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Azerbaijan-Iran Relations under the Shadow of Pan-Turkist Challenges*

Bayram Sinkaya

The Iranian Studies Unit

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The independence of the Azerbaijan Republic in October 1991 and the ensuing Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh posed a new set of challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran. One such challenge was that Iran now faced a military conflict between its two neighbours, creating instability adjacent to its borders that eventually turned into a protracted conflict. Although Tehran claimed neutrality, Azerbaijan blamed Iran for providing tacit support to the Armenians. Another challenge was the ascendance of Abulfaz Elchibey to power in Baku in June 1992, which sparked the so-called threat of pan-Turkism, arguably aimed at the territorial integrity of Iran. Elchibey was an ardent Turkish nationalist who forecasted the downfall of Iran and the “unification of two Azerbaijan” that alarmed Iranian officials about security risks arising from a powerful and independent Azerbaijan.¹ Nonetheless, Baku and Tehran used to have pragmatic relations, particularly after the replacement of Elchibey with Heydar Aliyev as President of Azerbaijan in 1993. Despite occasional tensions between the two neighbours that revolved around the alleged Iranian promotion of political Islam and its intelligence activities inside Azerbaijan, Iranian support for Armenia with regard to the Karabakh dispute, and Baku’s alleged support for ethnonationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis, the two countries have managed to preserve relatively stable and pragmatic relations.

However, immediately after the Second Karabakh War (27 September-9 November 2020), also dubbed as the 44-Day War by Azerbaijanis, which ended with Azerbaijan’s liberation of territories that were previously occupied by the Armenian forces, Baku-Tehran relations were strained significantly. Azerbaijan furiously reacted to Iranian deployment of additional troops close to the Azerbaijan-Iran border and frequent military drills. In return, Iran viewed the growing Azerbaijan-Israel relations as a “Zionist threat” encroaching close to its territories. Finally, in response to an attack on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran in January 2023, Azerbaijan suspended the activities of the embassy and withdrew its diplomats from Tehran. Baku then blamed Tehran for cultivating militant cells in Azerbaijan and declared some Iranian diplomats as *persona non grata*. Iran reciprocated the measure, displaying the severity of tension between the two states.

This paper examines the evolution of Baku-Tehran relations after the Second Karabakh War. It argues that the recent tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan are a result of two related factors. The first is the shifting geopolitics of the South Caucasus against the interests of Iran. The war has broken Azerbaijan and Armenia’s previous stalemate, and made the former, along with Türkiye, the dominant powers in the region. The second reason is the revival of the spectre of pan-Turkism that has haunted Baku-Tehran relations for the past century. In addition, rising Azerbaijani and Turkish influence in the South Caucasus and the presence of approximately twenty-five million Turkic, Azeri/Azerbaijani speaking people in the northwest region of Iran, commonly called Iranian Azerbaijan, has proved to be a source of tension in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Members of the Azerbaijani elite who have close ties with former President Elchibey have often talked about the partition of Iran and the unification of the two Azerbaijan (*bütöv Azerbaijan*).² This has fuelled Tehran’s fears that Baku incites ethnonationalist

1 Emil Souleimanov, “Dealing with Azerbaijan: The Policies of Turkey and Iran toward the Karabakh War (1991-1994),” *Middle Eastern Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (2011).

2 Nesib Nesibli, *Bölünmüş Azərbaycan, Bütöv Azərbaycan* [Divided Azerbaijan, Whole Azerbaijan] (Bakı: Ay-Ulduz, 1997).

movements among Iranian Azerbaijanis,³ and alleged pan-Turkist or pan-Azerbaijani policies pursued by Baku have led to the securitization of relations between the two countries.⁴

Azerbaijan-Iran Relations after the Second Karabakh War

With the outbreak of armed clashes on the Karabakh front on 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan quickly proved its military superiority against the Armenian forces. Following the war, Iran adopted a seemingly confusing policy towards the unfolding developments. On the one hand, Iranian officials adopted a pro-Azerbaijani position, with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei confirming the “Azerbaijani right to liberate its occupied territories”⁵ Additionally, then President Hassan Rouhani’s chief of staff, Mahmud Vaezi, made a phone call to Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister, Shahin Mustafayev, and reiterated Tehran’s support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.⁶ On the other hand, Iran also arguably served as a conduit for Russian military supplies to Armenia. Iranian Azerbaijani ethnonationalists published photos and videos of several military trucks allegedly carrying arms and equipment to Armenia. Iranian spokesmen, however, called it part of a routine transfer of conventional non-military items. Iranian authorities denied alleged Iranian support for Armenia as “baseless rumors” that aimed to disrupt Tehran-Baku ties.⁷

In the meantime, Iran called for a non-military solution to the conflict and suggested acting as a mediator.⁸ Iran proposed a peace plan that underlined the principle of territorial integrity of all regional states. As the special representative of the Iranian president, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited four countries – Azerbaijan, Russia, Armenia, and Türkiye – in order to present the Iranian initiative to resolve the conflict and “achieve a lasting peace” between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Accordingly, Iran proposed a 3+3 formatted regional forum to stabilize the South Caucasus that would include three South Caucasian republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – as well as Türkiye, Russia, and Iran.⁹

When a number of rockets and artillery shells reportedly landed on Iranian soil, Tehran deployed additional troops and military equipment along its northern borders.¹⁰ Iranian officials protested several times over the violation of Iran’s territories and warned belligerents against endangering

3 Julien Zarifian, “Iran and Its Two Neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan: Resuming Relationships under America’s Suspicious Eyes,” *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (2009).

4 Reza Kadkhodazade and Hamidreza Azizi, “Tasere Seyasethaye Panturkizm der Revabete Jomhouriyeh Azerbaijan ba Iran” [The Impact of Pan-Turkist Policies on Azerbaijan’s Relations with Iran], *Faslnameye Seyasete Jehan*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (2020), pp. 117 - 146.

5 Syed Zafar Mehdi, “Iran Backs Azerbaijan’s Right to Liberate Karabakh,” *AA*, 11/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/4th6znnk>; Eldar Mamedov, “Iran’s Delicate Balancing Act in the South Caucasus,” *Eurasianet*, 8/10/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/mtvc7mk6>.

6 “Protests Erupt in Iran Backing Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *RFE/RL’s Radio Farda*, 2/10/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/crn22pec>.

7 Brenda Shaffer, “Iran’s Policy towards the Caucasus and Central Asia,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 17/8/2022, p. 7, <https://tinyurl.com/29ndd4yc>; “Protests Erupt in Iran Backing Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”.

8 Kerim Has, Vali Kaleji, and Sergey Markedonov, “The Breakdown of the Status Quo and the International Dimension of the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis,” *The Valdai Discussion Club*, 2020, p. 18, <https://tinyurl.com/5y4tvu5b>; Zaur Gasimov, “Active but Inefficient? Iran’s Strategy towards the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh,” in *the Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for Future*, ed. Turan Gafarli and Michael Arnold (Istanbul: TRT World Research Center, 2021), p. 215.

9 “Iran after Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, A Region in South Caucasus,” *IRNA*, 31/10/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2eh3j6af>.

10 Vali Kaleji, “The 2020 Karabakh War’s Impact on the Northwestern Border of Iran,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 1/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/4zyc2ftt>.



the country's border security. Amid violent clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, the Iranian Army launched a one-day military exercise close to the border on 9 October 2020. It is reported that Iranian forces crossed the border into Azerbaijan on the pretext of protecting the Khudafarin hydropower plant, disrupting the advance of Azerbaijani forces for a couple of days.¹¹

Surprised by the quick advances of Azerbaijani forces in liberating the seven Armenian-occupied regions and marching toward the heart of Nagorno Karabakh, Iranian officials started to issue warnings, particularly to Azerbaijan. Iran formally declared that any change to the “official international borders” in the region was unacceptable for Iran. Iranian warnings to Azerbaijan also speculated the employment of foreign fighters from Syria, dubbed as “Salafis, Takfiris, or terrorists”, on the side of Azerbaijani forces. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that Iran is “almost certain” about the presence of terrorists in the conflict, which would “not be tolerated by Tehran on its doorstep”.¹² Khamenei also repeated the same argument about the alleged presence of terrorists in the conflict zone, warning that if they were to pose any danger to Iran, they would “definitely be dealt with seriously”.¹³

Iran's diplomatic initiative to end the conflict was sidelined by a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, epitomized by the Moscow Declaration on 10 November 2020.¹⁴ However, Iran officially welcomed it. Foreign Minister Zarif praised the “constructive efforts” of Russia and urged the belligerents “to engage in substantive dialogue based on respect for international law and territorial integrity.”¹⁵ A communique issued by the Foreign Ministry stated, “Iran welcomes this agreement, the principles of which were set out in the proposal of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and hopes that it will lead to the establishment of a lasting peace in the Caucasus region.”¹⁶ The communique also included Tehran's readiness to contribute to the implementation of the agreement. However, Iran's bid to aid in the enactment of the truce was ignored. Left out of the implementation process, Iran was left distressed by Türkiye's role, next to Russia, in monitoring the ceasefire. In addition to “keeping Iran in the dark,” the overall vagueness of the ceasefire agreement particularly on the meaning of the envisaged “transport connections” between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan raised speculation and concerns for the Iranians.¹⁷

Tehran's concerns were heightened with the possibility of Azerbaijani use of force to realize the transport connections, called by Azerbaijan as the “Zangezur corridor,” to ensure overland access to its Nakhichevan exclave.¹⁸ This would create a forced change of Iran's borders with Armenia, which

11 Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer, “Israel's role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War”, in *the Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for Future*, ed. Turan Gafarli and Michael Arnold (Istanbul: TRT World Research Center, 2021), p. 196.

12 “Vague peace in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Tehran Times*, 14/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/4haenbn6>.

13 “Vague peace in Nagorno-Karabakh.”

14 For the text of the ceasefire agreement see, “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation,” *President of Russia*, 10/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/bddsshhh>.

15 Has, Kaleji, and Markedonov, “The Breakdown of the Status Quo,” p. 7.

16 Arvin Khoshnood and Ardavan Khoshnood, “Iran's Quandary on Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Middle East Forum*, Vol. 28, No. 2, (2021), <https://tinyurl.com/6azwdw3>.

17 “Vague peace in Nagorno-Karabakh”.

18 Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during an interview with Azerbaijani Public TV on 21 April 2021 reportedly said: “The creation of the Zangezur corridor fully meets our national, historical and future interests. We will be implementing the Zangezur corridor, whether Armenia wants it or not ... If Armenia wants to, we will solve this issue more easily, if it does not, we will solve it by force.” Ani Avetisyan, “Aliyev Threatens to Establish ‘Corridor’ in Armenia by Force,” *OC Media*, 21/4/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bde6jp4m>.

was declared as Iran's red line. With Russian silence and alleged Turkish encouragement concerning Azerbaijan's threat to use force, Khamenei met President Recep T. Erdogan on the sideline of the "Astana Summit" held in Tehran in July 2022. At the highest level, he warned, "if there is a policy to block the Iranian-Armenian border, the Islamic Republic will oppose it because this border has been a communication route for thousands of years."¹⁹

Besides the discontent over the Zangezur corridor, Azerbaijan-Iran relations headed toward a serious crisis over several issues. The first development that led to a rise in tension between Baku and Tehran was the Azerbaijani imposition of a "road tax" for Iranian trucks passing through the Goris-Kapan Road on their way to Armenia. While that road was part of the 400-kilometer-long Norduz-Yerevan highway connecting the Armenian capital to Iran, virtually 20 kilometres remained within the newly liberated territory of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan also impeded the travel of Iranian trucks to Karabakh, which is recognized as the "illegal crossing of third-country vehicles into the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan". One such example of this took place in September 2021 when Azerbaijan authorities stopped and arrested two Iranian truck drivers allegedly carrying goods between Armenia and Karabakh to illegally enter Azerbaijan soils via Armenia.²⁰

Tension between Baku and Tehran increased further after Azerbaijan and Tehran exercised consecutive military drills in September and October 2021. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev strongly reacted against the timing, place, and reasonings of Iranian military manoeuvres. Recalling it to be the first "show of force" by Iran very close to the Azerbaijan border since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he asked, "why now, and why on our border?"²¹

Iran justified its military enforcements and drills on two grounds: perceived threats to international borders and the presence of 'Takfiri terrorists' and 'Zionist elements' on the Azerbaijani side of the joint border. Receiving the new Azerbaijani ambassador to Tehran in September 2021, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian said, "we do not tolerate the presence and activity against our national security of the Zionist regime next to our borders".²² President Aliyev responded from Jabrayil, stating that any claims of the presence of foreigners on the Azerbaijani side of the border are unfounded, and it is the business of Azerbaijan to decide "with which country and at what level we build relationships."²³

Despite the rising tensions between Baku and Tehran, Azerbaijani and Iranian officials had to consider geopolitical imperatives and chose to manage their differences. Azerbaijan did not wish to antagonize Iran, its powerful southern neighbour, whereas Iran avoided escalating tension further.

19 "Iran's Leader: Attack on Syria Brings Harm to Entire Region," *Fars News Agency*, 19/7/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yzjv5jax>.

20 Heydar Isayev and Ani Mejlumyan, "Azerbaijan Starts Charging Iranian Trucks Supplying Armenia," *Eurasianet*, 14/9/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/eav5d8jz>.

21 "Don't Poke Your Nose into the Affairs of Azerbaijan! - Ilham Aliyev Sharply Besieged Iran," *Turan*, 4/10/2021, <https://turan.az/en/politics/dont-poke-your-nose-into-the-affairs-of-azerbaijan-ilham-aliyev-sharply-besieged-iran>

22 Golnaz Esfandiari, "What's Behind Fresh Tensions On The Iran-Azerbaijan Border?," *RFE/RL*, 1/10/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/mvvpnzya5>.

23 "Don't Poke Your Nose into the Affairs of Azerbaijan!"



Azerbaijan has been the main trade partner of Iran in the South Caucasus and an important outlet for Iranian access to the markets of Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. Azerbaijan is also located at the centre of the International North-South Transport Corridor, projected to connect the Persian Gulf to Russia.²⁴

Presidents of Azerbaijan and Iran, Ilham Aliyev and Ebrahim Raisi met in Asghabat on 28 November 2021 on the edge of the Economic Cooperation Organization Summit after the signing of a gas swap deal between Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan. In that meeting, Aliyev said, “our peoples are fraternal peoples, our countries are fraternal countries, and the issues discussed today show again that Iranian-Azerbaijani relations are at a very high level.” He also said, “we have decided that from now on, Iran-Azerbaijan relations will develop in all areas.”²⁵

Azerbaijan and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding on 11 March 2022 to construct, through the Iranian province of East Azerbaijan, a 55 kilometres long highway and railway joining Aghbend in the Zangilan district of Azerbaijan to Ordubad of Nakhichevan. According to the memorandum, Azerbaijani vehicles would be allowed to cross Iranian territory without submitting to Iranian customs checks. They also agreed on the establishment of new communications and energy supply lines connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Iranian territories.²⁶ Without having to wait on the construction of the envisaged “transport connections” between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan through Armenian soil, Azerbaijan successfully initiated an alternative route for accessing Nakhchivan through Iran, altogether bypassing Armenia.²⁷

After a relative calm, a new round of verbal brawls sparked between Baku and Tehran in October 2022 because of Azerbaijan’s relations with Israel and new Iranian military manoeuvres. First, then Israel’s Defence Minister Benny Gantz visited Azerbaijan where he signed several military and security agreements.²⁸ Then, Iran held military exercises, named “Mighty Iran”, along the border with Azerbaijan. In reaction, Azerbaijani President Aliyev stated “those who conduct military exercises in support of Armenia on our border” should know that “if necessary, we will show it again, we will achieve what we want... Nobody can scare us”.²⁹

Azerbaijan-Iran relations were strained further in January 2023, when an armed attack carried out on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran killed one security officer and injured two others. The Azerbaijani government called the attack a “terrorist” activity and blamed Iranian authorities for not providing

24 Vali Kaleji, Tensions Deescalate Between Iran and Republic of Azerbaijan,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2/2/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mrnnypxu>.

25 Joshua Kucera, “Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Iran Reach Gas Trade Deal,” *Eurasianet*, 19/11/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3xmjn3pn>.

26 Vali Kaleji, “Strategic Rail Connectivity: Time to Reconnect Iran and the South Caucasus,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (2022), p. 114.

27 Heydar Isayev, “Azerbaijan, Iran Sign Transport Deal Bypassing Armenia,” *Eurasianet*, 18/3/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3paurnsn>. Hikmat Hajiyev, the senior foreign policy advisor to President Aliyev, said that the new route through Iran “will put an end to Armenia’s years-long policy of blockade of Nakhchivan”.

28 Anna Borshchevskaya and Andrew J. Tabler, “Iran’s Tensions with Azerbaijan Point to Broader Shifts in the South Caucasus,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 31/3/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdec2v6n>.

29 “Azerbaijani President Warns Iran: No One Can Scare Us!,” *Caliber.Az*, 8/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3j6ua26z>.

security for the diplomatic mission and failing to investigate the attack properly. In further protest, Azerbaijan later evacuated the entire staff from the embassy.³⁰

Azerbaijan's inauguration of its embassy in Israel on 29 March 2023 drew the ire of Tehran. What was particularly irritating for Tehran was Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's remarks at the inauguration ceremony, where he talked about the shared perceptions of Iranian threats. Moreover, Cohen stated that he agreed with visiting Jeyhun Bayramov, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, on forming "a united front against Iran".³¹ Iranian officials viewed those remarks as a display of anti-Iranian orientation of Azerbaijan-Israel cooperation and declared that Iran "will not be indifferent to that united front".³² Nasser Kanaani, Foreign Ministry spokesman, said Cohen's remarks showed Israel's "sinister intentions" to turn the territory of Azerbaijan "into a national security threat" for Iran.³³

Against this backdrop, the Azerbaijan State Security Service increased its pressure over allegedly pro-Iranian elements inside Azerbaijan where it is claimed that Iranian operatives recruited and trained some Azerbaijani people to carry out operations. Ultimately, Azerbaijan declared four employees of the Iranian embassy in Baku *persona non grata*, in April 2023, due to their activities that were "incompatible with diplomatic status". In response, Tehran expelled four Azerbaijani diplomats.³⁴

It appears that Azerbaijan-Iran relations have worsened in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War. There are two fundamental dynamics beneath the verbal brawls and diplomatic row that ended with a strained relationship between Baku and Tehran: the shifting geopolitics of the Caucasus against the interests of Iran and the growing Iranian fear of the spectre of pan-Turkism.

Shifting Geopolitics of the South Caucasus

In the late 1980s, the ethnic and territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-populated autonomous region in Azerbaijan, escalated into a war between Azerbaijan and Armenia known as the First Karabakh War. By May 1994, when a truce was reached through Russian mediation, the Armenian forces occupied nearly ten percent of Azerbaijani territories, including the former Nagorno-Karabakh oblast, where they established the so-called Republic of Artsakh. Since then, Iran has relied on Russia to uphold the status quo achieved by the 1994 ceasefire and has benefited from the stalemate between the belligerent neighbours. However, the recent shift in favour of Azerbaijan following the renewed conflict has raised concerns in Iran. Iranian critics have argued that the preoccupation of Iran with issues in the Middle East, including the nuclear controversy, have led Tehran to underestimate regional developments in the Caucasus, preventing its capacity and capability to understand

30 Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Azerbaijan Evacuates Embassy in Iran after Armed Attack," *AA*, 30/1/2023, <https://tinyurl.com/38ka6v9s>.

31 Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Iran Says 'Won't be Indifferent' to Israel's 'United Front' with Azerbaijan," *AA*, 31/3/2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3tacxawp>.

32 "Iran Lashes Out as Azerbaijan Opens Embassy in Israel," *Al-Monitor*, 31/3/2023, <https://tinyurl.com/yc42a7ux>.

33 Mehdi, "Iran Says 'Won't be Indifferent' to Israel's 'United Front' with Azerbaijan".

34 "Iran Expels Four Azerbaijani Diplomats," *VOA*, 5/5/2023, <https://tinyurl.com/yc4yrwff>.



recent developments in the region.³⁵ Iranian analyst, Mohammad Akhbari, called it “strategic negligence” (*ghaflat-e esteraejik*).³⁶ Consequently, the Islamic Republic did not play an active role in recent developments in the South Caucasus, becoming a passive and reactive player. Moreover, the implications of the Second Karabakh War have posed new geopolitical challenges for Iran.

Despite its claims of playing a historical role and having cultural influence over the South Caucasus, Iran’s regional position has been relegated to a secondary role. This is a consequence of Iran’s failed attempts at mediation between the warring parties and its absence from the Moscow declaration that ended armed clashes. Although Türkiye does not border the Karabakh region, it became an observer to the implementation of the truce, while Iran, with its virtually 800-kilometer length border with the conflicting parties, was left out of and played no role.³⁷ It explored the idea of the 3+3 platform, arguably for providing stability and security in the region to reclaim its regional role, but failed.

What also contributed to the relegation of Iran’s regional status was the defeat of Armenia. Unlike Türkiye which cut its relations with Armenia after armed conflict broke out over Nagorno Karabakh, Iran claimed to have a neutral position in the conflict and a balanced approach towards the belligerents,³⁸ allowing it to maintain close ties with Armenia. Moreover, the Iran-Armenia border remained a lifeline for the latter.³⁹ Tehran enjoyed cooperation with Yerevan, especially on energy, transport, and cultural spheres. The leading venture was the Iran–Armenia gas pipeline, which started operation in March 2007. According to the swap deal between the two countries, Iran exported gas to Armenia in return for importing electricity. To further bolster bilateral trade and economic relations, Armenia opened the Megri free economic zone near the Iranian border.⁴⁰ In 2016, the two countries also abolished the visa requirement for Iranian and Armenian citizens.

With the occupation of the Azerbaijani regions of Zangilan, Jabrayil, and Fuzuli during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1991–1994), Armenian forces controlled almost 135-kilometer of the Iran-Azerbaijan border. Thus, Iran “bordered on a gray zone” controlled by the Armenian forces but still regarded as a part of Azerbaijan.⁴¹ Although Iran did not officially recognize the Armenian occupation, it benefited from Armenian control of the area by developing cooperative mechanisms like the construction of hydropower plants that provided water and electricity to Iran’s border regions and building bridges over the Aras River. Iran also reportedly engaged in trade with the Armenian-ruled

35 “Bohran dar Ghafghaz va Amniyate Melliye Iran: Parvandeye dar Babe Masaleye Gharabagh (The Crisis in the Caucasus and Iran’s National Security, A Case about the Karabakh Issue),” *CMESS*, 13/2/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/mr36hts3>.

36 Mohammad Akhbari, “Payamade Geopolitike Bohrane Gharabagh bar Monasebate Jomhuriye Eslami dar Ghafghaz (The Geopolitical Consequences of the Karabakh Crisis on the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Relations in the Caucasus),” *Faslnameye Aamayesh Siyasiye Faza*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (2021), p. 27.

37 Akhbari, “Payamade Geopolitike Bohrane Gharabagh (The Geopolitical Consequences of the Karabakh Crisis).”

38 Has, Kaleji, and Markedonov, “The Breakdown of the Status Quo,” p. 12.

39 Mehdi Abbaszadeh Fathabadi, Hossein Moeinabadi Bidgoli, and Mahdiye Doosthosseini, “Tahlile Sazeangaraneye Charkhesh dar Siyasate Kharejiye Iran dar Barabare Bohrane Gharabagh (2020) (Constructivist Analysis of the Turn in Iran’s Foreign Policy Towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis (2020))” *Motale’ate Asyaye Markazi*, Vol. 14, No. 2, (2021), p. 235.

40 Benjamin Poghosyan, “Armenia – Iran Relations and their Perspectives after the 2020 Karabakh War,” *New Geopolitics*, 25/5/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3st9x9au>.

41 Kaleji, “The 2020 Karabakh War’s Impact on the Northwestern Border of Iran.”



Karabakh that assumed the name of Nagorno Karabakh Republic (NKR), or Artsakh, which viewed “Iran as a natural ally”.⁴²

Besides its close ties with Armenia, Iran was believed to prefer the preservation of the status quo and the *de facto* autonomous status of Karabakh that served Tehran’s regional interests.⁴³ The protracted conflict made Baku busy with the occupation and effectively weak enough that it could not pose a severe challenge to Iran. The continuation of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict ended with the virtual isolation of the latter, forcing Armenia to rely on Iran for economic and trade purposes,⁴⁴ consequently making Iran-Armenia relations stable and friendly.

After the recent war, however, Armenia was weakened and forced to accept the Azerbaijani terms of ceasefire. Additionally, with the liberation of Zangilan, Jabrayil, and Fuzuli regions, Azerbaijan restored its sovereignty over the northern part of the Azerbaijan – Iran border. Thus, Iran lost its direct access to Karabakh, ending its “illegal” trade with the region and reducing the length of the Armenia-Iran border to 44 kilometres. The restoration of Azerbaijani authority over Iran’s northern borders has posed additional and novel challenges for Tehran. First of those novel challenges for Iran was the growing potential of Israeli intelligence and security presence, which had turned into a strategic partner of Azerbaijan.⁴⁵ The growing Azerbaijan-Israel relations have been regarded by Iranian officials as a serious threat to the security of Iran. Because of the rising Israeli influence in Azerbaijani policies, Iran speculated that it could culminate in the Israeli use of Azerbaijan soil to spy on or conduct intelligence and military operations against Iran.⁴⁶ Iranian officials have also been especially concerned with the potential of Israeli support for pan-Turkist currents. Kioumars Heydari, the commander of the Iranian Army’s Ground Force reportedly said, “since the arrival of this regime, our sensitivity to this border has increased”.⁴⁷

The second challenge for Iran following Azerbaijan’s restoration of sovereignty across the border was the emboldening of anti-Tehran sentiment in Azerbaijan. Additionally, Azerbaijani victory could invigorate ethnonational tendencies among the Turkic and Azerbaijani speaking people of Iran. Iranian media blamed Azerbaijan for instigating anti-Iran activities and the claiming of territories in Iran’s northwestern provinces, which created a serious threat to Iran’s national security and territorial integrity.⁴⁸

42 “The Republic of Artsakh Sees Iran as a Natural Ally,” *Aravot*, 18/10/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/48cfda7u>. Iranian trucks are used to carry fuel and goods between Armenia and the Karabakh. Additionally, some reports claim that some Iranian banks and companies used the region as a hub for money laundering. Azerbaijani officials also claimed that the 130-kilometer section of the state border between Azerbaijan and Iran – which was under Armenian control for about 30 years – was a drug trafficking route from Iran to Europe through Armenia. “Drug Trade Between Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with Armenia,” *Azvision*, 2/11/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bcxvbmkc>.

43 Clément Therme, “Iranian Foreign Policy towards the South Caucasus: Between Revolutionary Ideals and Realpolitik,” *Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus*, ed. Annie Jafalian (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

44 Kavus Abushev, “The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict as a Part of the ‘New’ Eurasian Geopolitics,” *AÜ SBFD*, Vol. 60, No. 3, (2005), p. 22.

45 Kaleji, “The 2020 Karabakh War’s Impact on the Northwestern Border of Iran”.

46 Alex Vatanka, “Azerbaijan and Israel’s encirclement of Iran,” *Middle East Institute*, 5/10/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5ax28ppz>.

47 Esfandiari, “What’s Behind Fresh Tensions on The Iran-Azerbaijan Border?”.

48 Khoshnood and Khoshnood, “Iran’s Quandary on Nagorno-Karabakh”.



The prospective Zangezur corridor would be yet another blow to Iran's standing in the South Caucasus. As mentioned previously, the Moscow declaration envisaged unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo between Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhchivan through Armenian soils. Although exact details of "transport connections" envisaged in the declaration have not been clarified yet, Azerbaijan viewed the corridor as connecting it not only to Nakhchivan but also to Türkiye, which has a 13-kilometer border with the country. Thus, the building of the Zangezur corridor would result in Iran's loss of transit fees attained through Azerbaijan-bound Turkish transport trucks. What has been more alarming for Tehran, however, is the prospect of the Zangezur connection transforming into a "Turan corridor,"⁴⁹ as many in Türkiye regard it as the opening of a "strategic gateway to the Turkic states of Central Asia".⁵⁰ Another implication of the prospective Zangezur corridor for Iran would be its loss of leverage against Azerbaijan. Currently having no land access to Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan used to utilize Iranian territories for transportation, which provided Tehran leverage against Baku. Having lost important leverage against Azerbaijan, arguably Iran would become more vulnerable to threats of pan-Turkism. Furthermore, the ambiguity surrounding the "transport connections" and the Armenian resistance to it might trigger Azerbaijan's use of force and takeover of a strip in the southern part of Armenia, which would effectively sever Iran's border with Armenia. The worst scenario for Tehran is to have Azerbaijan as the single neighbour in its northwest, which may risk Iran's access to the Black Sea ports, and then to Europe.⁵¹

The 44-Day War proved Azerbaijan's military superiority which has been supported by its growing economic capacity largely due to energy exports. Azerbaijan's military power has been built through military procurements and defence cooperation with Israel and Türkiye. Both states have converted their military support for Baku into strategic partnerships accompanied by growing economic cooperation. Türkiye has been a longtime rival of Iran, competing for influence in the South Caucasus. After the Karabakh War, Türkiye strengthened its defence cooperation with Azerbaijan and held joint military drills. The deployment of Turkish soldiers in Azerbaijan as part of a Russian-Turkish joint military mission to observe the ceasefire was applauded by Turkish media as "the return of Turkish soldiers to Azerbaijan after 102 years".⁵² Additionally, Turkish companies are actively involved in infrastructure projects and the reconstruction of liberated territories. Although Iran also eyed an opportunity to take part in the reconstruction of war-torn Azerbaijan lands and declared its readiness to assist in the reconstruction on every occasion, it could not attain such a role. As Israel is regarded as the avowed enemy of the Islamic Republic in Iran, Tehran has become increasingly anxious about Azerbaijani military purchases from Israel, including unmanned aerial systems that dubiously

49 "Nofouze Nato Hadafe Dargiriye Mantaqe ast (NATO's Influence is the Goal of Regional Conflicts)," *Alef*, 23/9/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/5xh3dyd4>; Salar Seifoddini, "En Rah ke To Miravi be Torkestan ast! (This is the Way to Turkestan)" *Shargh Daily*, 29/8/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhsenz>.

50 Fehim Tastekin, "How Realistic are Türkiye's Ambitions Over Strategic Corridor with Azerbaijan," *Al-Monitor*, 4/12/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yc6aft3j>.

51 "Bolandparvazi dar Baku (Baku's Ambitions)," *Shargh Daily*, 29/8/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/39y9tfs5>; Yeghia Tashjian, "Why is Baku Waging a 'War of Words' Against Tehran?," *The Armenian Weekly*, 17/9/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4p7tx9vz>.

52 Okan Yesilot, "Türk askeri 102 yıl sonra yeniden Azerbaycan'da (Turkish Soldiers are back in Azerbaijan after 102 years)," *AA*, 19/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yyv6zpt5>.

could allow Israel to spy on targets inside Iran.⁵³ The Azerbaijani restoration of its sovereignty over previously occupied territories has worsened Iranian worry about the potential of Israeli intelligence and security presence in the northern part of its border with Azerbaijan. Recently, Israeli Foreign Minister's talk about a "united front" against Iran has only further aggravated the latter's concerns.⁵⁴

Regional developments in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War not only weakened Iran's position in the South Caucasus but also posed additional challenges for Tehran. The geopolitical setbacks that Iran has experienced in due process have stoked its concerns about the rise of pan-Turkism, derived from rising Azerbaijani and Turkish influence in the South Caucasus. Why then is Iran concerned about Azerbaijan, and the threat of pan-Turkism?

Rise of the "Specter" of Pan-Turkism

Since the emergence of Azerbaijan as an independent state, first in 1918, and then with the restoration of independence in 1991, Azerbaijani leaders have strived to develop a new identity for their people distinctive from Iranian identity. Azerbaijani identity has been built upon their Turkic language, making them closer to Turkish nationalism. Since Azerbaijani identity positioned itself contra to the Iranian identity, it has strained Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Complicating the picture further is the presence of a large number of Turkic and Azerbaijani speakers – estimated to be around 25 million people – in the historic Azerbaijan province of Iran, in the northwest of the country, which is currently divided into four different provinces. Iranian and Azerbaijani nationalisms have been in competition with each other over cultural influence and the overall identity of Turkic-speaking people in northwestern Iran. Iranian officials and nationalists cultivated "Azeri" identity for them in opposition to the Azerbaijani and Turkish one, and blamed their rivals for pursuing pan-Turkist and Pan-Azerbaijani policies that envisaged the unification of the "Southern Azerbaijan" with its sister to the north of Aras.⁵⁵ Thus, since the formation of an independent Azerbaijani state, Iran has faced the specter of pan-Turkism amalgamated with Pan-Azerbaijanism.

According to the Iranian assessments, there have been several waves of pan-Turkism throughout history.⁵⁶ The first wave unfolded in the early twentieth century when it was promoted by Ottoman Turkists, which ended with the establishment of the Azerbaijan state under the leadership of Mahammad Amin Rasulzade in the South Caucasus. While the Soviet domination over the Caucasus soon ceased the pan-Turkist threat to Iran, the second wave of pan-Turkism was then promoted by the USSR during their occupation of the north of Iran in WWII and ended with the short-term

53 Kaleji, "The 2020 Karabakh War's Impact on the Northwestern Border of Iran".

54 Vali Kaleji, "The Israel Factor as a 'Third Party' in Growing Tensions Between Iran and Azerbaijan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 8/5/2023, <https://tinyurl.com/24kc2nz8>.

55 Hamid Ahmadi, "The Clash of Nationalisms: Iranian Response to Baku's Irredentism," in *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey, and South Caucasus*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 105 - 140.

56 Kaveh Farrokh, "Pan-Turanism Takes Aim at Azerbaijan; A Geopolitical Agenda," *CAIS*, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/2ajx63hk>.



autonomous Azerbaijan National Government. However, Soviet interests in supporting Azerbaijani nationalism ended under post-war settlements, and Iran restored its sovereignty over the historic Azerbaijan. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iranian fears of pan-Turkism grew with the presidency of Elchibey in the Azerbaijan Republic. After the overthrow of Elchibey by a coup d'état, the Azerbaijan Republic under Heydar Aliyev adopted compromising policies in relation to Iran. Yet, the unfolding of events following the Second Karabakh War, which ended with the Azerbaijani liberation of its territories that had been under Armenian occupation for over thirty years, have revived the threat of pan-Turkism.

This new wave of pan-Turkism for Iran revolved around two different phenomena. First was the growing Azerbaijani ethnonationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis. Iranian Azerbaijanis, who make up a quarter to one-third of the Iranian population are concentrated in the country's northwest and have remained one of the most important factors shaping Iran's policies towards the South Caucasus.⁵⁷ Ethnonationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis, labelled as pan-Turkism, is mainly built on distinctive language and originated in the 1920s in reaction to the suppression of their language under the rule of Reza Shah. It was crystallized after the deposition of Reza Shah by the Allied occupation of Iran in 1941 and the Soviet domination in the north of Iran. Nevertheless, after the demolition of the Azerbaijan National Government under the leadership of Jafar Pishevari, ethnonationalist currents among Iranian Azerbaijanis were considerably marginalized. Ethnonationalist demands among Iranian Azerbaijanis were aroused again in the 1990s, first among university students, and then among the wider public, as illustrated by the tens of thousands of people who attended the commemoration of Babak Khorramdin that turned into an icon of Azerbaijani ethnonationalism. In addition, Iranian Azerbaijani politicians addressed ethnonationalist demands in their election campaigns and political activities.⁵⁸ Iran's domestic concerns about Turkish and Azerbaijani nationalism have grown with the rise of pan-Turkist fans of Tractorsazi, a popular soccer club in Tabriz, as well as occasional but widespread public protests of perceived discrimination and insults against Azerbaijani language and people. Moreover, Iranian Azerbaijani ethnonationalists have mobilized several political movements that either were organized in exile or operated underground. The restoration of Baku's control over the border with Iran has provided additional opportunities for direct interactions among the Azerbaijanis living on both sides of the Aras.⁵⁹ Fuelling Iranian worry about its Azerbaijani population, some news outlets that are allegedly connected to the Azerbaijani government started to publish articles arguing for the secession of "South Azerbaijan" from Iran.⁶⁰

The second phenomenon that aggravated the Iranian perception of the pan-Turkism threat is the rising power of the Azerbaijan-Türkiye axis in the South Caucasus. For a long time, Iranians have viewed growing relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan through the prism of pan-Turkism. Hamid Ahmadi claimed that through its presence in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Türkiye has been

57 Abushev, "The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict as a Part of the 'New' Eurasian Geopolitics".

58 Ghadir Golkarian, "The Prospect of Ethnic Nationalism in Iranian Azerbaijan," *International Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (2017), pp. 14 - 22.

59 Brenda Shaffer, "The Armenia-Azerbaijan War: Downgrading Iran's Regional Role," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 25/11/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/bcbu4nmd>.

60 "The Time has Come: South Azerbaijan Must Secede from Iran," *Caliber.az*, 26/8/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2pZR9vdk>.

able to create a “pan-Turkish highway” to access the South Caucasus and Central Asia.⁶¹ According to Mohsen Pak-Ayin, former Iranian ambassador to Baku (2012-2016), “Azeri nationalism and pan-Turkism came together” based on common language and ancestral identity.⁶² To achieve its political, economic, and security goals, in view of Iranian assessments, Türkiye has strived to strengthen pan-Turkism against the Shiite identity among Azerbaijanis.⁶³ Iranian nationalists have been obsessed with Türkiye’s alleged pan-Turkist agenda that addresses the Turkic speaking people stretching from the Balkans, across the Azerbaijani people of Iran, and to the Eastern Turkistan in China.⁶⁴ Hence, Türkiye’s active support extended to Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War was regarded by Tehran as “adding fuel to the fire.”⁶⁵ Consequently, the rising Turkish-Azerbaijani influence after the war, particularly the prospective Zangezur corridor, heightened Iranian concerns about pan-Turkism. If Türkiye were to enter Azerbaijan through Nakhchivan, one analyst speculated that the north of Aras would turn into a Turkish Gate (Turanism Gate) for access to the Caspian Sea basin, which would create “a strategic and geopolitical disaster for Iran”.⁶⁶

Against this backdrop, a number of events have contributed to Iran’s perceived rise of pan-Turkism in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War. First is the mobilization of Iranian Azerbaijanis in many cities, during the Karabakh war, to stage rallies in solidarity with their Azerbaijani brethren in the north of Aras, and to protest alleged weapon transfers to Armenia through Iranian territories.⁶⁷ Another development that alarmed Iran was Turkish President Erdogan’s recitation of some verses on the Aras River at the military victory parade held in Baku on 10 December 2020. The verses that agitated Tehran said: “They separated the Aras River and filled it with rocks and rods. I will not be separated from you. They have separated us forcibly”.⁶⁸ According to most Iranians, the poem recited by Erdogan in Baku was a separatist symbol of pan-Turkism.⁶⁹ It implied that the Azerbaijani-populated Iranian provinces were part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which was regarded as a “meddlesome and unacceptable” questioning of the territorial integrity of Iran.⁷⁰ Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zarif, tweeted saying that Erdogan was mistaken because it was Azerbaijan that forcibly separated from Iran.⁷¹

61 “Bohran dar Ghafghaz va Amniyate Melliye Iran (The Crisis in the Caucasus and Iran’s National Security)”.

62 Mohsen Pakayeen, “Torkeye be Donbale Bordane Jomhuriye Azerbaijan zire Chatre Pantorkism (Türkiye Aims to Bring the Republic of Azerbaijan under the Umbrella of Pan-Turkism),” *ANA Press*, 17/1/2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ynt5k2n6>.

63 Sadegh Maliki, “Iran ve Taleye Pantorkism va Iranshahri (Iran, Pan-Turkism, and Iranshahri)” *Diplomase-ye Irani*, 12/10/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/cv2ehkf4>.

64 Alex Vatanka, “Iran, Türkiye, and the future of the South Caucasus,” Middle East Institute, 4/5/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4v3cydrk>.

65 “Iran Criticizes Türkiye’s Role in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *Al-Monitor*, 6/10/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2v6szhpn>.

66 Akhbari, “The Geopolitical Consequences of the Karabakh Crisis,” p. 25.

67 Gasimov, “Active but Inefficient?,” p. 212.

68 Mohammad Mazhari, “Her Sözü bir yeri var (Every Remark should be Pertinent),” *Tehran Times*, 13/12/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/b8p9ehcw>.

69 Mazhari, “Her Sözü bir yeri var (Every Remark Should Be Pertinent)”.

70 Ibid.

71 “Iran Summons Turkish Ambassador over Erdogan’s Poem on Territorial Integrity,” *Tehran Times*, 11/12/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/knhd7db5>.



In the same vein, the government of Azerbaijan decided to change its official “Independence Day” from 18 October 1991 to 28 May 1918, the date the Azerbaijan Republic was founded. This is perceived by Iranian nationalists as President Aliyev’s adoption of the legacy of Mohammad Amin Rasulzadeh, a forerunner of Azerbaijani nationalism embedded with pan-Turkism.⁷²

Finally, President Aliyev’s two successive speeches in November 2022 were alarming for Tehran and further aroused its concerns about pan-Turkism. Addressing the Ninth Summit meeting of the Organization of Turkic States held on November 2022 in Samarkand, Aliyev said:

The Turkic world does not consist of independent Turkic states only, its geographical boundaries are broader... The young generation of the Turkic world should have the opportunity to study in their mother tongue in the countries of their residence. Unfortunately, the majority of the 40 million Azerbaijanis living outside Azerbaijan are deprived of these opportunities.⁷³

Later on, addressing an international conference in Baku, on 25 November 2022, Aliyev expressed his displeasure with the current situation of Azerbaijan-Iran relations and complained about Iran’s frequent military manoeuvres close to the joint border. He also hinted at a complaint about Iran’s propagation of Shiite Islamism among the Azerbaijani people. Having counted his complaints against Tehran, Aliyev said: “We will do our best to protect the secular lifestyle of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis around the world, including Azerbaijanis in Iran. They are part of our people.”⁷⁴ Thus, for the first time since Elchibey’s short-term rule, a top Azerbaijani official claimed to “protect” Iranian Azerbaijanis based on common identity. Aliyev’s address of Iranian Azerbaijanis as compatriots, and his calls to protect their language rights was regarded by Iran as an interference in domestic affairs. Moreover, it was viewed as Azerbaijani leadership’s resolve to “undermine relations with Iran.”⁷⁵ Summoning the Azerbaijani ambassador, the Iranian Foreign Ministry protested and conveyed its dissatisfaction with the unfriendly remarks of Azerbaijan’s top officials.⁷⁶

Conclusion

It has turned into a cliché in Iranian foreign policy discourse to blame the United States and Israel for creating challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran and its neighbours. When considering the shifting geopolitics that culminated in dramatic setbacks for Tehran in addition to the rising spectre of pan-Turkism, many Iranian analysts viewed the Second Karabakh War and its aftermath as part of

⁷² Salar Seifoddini, “Tahlili bar Taghyire ‘Roze Esteqlal’ dar Hamsayeye Shomali (An analysis On the Change of ‘Independence Day’ in the Northern Neighbor,” *Shargh Daily*, 19/10/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mrdjzfh>.

⁷³ “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 9th Summit of Organization of Turkic States,” *The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 11/11/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/r5upmch8>.

⁷⁴ Tolga Özgenç, “Azerbaijan to Protect all Azerbaijanis, Including Those in Iran: President,” *AA*, 25/11/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bddsujnm>.

⁷⁵ Mehran Shamsuddin, “Mr. Aliyev this is Simorgh Arena,” *Tehran Times*, 13/11/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yc6hxyv>.

⁷⁶ “Iranian Lawmakers Warn Azerbaijan President Over ‘Compatriots’ Comment,” *Tehran Times*, 14/11/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/23abuads>.

“a regional plot” against Iran.⁷⁷ Accordingly, over the last couple of years, a new alliance has formed among the United States, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Israel that aimed at bringing about geopolitical change with strategic ramifications against Iran. The role of Türkiye and Azerbaijan in this scheme has been expanding the American influence to the backyards of Russia and Iran, and sowing the seeds of ethnic sedition.⁷⁸ Iranian officials even considered Turkish-Azerbaijani understanding as a means to utilize the so-called pan-Turkist agenda, which was engineered and fully supported by both Israel and the United States.⁷⁹ For instance, Ahmad Dastmalchian, a former diplomat stated: “What Azerbaijan is doing together with Türkiye and Israel is an Israeli project” that aimed at creating a domino effect by inciting ethnic minorities in the region, fomenting unrest, weakening state structures, and provoking a war between Azerbaijan and Iran.⁸⁰ Therefore, pointing out foreign fingers behind the rise of pan-Turkism both in the region and inside Iran, they aimed to contain and marginalize ethnonationalist currents among the Iranian Azerbaijanis.

Iran has employed an array of diplomatic and military instruments aimed at rectifying its marginalization from the South Caucasus politics and balancing Azerbaijan and the perceived threats arising from new geopolitics of the South Caucasus, including pan-Turkism. First, Iranian officials ostensibly supported Azerbaijan’s call for the evacuation of Armenian forces from the occupied regions. It was not a full-fledged support, however, and came with some reservations. For instance, while recalling the Armenian evacuation from the occupied seven regions of Azerbaijan, Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Khamenei, underlined that “such a process should take place politically, not militarily”.⁸¹ Furthermore, he criticized Türkiye’s active support for Azerbaijan as an instance of adding fuel to the fire.⁸² Secondly, Iran strived to capitalize on the proposal of 3+3 (three countries of the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and three neighbouring countries of the Caucasus (Russia, Türkiye, and Iran) to provide stability and security in the region and its northern borders. Türkiye also suggested a similar platform for regional countries. Till now representatives of the respected parties, except for Georgia, held two meetings, which didn’t produce a considerable outcome. Likewise, in an attempt to defuse tension with Baku, Iran intended to revive the trilateral forum between Iran, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye, which, in the previous decade, held the sixth round of trilateral foreign affairs meetings of the respective states. Repeated Iranian bids for hosting the trilateral meetings of foreign ministers have not yielded an effective result.⁸³

On the other hand, Iran made a show of force through military reinforcements to the Azerbaijan-Iran border and exercised a number of massive military manoeuvres, which was unprecedented in the

77 “Iran’s Defeat in The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War – Part II: Iranian Threats Against Azerbaijan, Türkiye, And Israel,” *MEMRI*, 19/11/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4kwjws8k>; “Nofouze Nato Hadafe Dargiriye Mantaqe ast (NATO’s Influence is the Goal of Regional Conflicts)”.

78 “Iran’s Defeat in The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”.

79 Vatanka, “Iran, Türkiye, and the future of the South Caucasus”.

80 A. Savyon, “Iran’s Defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War – Part I: Geopolitical and Economic Ramifications,” *MEMRI*, 25/10/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5hdct5zb>.

81 “Leader’s Adviser: Armenia should Leave Occupied Azeri Lands,” *Tasnim News Agency*, 6/10/2020, <https://tinyurl.com/9fx35skn>.

82 Mamedov, “Iran’s Delicate Balancing Act in the South Caucasus”.

83 “Tehran to Host Trilateral Meeting Among Iran, Azerbaijan, Türkiye,” *IRNA*, 4/7/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2z2u69>.



last three decades of Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani regions bordered with Iran.⁸⁴ By flexing its military muscles, Iran declared two red lines not to be violated in areas close to its northern borders. The first is the firm Iranian objection against any attempt to change international political borders. IRGC Ground Force Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour declared: “We will not accept change in the geopolitics of borders. This issue is the red line of the Islamic Republic of Iran”.⁸⁵ The second red line of Iran was the prevention of any Israeli military presence in the region. Through the show of force, Iran wished to deter Azerbaijan from permitting Israel to have a military and intelligence presence close to the joint border. For the Iranian elite, the holding of controversial military drills, as stated by Ayatollah Hassan Ameli, Friday prayer leader of Ardebil, was a message to an array of players including Azerbaijan, Israel, and Türkiye “not to play with the lion’s tail”.⁸⁶ Likewise, former diplomat Ahmad Dastmalchian stated that through the massive military drills, “Iran has sent a good message to the neighbouring countries, i.e. that it does not accept any geopolitical change of borders”.⁸⁷

Iran has also displayed solidarity with Armenia and has engaged in strengthening its ties with Yerevan. Having revived the transportation projects between the two countries, Iran inaugurated a consulate in Kapan, in the Siyunik province (Zengezur). Although Iran has not been involved in military support for Armenia, it has turned into a self-proclaimed protector of the territorial integrity and borders of that country. In his visit to Yerevan, after visiting Baku and Moscow, Foreign Minister Zarif said, “our red line is the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia.”⁸⁸ In the same vein, Brigadier General Kiumars Heidari, Commander of the Iranian Army’s Ground Forces, stated that “possible weakness in one country to protect its borders gives no reason to other countries to change the borders. The Islamic Republic will not allow that.”⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Vali Kaleji, “Iran’s Perceptions and Concerns of Border Tensions Between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, 18/1/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/7upscxzx>; Vali Kaleji, “Iran Increasingly Uneasy About Threats to Common Border With Armenia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14/10/2022, <https://tinyurl.com/f9dy6jbe>.

⁸⁵ “Vague peace in Nagorno-Karabakh”.

⁸⁶ Esfandiari, “What’s Behind Fresh Tensions On The Iran-Azerbaijan Border?”; Yeghia Tashjian, “Is Iran making a Comeback to the South Caucasus?,” *The Armenian Weekly*, 20/10/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4mtpdkh6>.

⁸⁷ Savyon, “Iran’s Defeat in The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”.

⁸⁸ “Iran Strongly Supports Armenia’s Territorial Integrity,” *Asbarez*, 27/1/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/24x4mxwj>.

⁸⁹ “Army Commander Says Iran Will Not Tolerate Any Change at its Northern Borders,” *Panoram*, 2/10/2021, <https://tinyurl.com/228mb72r>.