

# IRAN'S ASSERTIVE FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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## INTRODUCTION

Many Iranian experts and scholars believe that the influence of the US is eroding in the region. This argument is justified by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East. The US now has a bigger threat to deal with; which is China and has to contain Beijing in South Asia. However, the US military withdrawal and redeployment from the region does not mean its influence will diminish since the Americans will pursue their policy through their proxies and allies. Hence, the Saudis, Israelis, and Turks will try to shape US interest in the region by containing the Russian, Iranian and Chinese interests. Iranians, especially the conservatives, view the regional geopolitical and geo-economic developments through this (anti-Israeli and anti-American) prism. This is why Iranians directly intervened in Syria and Iraq since they saw the “Sunni-Islamist jihadism” as an “American-Zionist plot” to change the balance of power in the region and destabilize Iran.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to its traditional “anti-US/Israeli” policy in the Middle East, Tehran perceives the South Caucasus through the same prism. Although Tehran, diplomatically and militarily was not pro-active as its presence in the Middle East, however, this paper will highlight Iran’s limitations and “red lines” in the region. The paper will discuss why Iran shifted from passive to assertive diplomacy, and raise few recommendations to strengthen Armenian-Iranian relations.

## IRAN'S POLICY TOWARDS ARMENIA AND ARTSAKH

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has patiently and cautiously followed the developments in the South Caucasus. The main strategic objective of Tehran was to prevent US-Israeli penetration into the region and it viewed the Russian political and military presence in the region, particularly in Armenia, as a buffer zone against Western and even Turkish expansionist activities.<sup>2</sup> However, after 2018, the Iranians viewed the developments in

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<sup>1</sup> “Iran ‘concerned’ by Israeli ‘presence’ in the Caucasus”, *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/6/iran-concerned-by-israeli-presence-in-the-caucasus> , accessed 10/3/2022.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Poghosyan, “Opinion: In the South Caucasus, Tehran has its red lines too”, *commonsplace.eu*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-south-caucasus-tehran-has-its-red-lines-too> , accessed 10/3/2022.

Armenia from the prism of “Western-funded color revolutions”, such phrases were highlighted in Iranian newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey, on the other hand, started to follow an independent foreign policy and came to terms with Russia to share power in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Iranian policymakers thought that Turkey by cooperating with Russia would reduce western influence in the region and give up its Pan-Turkic and neo-Ottoman claims.<sup>4</sup> However, regional developments in the post-Second Artsakh war showed that Ankara pushed for assertive pan-Turkic foreign policy in the region. Indeed, after the trilateral statement of November 9, 2020,<sup>5</sup> and the Shushi Declaration of June 15, 2021,<sup>6</sup> it was clear that Turkey’s ambitions went beyond the Caucasus and Iran was being further marginalized.

During the recent war in Artsakh, Iran’s policy was clear. It called for Armenia’s withdrawal from the adjacent territories of Nagorno-Karabakh and a peaceful resolution for the conflict. It even tried to mediate between both sides. In an interview with Iranian political analyst Seyed Mohammad Marandi, the analyst argued that Iran’s position from the beginning, was based on the preservation of international law, hence “the occupied territory that was largely Azerbaijani has to be returned to Azerbaijan and the territories that belong to

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<sup>3</sup> “تحولات سیاسی در ارمنستان پس از انقلاب مخملی و منافع روسیه” (Political developments in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution and Russian interests), *Tasnim News*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/03/11/2023282/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%BE%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%AE%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87>, accessed 10/3/2022

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Iranian political analyst and former Fars News Agency (English) chief editor Dr. Seyed Mostafa Khoshcheshm, October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Yeghia Tashjian, “Iran and the Second Artsakh War: Has Tehran lost its leverage over the South Caucasus?”, *Armenian Weekly*, January 27, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/01/27/iran-and-the-second-artsakh-war-has-tehran-lost-its-leverage-over-the-south-caucasus/>, accessed 10/3/2022.

<sup>6</sup> Yeghia Tashjian, ““Shushi Declaration” and its Implications on the South Caucasus and Beyond”, *Armenian Weekly*, June 29, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/06/29/shushi-declaration-and-its-implications-on-the-south-caucasus-and-beyond/>, accessed 10/3/2022.

Armenia has to be part of Armenia”.<sup>7</sup> Therefore during the war, “Iran accepted and supported Azerbaijani sovereignty and today Iran supports Armenia’s sovereignty and will not allow Turkish or other regional forces to weaken the sovereignty of Armenia” mentioned Dr. Marandi.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, other Iranian experts whom this writer met or interviewed were very cautious on the subject of Nagorno-Karabakh, despite the fact that they firmly opposed Armenian control over the adjacent territories of 1988 borders of NKAO, they did not have a clear opinion on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh. They showed their mistrust towards Azerbaijan, they were silent towards the pre-2020 status quo, however, they favored a compromised solution so as not to drag the region into another regional war that would pave the way for Turkish, NATO, or Israeli intervention.

Hence, many Iranians criticized Armenia’s “non-compromising position” over Nagorno-Karabakh. They viewed PM Nikol Pashinyan’s pre-war statements on changing the format of the negotiations as a path to pave the way towards war and trigger foreign (mainly Turkish and Western) intervention in the region.

#### IRAN’S LIMITATIONS AND “RED LINES” IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Traditionally, Iran had two “red lines” in the South Caucasus. However, after the November 9, 2020 trilateral statement, another “red line” was added to its list. These red lines sometimes are dependent variables on the limitations of Iran’s foreign policy in the region.

What are those limitations?

Tehran’s limitations are linked to geo-economic projects in the region which explain why Iran has not intervened in the war.

1- A key factor that has pushed Iran to have a passive stance towards Turkey was Ankara’s political and economic transit role in the region. Turkey is an important trade partner and transit corridor to transfer Iranian gas and oil to European markets. Both Ankara and Tehran also cooperate against the Kurdish insurgency in the region. They also face the same regional rivals – the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> Turkey is also a useful conduit for mitigating the effects of unilateral US sanctions. At a time when Iran was

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Iranian political analyst and advisor to Iranian delegation for Iranian nuclear talks Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi, October 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid..

<sup>9</sup> Alex Vatanka, “Iran’s strong hand in the Arab world is missing in the Caucasus”, *Middle East Institute*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-strong-hand-arab-world-missing-caucasus?fbclid=IwAR2ER1GikSJQvxemf1HHGIPAou0ddDYCogkyEDrPIZPvLZPJ1zBTrnELI4>, accessed 10/10/2021.

being squeezed by the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign and an array of regional rivalries, it can hardly afford to alienate Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

2- The military-technical-intelligence partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan which is actively and permanently developing and strengthening has raised alarms in Iran.<sup>11</sup> However, Azerbaijan is not the only country in the South Caucasus that is being actively supported by Israel, there is Georgia too. For Iran, Georgia is influenced by NATO and especially US decision-makers. This is why, during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Iran has neither criticized nor openly supported Russia's annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nevertheless, for Iran; Georgia, and Azerbaijan (given Armenia's poor infrastructural role) are important transit hubs to trade with European and Russian markets. For this reason, Iran could not directly contain or challenge the American and Israeli influence alone in this region. Hence, unlike the Middle East, where Iran has proxies and allies (Syria, Hizbollah, and Iraqi and Yemeni militias), where they contain Tehran's enemies, Tehran lacks such allies in the South Caucasus and cannot go to a direct confrontation against them.

Nevertheless, after August 2021, as the threats intensified against Iran's national security, Tehran's new government redrew its "red lines" in the South Caucasus and replaced its passive diplomacy with a pro-active assertive foreign policy.

According to Iranian political analyst, Dr. Seyed Mostafa Khoshcheshm currently Iran is reviewing former President Hassan Rouhani's policies in the South Caucasus. The analyst argued that the former President and his FM Mohammad Zarif took a passive stance towards the 2020 war in Artsakh since they thought Iran needs Turkey to push the nuclear negotiations forward.<sup>12</sup> Iran also valued its trade with Ankara more than its relations with Yerevan. However, with the coming of conservatives to power, the Iranian government realized that its geopolitical and geo-economic interests are at stake.

First, as mentioned earlier, most Iranian scholars and experts this author has interviewed, viewed the regional dynamics from an anti-Israeli prism. During the last years, there were high-ranking official meetings between Azerbaijan and Israel, both sides signed economic, security, and military

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<sup>10</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Bolton visits Caucasus amid anti-Iran campaign", *Eurasianet*, October 23, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/bolton-visits-caucasus-amid-anti-iran-campaign>, accessed 10/10/2021.

<sup>11</sup> Yeghia Tashjian and Mona Issa, "The axis of instability: The Azerbaijani-Israeli alliance", *Nour News*, October 4, 2020, <https://nournews.ir/En/News/54444/The-axis-of-instability-The-Azerbaijani-Israeli-alliance>, accessed 18/11/2021.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dr. Khoshcheshm, October 2021.

agreements. Moreover, Israel used Azerbaijan as an intelligence base to spy on Iranian military activities in Northern Iran. According to Dr. Khoscheshm, Mossad has sent hitmen and agents from the Azerbaijani border to Iran to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists.<sup>13</sup>

Second, Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus is another "red line" for Iran which had been crossed by Ankara after the end of the Second Artsakh War (September 27-November 9, 2020). Iran had concerns that this conflict would trigger Turkey's proactive policy of supporting Azerbaijan and this would come to give Ankara a bigger stake in the future of the South Caucasus. As the war ended with Azerbaijan's military victory, it was clear that the Baku-Ankara alliance has been radically strengthened and Turkey was going to stay in Azerbaijan. It is worth mentioning that with the outbreak of the war in late September 2020, demonstrations erupted in Azeri majority cities in Iran (ethnic Azeris make up about 25 percent of Iran's population) demanding active support for their ethnic kin on the other side of the border. The war had already fueled a sense of Azerbaijani nationalism inside northern Iran. Tehran feared it would be dragged into the Armenian-Azerbaijani war. This was followed by President Erdogan's remarks by citing a controversial poem during the military parade in Baku (December 10, 2020) thus further antagonizing the Iranians.<sup>14</sup> Many Iranians believed that Turkey with the help of Israeli and Azerbaijani agents was going to destabilize northern Iran.

Finally, despite the fact that Tehran has welcomed the end of hostilities, its passive diplomacy in the recent war cost her to lose its important transit role in the region. Based on the trilateral statement, Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan will be connected to Azerbaijan proper through a route passing by Southern Armenia, possibly the Meghry district. Now that Turkey has infiltrated the region, and Israel, through this war, has succeeded in politically isolating Iran, Tehran is concerned to be economically isolated too. In 2005, around 1700-km-long pipeline between Baku and the Turkish port of Ceyhan started operating. Even before the imposition of sanctions, these pipelines replaced the Iranian gas exports with Azerbaijani. Energy security has consolidated Turkish-Azerbaijani trade relations and their ties with Europe: now the oil from Baku is shipped from Turkey to European states through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. As Hamidreza Azizi from the German think-tank SWP pointed out, the new route will diminish Iran's image of being a regional transit and its leverage over Nakhichevan. Meanwhile, Turkey, which borders

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Dr. Khoshcheshm, October 2021.

<sup>14</sup> "Iran protests to Turkey over 'meddling' poem recited by Erdogan", *Aljazeera*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/11/iran-protests-to-turkey-over-meddling-poem-recited-by-erdogan>, accessed 15/10/2021.

Nakhichean, gains land access to the Azerbaijani proper without having to pass through Iran or Georgia, thus directly being connected to the Central Asian markets.<sup>15</sup> Thus Iran would lose its leverage over Azerbaijan as well.

As border clashes erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijani President declared his clear intentions regarding territorial demands from Armenia (December 10, 2020), the Iranians started reviewing their policy out of concern of increasing Azerbaijani influence on Armenia's southern province, Syunik. Iran is one of the regional powers actively concerned with the developments in Syunik. From the Iranian perspective, any change regarding the internationally recognized borders with Armenia or a de facto loss of Armenian sovereignty over Syunik would threaten Iran's national security and place Iran at the mercy of Turkey and Azerbaijan when it comes to trade routes linking Tehran to Russia and Europe. Iran values Armenia for its North-South corridor projects and Armenia can turn into a valuable geo-economic transit hub only if it finalizes this corridor thus connecting Iran to the Black Sea and beyond.<sup>16</sup>

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN ARMENIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

As an outcome of interviews and meetings with Iranian scholars and experts, based on their political linings, and my participation in the "Armenia-Iran: Historical Past and Present" International Conference which took place in Yerevan between February 9 and 10, 2022 and meetings with Iranian diplomats this author came up with the following suggestions to strengthen Armenian - Iranian relations.<sup>17</sup> Some of these suggestions were welcomed by the Iranians and other suggestions were proposed by them. Some of them are realistic and should be viewed carefully by Yerevan, other recommendations may seem idealistic or far-fetched given the complex geopolitical system in the region but also highlight how far Iranian conservatives may go if they feel their national security is threatened.

- If in the future, Iran joins the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), it would have better access to the Eurasian, Russian, as well as European markets. This accession would also provide EAEU member states with increased access to the Persian Gulf, increase trade and give stronger impetus

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<sup>15</sup> Tashjian, "Iran and the Second Artsakh War: Has Tehran".

<sup>16</sup> Yeghia Tashjian, "Is Iran making a comeback to the South Caucasus?", *The Armenian Weekly*, October 20, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/20/is-iran-making-a-comeback-to-the-south-caucasus/>, accessed 29/11/2022.

<sup>17</sup> Yeghia Tashjian, "Reflection on the "Armenia-Iran: Historical Past and Present" International Conference", *Armenian Weekly*, February 28, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/02/28/reflection-on-the-armenia-iran-historical-past-and-present-international-conference/>, accessed 10/3/2022.

and incentive for both sides (Iran and EAEU members) to pursue common interests in third-party states like in the Levant. Therefore Russia and Iran would have stronger cooperation in the Levant, and other regions, hence they will work to protect their shared economic interests. Therefore, with the unblocking of regional trade routes, in the long run, Armenia would have access to the Levantine markets and reach the Eastern Mediterranean through railways.

- Both Armenia and Iran could launch rapid joint cooperation through joint venture plans and also through Iran's investments in Armenia's highways, especially from the Norduz border crossing to Yerevan in order to widen the capacity of the north-south corridor. From the Iranian perspective, this would widen not only the Armenian-Iranian and regional trade but also promote Iran's geo-economic interests in Armenia. Such steps may further attract Indian, Chinese, and European investments which would empower Armenia's security and stability.

- Both Armenia and Iran may also have military cooperation for the sake of regional stability and to ensure that geopolitical borders of regional countries will remain stable and unharmed especially in Armenia and to ensure that states like Israel and the US will not try to make a scapegoat of Armenia and weaken it for the sake of their plans in the Caucasus. For this reason, an intelligence cooperation center should be created both in Armenia and Iran where both sides can share, analyze and assess regional threats and terror activities that may expose a threat to both countries and regional securities. To facilitate this process, direct communication channels must be established between the security service institutions of both countries.

- Opening of an Iranian consulate in Syunik with a military coordinator/attache. This will pave the way for other states to take similar steps and preserve Armenia's sovereignty with international backing on Syunik.<sup>18</sup>

- Establishing a military base in Syunik (suggestion from Iranian conservative expert) with Armenia's and Russian Federation's consent with the presence of 700-1000 Iranian forces.

- To increase pressure on the Azerbaijani side, the Iranian side can increase the transit fees for Azerbaijani trucks passing through Iran heading for Nakhichevan.

- Enhancing communication between Armenia and the Diaspora communities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in order to compare and assess Iranian intentions and policies in the Middle East and the South Caucasus.

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that Iran already took such a decision on December 2021. "Iran To Open Consulate In Strategic Armenian Region", *Azatutyun*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31631830.html> , accessed 27/1/2022.

These communities can act as secondary embassies to facilitate communication and information sharing between different Iranian and pro-Iranian organizations and the Republic of Armenia.

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ԿՈՎԿԱՍԻ ՄԷՋ  
(Ամփոփում)**

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Ուսումնասիրությունը կը քննարկէ Հարաւային Կովկասի մէջ Իրանի արտաքին քաղաքականութեան արձանագրած որոշակի շրջադարձը:

Ըստ հեղինակին, Թուրքիոյ աջակցութեամբ Արցախի դէմ սանձազերծուած Ա-գրպէյճանի 44օրեայ պատերազմին հետեւանքով վերահաստատուեցան Թուրքիոյ ախորժակները դէպի Կեդրոնական Ասիա: Եւ քանի որ նման ծրագիր մը Իրանը կը դնէ թրքական աւազանի մէջ, Իրան շրջադարձ մը կատարեց իր հիւսիսին հանդէպ վարած արտաքին քաղաքականութեան մէջ:

Քննարկումին աւարտին, հեղինակը շարք մը յառաջադրանք-առաջարկներ կը ներկայացնէ որոնք կրնան յաւելեալ գործակցութեան միջոցներ հանդիսանալ՝ Հայաստանի եւ Իրանի պետութիւններուն համար, կ'ամրապնդեն անոնց փոխյարաբերութիւնը, կը սատարեն շրջանի խաղաղութեան եւ կը խոչընդոտեն օտար միջամտութիւնները այնտեղ: