at Paris-IV (Sorbonne) University, the University of California at Berkeley, Hokkaido University, and Osaka University.

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Shifting Sands, Unmoved Mountains? Relations between Armenia and Iran since the Second Karabakh War

Nareg Seferian (independent researcher)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran across three inter-related dimensions: first, the presence of the prominent Armenian community in Iran; second, economic ties between the two countries; and third, the role of Tehran within regional political dynamics. It is the lattermost point which has seen substantial shifts since the end of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, especially with the shared perceived threats arising from the prospect of a 'Zangezour/Zangezur Corridor' connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan/Nakhichevan. In this context, the foreign policy orientations in Yerevan mainly directed towards Moscow have been shattered as a result of the war and its aftermath. Relations with Tehran, by contrast, have remained steady, developing as one of many in a complex of factors both in Armenia's re-pivoting and the ongoing changes to geopolitical power structures in the South Caucasus.

Introduction

Historical and cultural relations between Armenian and Persian spaces stretch back into the ancient past. Armenian and Parthian realms were at times ruled by the same dynasties in antiquity. Records of overlaps in language and religion attest to shared cultural origins. With the adoption of Christianity among the Armenians and Islam among Persians, those overlaps became more frayed. All the same, for centuries many territories populated by Armenians continued to be ruled on and off by Persian empires, sustaining unbroken Armenian-Iranian interactions across political, commercial, and other spheres (Hovannisian, 2021).

For the purposes of this brief paper, recent relations between the modern states of the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran will be discussed across three inter-related dimensions: the Armenian community in Iran, trade and other economic ties between the two countries, and, most consequentially, the role of Tehran within the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Following the outcome of the Second Karabakh War of 2020 and in the years that followed, Armenia's geopolitical orientation has been severely disrupted. Maintaining and developing ties with Tehran remains one of the few constants in Yerevan's foreign policy as it tries to navigate emerging changes to regional power dynamics in the South Caucasus.

The Iranian-Armenian Community

The Armenians living in Iran today trace their ancestry back through various routes. Many are descendants of the Armenian population displaced by Shah Abbas in 1604. Some also have great-grandparents from the Caucasus or the Ottoman Empire, having found refuge

in Tehran and elsewhere the country in the early decades of the 20th century. Some can claim more ancient, settled Armenian ancestry in territories that are today part of Iran.

The Armenian community of Iran participates in almost all spheres of life in the country: industry, small businesses and trade, arts and culture, education, sports. It displays features typical of the organised Armenian Diaspora around the world, maintaining churches, schools, publications, cultural institutions, athletic teams, and other spaces and activities mainly directed towards other Armenians. By the time of the Islamic Revolution, the population of Armenians in Iran was estimated to be as high as 270,000 (Amurian and Kasheff, [1986] 2011). Since the 1980s, there has been a marked emigration of the Iranian-Armenian population, particularly to Western countries, but also to Soviet and later independent Armenia. It is difficult to come to a precise number for Armenians living in Iran today. One scholar estimated it at around 40,000 in the mid-2010s (Barry, 2018, p. 250).

Besides the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988, fluctuations in the economy, and other sources of hardship, one reason for emigration is that the Iranian regime has maintained a heavy hand over social and cultural life in the country. However, the Iranian-Armenian community can claim a certain degree of privilege in this regard. Although the oversight and limitations imposed by the regime are not insignificant, the Armenians have official recognition as a community and enjoy relatively broad freedom of religious and cultural expression. Notably, similar opportunities are denied to other identities or minorities of Iran, such as the Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Baloch, and others (Iskandaryan, 2019;

Sawhney and Azad, 2020). One possible explanation for such an approach is that the Armenian community is not perceived by the Iranian government as posing any political threat. Unlike other communities and minority identities—such as the three noted above—the Islamic regime does not associate the Armenians of Iran with security issues in the country. The presence of an Armenian Diaspora in Iran serves instead as a catalyst to official relations between Tehran and Yerevan.

Furthermore, the Armenian presence in Iran is uniquely marked by the inclusion of three monasteries on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2008.¹ That is to say, the government of the Islamic Republic itself applied to UNESCO in order to highlight the presence of material Armenian (indeed, Christian) cultural heritage on its territory. That is a rare indicator and a notable contrast with other states in the region which contain similar Armenian monuments, especially Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Armenia-Iran Commerce

Out of a total of around \$3 billion in exports in 2021, Armenia sent over \$60 million in products and services to Iran. The total exports from Iran in turn were valued at \$14 billion in 2021, including over \$400 million in products and services sent to Armenia that year. Both of those figures indicate a relatively small trade turnover. For Iran, Armenia is low in rankings compared to various Asian markets, especially China. Armenia's top trade partners, for its part, have long been Russia and various European countries, as well as China more recently. However, close to a tenth of Armenia's imports come from Iran—mainly oil and gas. Armenia's top export to Iran has been electricity. The energy component of Armenia-Iran economic relations is therefore quite significant. A gas for electricity exchange agreement, in place since 2009, was recently extended to 2030.²

Moreover, trade volumes between the two countries have steadily increased, particularly in recent years. The volume of trade between Armenia and Iran has grown from approximately \$400 million in 2020, to over \$450 million in 2021, and more than \$700 million in 2022. Both governments have moved to incentivise growth in economic ties.³

The presence of an Armenian community in Iran serves as a boost for economic ties, connecting business partners and serving as a ready means for the flow of capital and goods, among other things. There has also been an identifiable tourism component in the commercial ties between the two countries, particularly travellers from Iran who find an affordable, close by destination with few limitations on entry and—perhaps also an attraction—more liberal social and cultural norms. For some years in the 2010s, visiting Armenia during the Novruz holidays was a popular trend among Iranian travellers (Lazarian, 2016).

Transportation is perhaps the most important sphere of co-operation between the Armenian and Iranian economies. Both states face logistical challenges and issues with supply routes. Armenia's longest land borders—with Turkey and Azerbaijan—have remained closed since the early 1990s because of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Routes to and from Georgia and Iran are therefore lifelines for land-locked Armenia. Even though Iran has access to the sea, it faces its own hurdles due to sanctions as well as perceived security threats on its northern and western borders with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iraq, ranging from ongoing conflicts and separatist movements to strategic ties involving the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or Israel, with its close and growing ties to Baku. In comparison, the route through Armenia provides a more secure connection with markets to the north and west.

At the same time, the so-called International North-South Transport Corridor, which aims to develop the infrastructure for supply routes across India, Russia, and Iran, presents its own political and logistical challenge. Nevertheless, Armenian officials have framed the route through the country (and onwards through Georgia) as a supplemental or even alternative Persian Gulf–Black Sea pathway (Chaudhury, 2023; Bonesh, 2023). Notably, Iranian companies have taken on the contract to refurbish and construct a 32-kilometre sections of the highway linking the two countries through southern Armenia.⁴

Geopolitics and Regional Dynamics

Trade routes are an important reason for the close attention Iran has paid to security in the South Caucasus,

1 'Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran', UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1262> (accessed 23 October 2023).

2 'Armenia, Iran agree to increase mutual gas and electricity supplies', Interfax, 10 August 2023, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/93459/>; World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/IRN> and <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/ARM>; The Observatory of Economic Complexity, country-to-country Iran–Armenia, <https://next.oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/irn/partner/arm> (accessed: 23 October 2023).

3 'Armenia, Iran Eye Increased Bilateral Trade', Azatutyun—RFE/RL Armenia, 9 November 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32122272.html>; 'Armenian Minister Predicts \$1b Trade With Iran in Near Future', Financial Tribune, 11 February 2023, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/117065/armenian-minister-predicts-1b-trade-with-iran-in-near-future> (accessed 23 October 2023).

4 'Iran, Armenia strengthen bilateral relations', Mehr News Agency, 24 October 2023 <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/207509/Iran-Armenia-strengthen-bilateral-relations> (accessed 24 October 2023).

particularly following the Second Karabakh War. As discussed elsewhere in this special issue, the prospect of a ‘Zangezour/Zangezur Corridor’⁵ connecting Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhchivan/Nakhichevan through Armenian territory is perceived as a threat in Tehran and Yerevan. Any logistical arrangements with the potential to compromise the flow of goods across the Armenia-Iran border would not be viewed favourably by either government. For Armenia, granting extra-territorial rights to Azerbaijan would in addition be perceived as a further erosion of sovereignty following the aftermath of the war, which has included incursions by Azerbaijani forces and the ongoing occupation of some Armenian territory (Sarukhanyan, 2022). The prospects of further conflict have featured prominently in Armenian discourse since 2020, particularly the invasion and occupation by Azerbaijan of all or part of the province of Siunik/Syunik in southern Armenia, also referred to as Zangezour in Armenian, and Zangezur alone in Azerbaijani (DePencier, 2023).

Tehran also takes such a potential development seriously. Recognising Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, it nonetheless insists that all interstate borders in the region remain in effect. Among other actions, Iran has held military exercises in areas bordering Azerbaijan on multiple occasions in recent years (Shahbazov, 2023). Most significantly, Iran opened a consulate in Kapan, the provincial capital of Siunik, in October 2022. (It is not just the Islamic Republic taking such a step—both Russia and France have each publicly declared their intention to open a consulate in Kapan as well.) Yerevan in turn plans to open a consulate in Tabriz (Motamedi, 2022).

More generally, Armenia has included the ‘further development of special relations with Iran’ in its governmental programme for 2021–2026. Official visits at the highest levels—president, prime minister, foreign minister—have seen a marked increase in the past few years.⁶

Two recent developments reflect the expanded engagement of Iran with the South Caucasus and the readiness of Armenia to build relations with what has hitherto been the least active regional player. First, as early as March 2022, Tehran agreed to develop infrastructure through its territory for road, rail, and energy links between western parts of Azerbaijan proper and the exclave of Nakhchivan/Nakhichevan (Kaleji, 2022). The Turkish leadership likewise put forward the idea of

an alternative Zangezour Corridor through Iran bypassing Armenian territory in September 2023 (Akin, 2023). According to an Iranian member of parliament, it was Tehran’s proposal to undertake such a ‘Plan B’.⁷ In any case, transiting through Iran has long been an option for people and goods moving between Azerbaijan proper and Nakhchivan/Nakhichevan.

Second, on 23 October 2023, Iran hosted a meeting of foreign ministers as part of the ‘3+3’ format. First proposed in 2021, the intention is to bring together the three South Caucasus states and Russia, Turkey, and Iran on a single platform, framed in part as an alternative or counter to involvement by Western actors in the region. A peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was the main agenda item (Teslova, 2021).⁸ (‘3+3’ is in fact a misnomer as Georgia refuses to participate in such an arrangement, protesting Russia’s policies regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia.)

Conclusion

This paper briefly examined the relations between Armenia and Iran across three dimensions.

Economic ties remain relatively small-scale for both countries. For neither is the other a major trade partner, although energy links are significant. Both Yerevan and Tehran are pushing to boost commercial activity, already on the upswing in recent years. The development and maintenance of transportation infrastructure is the main priority in this regard. Any compromise on connections between Armenia and Iran via a Zangezour Corridor imposed by Azerbaijan (and Turkey) remains the most pressing concern for both Yerevan and Tehran. Meanwhile, the existence and maintenance of an identifiable Armenian community in Iran acts as a living link between the two countries, with largely positive outcomes.

For Armenia, the greatest challenge lies in navigating its still-unclear geopolitical orientation following the Second Karabakh War. Most consequentially, long-standing security ties with the Kremlin have been heavily eroded in recent years. For decades, Yerevan has relied on Moscow for arms supplies and has maintained robust bilateral security connections. Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Iran are guarded by Russian troops. Russia maintains military facilities in Armenia, including a base in the city of Gyumri and an airfield in Yerevan. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty

5 ‘Zangezour’ is the transliteration more strictly in keeping with classical Armenian orthography.

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Bilateral Relations: Iran, 1 August 2023, <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/ir> (accessed 23 October 2023).

7 ‘Azerbaijan to back down on proposed Zangezur corridor: Iranian MP’, Tehran Times, 30 September 2023, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/489598/Azerbaijan-to-back-down-on-proposed-Zangezur-corridor-Iranian> (accessed 23 October 2023).

8 ‘Iran hosts Armenia-Azerbaijan talks, Russia says main issue resolved in Nagorno-Karabakh’, Reuters, 23 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-lavrov-visit-tehran-monday-ria-2023-10-22> (accessed 24 October 2023).

Organisation (CSTO), which brings together six countries of the former USSR in an alliance akin to NATO, with a common defence clause.

However, although economic and cultural ties with Moscow remain strong—indeed, also due to the substantial Armenian population in Russia—there have been tensions in the relationship since 2020. Yerevan perceives a lack of response from Moscow to its security threats from Azerbaijan. Many episodes of violence across its borders did not trigger bilateral or CSTO defence mechanisms. The more liberal leaders in government in Yerevan following mass protests in 2018, the full-scale war in Ukraine since early 2022, as well as the ineffectiveness of the Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 add their own complications to the relationship (Atasuntsev, 2023; Mgdesyian, 2023).

Armenia's policy since the 1990s has been to balance among the major geopolitical actors, while tilting in Russia's favour. Such positioning has skewed since

2020. Yerevan has broadened and deepened its relations with the West. Looking at the same time to Iran for richer areas of partnership may, then, give some pause to Washington or Brussels. At the end of the day, however, Western actors have limited reach in the region and cannot offer too much in the way of security guarantees—although the presence of EU border monitors and agreements between Yerevan and Paris for acquiring French defensive weaponry have recently become components to that dynamic.

If Tehran manages some success in mitigating perceived Zangezur Corridor threats—especially through greater economic ties with Yerevan—and if the '3+3' platform proves a viable space for productive discussions, including measurable involvement on the part of Iran, Armenia may find good reason to continue including the Islamic Republic in its pursuit of a new balance in its foreign policy orientation.

About the Author

Nareg Seferian completed his doctoral studies at the School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, in 2023. He has taught at the American University of Armenia (2013-2016) and Virginia Tech (2019-2023). His published writings are available at naregseferian.com.

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.laender-analysen.de/cad/