
**THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AND IRAN'S
REGIONAL POLICY¹**Anna Gevorgyan²

DOI: 1673/18294502-22.14-730.56

For Iran, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its peaceful settlement were and remain closely related to national security interests. The basis of Iran's national security is anchored in the protection of all the layers of Iranian identity. Taking into consideration that this identity consists of Iranian, Islamic, Shiite and Revolutionary elements, we can argue that the attempt to impose a military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and, particularly, the direct involvement of Turkey and foreign mercenaries in the conflict, has been and still remains a threat to all components of Iran's security.

The status quo of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has effectively hindered the implementation of the Azerbaijan-Northern Iran-Turkey pan-Turkic program. Moreover, the neutralization of this obstacle has been one of the important components of the security of Iran's identity. Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey, is consistently trying to advance the idea of "one nation, two states", presenting the northern provinces of Iran as "Southern Azerbaijan" and talking about the need to unite them with the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the context of this ideology and the struggle of the Pan-Iranian ideology against it, preventing the expansion of Azerbaijani forces toward the east and southeast was within Iran's immediate interests. It is not surprising that in the aftermath of the 44-Day War in Karabakh, Iran has implemented several military drills across the Iran-Azerbaijan borders. The latest one is the largest and it has been accompanied by several anti-Azerbaijani statements from Iranian officials.

In addition, Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia is a red line for Iran and the North-South Corridor is of vital importance for Tehran.

¹ The work was supported by the Science Committee of RA, in the frames of the research project № 21T-5F251

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From the perspective of Iran's Islamic identity, the current Azerbaijani state, with its secular approaches and pro-American, pro-Israeli policies, is considered a threat in the context of regional countries which are founded on Islamic values. Many Iranian experts and state officials believe that the Israeli technologies and human resources which have been used by Azerbaijan can also be used against Iran.

From the perspective of Shiite identity, although Azerbaijan is a country with a Shiite majority population, the facts surrounding repressions in cities with a significant religious population make Azerbaijan an enemy of Shiite identity. The policy adopted by Azerbaijan around religious organizations inspires Iran to raise legitimate questions about the sincerity of Azerbaijan's Shiite identity. During and after last year's war, the transfer of Sunni mercenaries to Azerbaijan has also had a major impact on the security of Northern Iran. It is crucial to remember that Iran has made it a national security priority to fight against Sunni extremist groups in Syria, Iraq, Libya and other parts of the region, asserting that if they are not eliminated outside of Iran's borders, they will end up in the country proper. During the war, Iran's officials repeatedly stressed the importance of the withdrawal of those mercenaries from the region. The presence of the mercenaries in the region was condemned not only by the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran and by the Majles but also in a statement made by Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on 3 November 2020.

From the perspective of Iran's revolutionary identity, the existence of Azerbaijan's clan-based state authorities and the reliance of Azerbaijani politics on foreign economic and political actors in a polarized society make Azerbaijan an obstacle for the dissemination of Iran's revolutionary values.

Thus, we can state that while Iran's response to the escalation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was neutral and balanced, as it has been traditionally, Iran still has strong concerns about Azerbaijan's behavior and desire for a military solution, Turkey's involvement and the arrival of mercenaries in the region. Furthermore, Tehran's statements about the sovereign territories of Armenia being its red line, especially when it comes to the southern Syunik region after the trilateral agreement of 9 November, make Iran's security in the northern regions very vulnerable. This is the

reason why Iran has been proactive with regards to its statements about regional stability and peace while also initiating a series of visits to both Azerbaijan and Armenia to boost all the possible regional projects, especially concerning the North-South Corridor.

Iran's official response regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has stood out traditionally as being neutral, balanced and level-headed. Iran is the only country which borders Armenia, Artsakh and Azerbaijan. Armed clashes in the conflict zone could destabilize the situation near Iran's northern provinces. During the 44-Day War, as well as during the Four Day War in April 2016, missiles fell on the territory of Iran and a six-year-old child was wounded in one of the villages. In addition, an Azerbaijani military helicopter was shot down onto the territory of Iran. Causing further concerns for Iran is Azerbaijan's use of Israeli-produced UAVs in its border regions. Finally, every escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict creates a new opportunity for those interested in the spread of Pan-Turkic and anti-Iranian sentiment among the Turkish-speaking population (sometimes declared as Southern Azerbaijanis) of the northern provinces of Iran. A rally was organized by members of this group in Tabriz who demanded their government refrain from helping Armenia and allow them to go fight in Karabakh. The rally was dispersed and its organizers detained. It is noteworthy that the participants of the rally were chanting not only anti-Armenian but also anti-Iranian slogans.

On the second day of the armed clashes, the spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, called for a ceasefire and announced Iran's readiness to act as a mediator. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Tweeted that Iran is closely monitoring the developments, stating their neighbors are their priority and that they are ready to help resume the negotiations. This was followed by a phone call between Nikol Pashinyan and Hassan Rouhani during which the Iranians emphasized the necessity of resolving the conflict through peaceful means.

The Iranian press was paying special attention to the news about the presence of mercenaries at the Line of Contact. Meanwhile, Iranian analysts were saying that, regardless of the outcome of the clashes, the presence of mercenaries in the region would have a destabilizing effect and cause new

conflicts. The Iranian press reported that, according to Syrian sources, thirty Turkish militants formerly fighting in Syria were killed while another sixty had disappeared in Karabakh.

The spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also mentioned the presence of mercenaries, stating that Iran would not allow terrorists to be present near its northern borders.

In the multi-layered Iranian response, the leaders of the Friday prayers in the northern Iranian provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan and Ardabil stand out. They often pressed on the nationalist sentiments of some of the groups within the local population by making anti-Armenian statements, particularly conveying a religious dimension to the Karabakh conflict and emphasizing the necessity of helping Azerbaijan.

After 27 September, the representatives of the Iranian Foreign Ministry paid several visits to the countries of the region. First, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Baku, Moscow, Yerevan and Ankara to discuss Iran's long-term peace plan for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This was followed by Foreign Minister Zarif's visit, which aimed at continuing the discussions which had already begun, taking into account the new realities resulting from the trilateral statement signed on 10 November.

The full details of Iran's peace plan have not been released. But its basic tenets can be traced from the interviews and announcements of Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, his foreign policy adviser Ali Akbar Velayati, the former president Rouhani, former foreign minister Zarif and his deputy Araghchi. From the above-mentioned texts it can be assumed that the program was based on the principle of territorial integrity and the goals of protecting minority rights and excluding extra-regional forces.

Iran's initiative to come up with its own program for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could have been more of a symbolic gesture than a real peace plan. Taking into account Iran's previous failed attempts at mediation and the increased role of Russia and Turkey in the region, the following goals and potential impacts can be identified as main objectives of the initiative:

- By initiating a peace process, Iran was attempting to make an effort to improve its image within the international community and especially with the countries of the region. It was vital for Iran to project the image not of a provoker of conflict but rather of an advocate for peaceful solutions.

- Iran was truly interested in establishing a ceasefire between the conflict's parties as soon as possible. As Iran is the only country in the region bordering Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, the armed conflict also had a direct impact on its border security.

- The hostilities were especially dangerous for Iran given the presence of mercenaries. It should be noted that they were members of the same extremist Islamic groups against which the forces of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were fighting in Syria and other countries in the region. In the context of the discussions of the proposed program, the issue of removing mercenaries from the region was certainly an important part of negotiations.

- Each additional day of the war caused increased internal political problems for the authorities of Iran. Certain groups linked to Azerbaijan and Turkey were demanding the state officials of Iran abandon their neutrality and intervene in the conflict, closing the border with Armenia and supporting Azerbaijan.

Iran's attempt to mediate was also a response to these groups, as a mediating country cannot support any side of a conflict.

- Through crafting this initiative and holding discussions about it, Iran was trying to play a part of the regional developments.

The trilateral agreement of 1 November, however, changed the status quo and also created more security issues for Iran.

The trilateral statement between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, the creation of a Russian-Turkish military monitoring center and the point in the statement regarding the transportation corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan, serve to show the role of Russian-Turkish cooperation.

In the current situation, Iran is making efforts and will continue to hold discussions with the countries of the region so as to prevent itself from becoming isolated from any forthcoming developments and ensure the

continued protection of its interests. It has already been voiced in Iran that the issue of terrorists in the region has yet to be resolved.

At the same time, Iran has stressed the unacceptability of changing the political borders in the region, thus expressing concern over the details and consequences of Azerbaijan's demand to have a transport corridor passing through Armenia. The statement of the representative of the conservatives in the Iranian Parliament, MP Ahmad Bigash, was one of the strongest in this regard, demanding the government take more active steps towards preventing Azerbaijan from achieving these goals.

Zarif's regional visit in late January 2021 can also be viewed in the context of Iran trying to overcome its isolation from developments in the region. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh tagged this visit as the most important regional visit during the minister's tenure. Iran considers the South Caucasus as its cultural sphere of influence, an important part of its imperial past and a reminder of lost opportunities. It is important to acknowledge that the Treaties of Turkmenchay and Gulistan are important components of the Iranian political mythology and are topics as relevant and painful in the country's current political discourse as the discourse on the post-Soviet space is for Russia.

On the other hand, from the viewpoint of *realpolitik*, Iran is the only one of the three actors (the other two are Russia and Turkey) in the region that has political relations with all three recognized countries of the South Caucasus—unlike Russia, which has problems with Georgia, and Turkey, which has a closed border with Armenia. Thus, Iran considered itself the most legitimate and effective power for the settlement of issues in the region. Nonetheless, in the context of recent events, Iran is worried about being left out of the game. The dangers Iran sees are expressed in its following concerns:

- The fact of the “settlement” of the issue through joint Russian-Turkish forces belittles Iran's role as a regional power.
- The goal of unblocking communications as set out by the November 2020 statement is being interpreted by Azerbaijan and Turkey as solely the East-West connection, risking the North-South route, which is extremely important for Iran.

- The growing Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation may increase the Pan-Turkic threat to Iran's overall security system.

As a consequence of all the above-mentioned factors, Azerbaijan can become a slow-motion mine for Iran's national security.

None of Iran's concerns, however, have prevented the president of Azerbaijan from receiving its neighbor's congratulations for the victory in the Karabakh war and assurance that Iran is ready to participate in the reconstruction of the "liberated territories" and the restoration of communications.

This possible participation could give Iran an opportunity, firstly, to prevent Azerbaijan from becoming completely dependent on Turkey (thereby increasing the threat to Iran), and secondly, by participating in the processes on the ground, to monitor the local developments. Similarly, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who reacted strongly to the points expressed by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Baku held "warm discussions" with him in Istanbul, emphasizing Iran's readiness to promote regional dialogue.

Another important aspect of Iran's regional policy is preventing the participation of extra-regional powers. This importance was stressed not only during official meetings in Moscow but also during the Iranian foreign minister's exclusive interview. The Iranian foreign minister drew attention to the fact that during the second Karabakh war neither the European Union nor the United States was able to take an active part—the issue was "settled" only through Russia, a player in the region.

The discussions of the Iranian diplomat in Tbilisi focused on the expansion of bilateral relations and the importance of the North-South Corridor. In this regard, Georgia and Iran hold the same playing cards, or share the same risk of losing their cards, because if the so-called unblocking of the region means only connecting Turkey to Russia through Armenia and Azerbaijan, both countries will lose their current transit significance. Therefore, it is in the interests of Iran and Georgia to increase the capacity of the Black Sea-Persian Gulf connection and keep discussions about the implementation of the programs contributing to it on the agenda of current developments.

At the same time, Georgia has serious limitations in discussing its relations with Iran. In general, they are coordinated with the United States and with the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem, especially taking into account their growing economic leverage in Georgia.

The statement by Foreign Minister Zarif that the territorial integrity of Armenia is a red line for Iran became a key subject of discussions in Armenia. This, of course, refers above all to the inviolability of the Armenia-Iran border once again and Iran's reservations about Azerbaijan's desire to implement the so called "Meghri Corridor" program.

The "common challenges" voiced in Armenia were another important point of emphasis; these referred especially to the presence of mercenaries in the region.

Another important feature of Zarif's visit was the fact that it included meetings in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Region. This fact and the observations made publicly in each country create the possibility to make assumptions about topics discussed behind closed doors.

Zarif's visit was followed by the visits of a number of other Iranian officials and delegations to Armenia as well as by statements that the inviolability of Armenia's southern political borders was important for Iran. These statements are especially important in the context of the entry of Azerbaijani armed forces into the territory of Armenia. Iran offers its mediation mission for this situation as well but without condemning the violators of the border. The topic became more important and vulnerable after the Azerbaijani side started charging Iranian trucks driving through Armenia's Goris-Kapan road. There was even a case of the detention of two drivers charged with "illegal crossing of the borders".

Thus, it can be stated that at this stage the inviolability of borders the removal of mercenaries and the exclusion of the participation of extra-regional forces are the most important issues in Iran's regional policy. The same principles are key for Iran's newly elected President Raisi and his government. The text of his inauguration, the press conferences and the thoughts voiced in a number of bilateral meetings, including those with the RA Prime Minister and the statements relating to Armenia's authorities come to support to the above-mentioned viewpoints.