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The Arab-Islamic direction of Azerbaijan's foreign policy in transition: the main trends

The report discusses transformation and main trends of the Arab Muslim direction of the Azerbaijan's foreign policy since independence in 1991, its significance for Azerbaijan from the political, socio-economic and cultural point of view. Particular attention will be paid to Azerbaijan's policy of exporting the Artsakh/Karabakh issue to the Arab Islamic world, as well as the peculiarities of Azerbaijan's propaganda in MENA region. The transformation of existing insights to Azerbaijan in the Arab Muslim world will be analyzed, as well. The factors supporting and hindering Azerbaijan within the framework of the Arab Muslim direction thereafter are matter of interest. In general, the topic is important and actual for understanding the agenda of Baku's foreign policy from a regional perspective and leads to new conclusions. Research methods include digital anthropology, content and discourse analyses.

In early years of independence, Azerbaijan faced national security challenges from the Islamic world, which threatened to undermine Azerbaijan's internal public solidarity, the secular state and the regime. Particularly, Turkey, Iran, and some Arab Gulf countries used religious soft power, humanitarian and social projects to spread their influence in the region. Since 1993 when Heydar Aliyev took the power, Baku gradually managed to neutralize the main challenges, and improved political, economic and cultural relations with a number of Arab countries, including the Gulf monarchies. The rapprochement of relations with the

Arab Muslim world was the result of the consistent efforts of Azerbaijan, one of the components of which was the discreditation of Armenia and the Armenian World. By the way, all kind of speculations about Republic of Armenia eventually became not only the toolkit of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, but also the most important means for the regime to keep the power and consolidate the society against the enemy.

The Arab Muslim direction in foreign policy of Azerbaijan gradually acquired an importance. In the beginning of 1990's, Azerbaijan started the process of exporting the Artsakh issue to the Islamic world in order to get maximum support. Over the years, Azerbaijan developed close cooperation with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and became one of its most active members. In turn, the organization strongly defended Azerbaijan against Armenia not only within the framework of the organization, but also in various international platforms, relying on the idea of Islamic solidarity and geopolitical interests. In contrast to the former Soviet Muslim states, the integration of Azerbaijan into the international Islamic family was quite successful because of Turkish unconditional support. Baku managed to present itself to the Arab and Muslim world by specific Islamic image. Azerbaijan being a secular state and society, considered itself a close part of the Islamic world and Ummah. It is noteworthy that mainly Shia oriented Azerbaijan was able to create favorable conditions for itself in both the Sunni and the Shia worlds whereas presented itself with completely different images in Turkish world or in the West. On the other hand, close cooperation with Israel did not hinder either. Azerbaijan quite successfully maneuvered between the centers of power. In fact, Baku diversified its identities, which contributed to foreign political achievements.

The transformation of ideas about Azerbaijan in the Arabic Islamic environment is also directly related to the discussing issue. Azerbaijan is not very popular state in MENA region. The 44-day Artsakh/Karabakh war meanwhile somewhat broadened the perceptions about Azerbaijan. From this point of view, it is important to understand how Azerbaijan is perceived in the Arab-Islamic environment, what kind of centers of power and states besides Turkey supported Azerbaijan in advancing the Islamic foreign policy agenda. Thus, Azerbaijan has demonstrated a long-term vision in developing strong cooperation with the region. It is my humble view that Baku in further will aggressively and consistently advance its national interest in different international platforms, particularly in MENA region.