

SESSION 3.

DYNAMICS OF NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES: GEORGIA, AZERBAIJAN AND IRAN

REVIEW ON ANNA GEVORGYAN'S PAPER "NATIONAL SECURITY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN"¹¹

*Hamidreza Azizi,
Shahid Beheshti University, Iran*

Hello everyone! First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of this conference, which I found very interesting. It is my first time here in Yerevan and apart from being at this conference, being in this city and having a chance to once again meet Ambassador David Hovhannisyan, who I first met last year in Sweden, is a great pleasure for me.

About the paper on Iran's National Security, written by Anna Gevorgyan, I am not about to go into the very details that the work has. It's because the details actually were not discussed here, so I just want to share my general viewpoint towards the work, and I will try to summarize it in some general points.

First of all, it is said in the text and it was also presented here that Iran does not have a special document on its national security; yes it is true. But the main point is that we should explore the reasons behind this lack of a document. I believe that this is more than anything related to the changing nature of the threats Iran has been facing with in its periphery. For example, if we look back to the first years after the Islamic Revolution, we can see that at the time, Iran was facing with two sets of threats, from both the internal and external levels. At the domestic level, we had some separatist movements, which were trying to build upon the vacuum of power after the Islamic Revolution and to pursue their own goals. At the same time, and at

¹¹ The text is the transcription of the speech given at the conference.

the international and regional levels we experienced some pessimism towards the new political system in the making in the country. So, these were the basic levels, which were actually defining Iran's approach towards its national security. After that, we had 8 years of Iran-Iraq war which shifted Iran's attention towards its periphery and towards the Arab Middle East; because it was facing with Iraq as an enemy and with some of the Arab countries that supported Saddam Hussein. After that and for a very long period we had a controversy over the nuclear program which lasted till 2015. Again it was also related to both regional and international levels, if we want to define the level of the threats against Iran.

Thus, we could say that the threats and the level of threats and the level at which Iran could define its national interests and national security have been changing during this whole period. So, this was the main reason behind the lack of a certain document, but this does not mean that we do not have general viewpoints and general approaches towards our National Security as well as foreign policy.

I want to say that there are two general viewpoints, based on which we can approach the issue when we want to discuss the national security of our country without clear documents. First, we could approach the issue with a constructivist approach, which, I believe is the case for what Anna has done in her work. Her references are mostly to the ideological aspects of the Islamic Republic and to the viewpoints of the leaders of the Islamic Revolution, etc. But I believe that to better understand Iran's views towards its national security as well as its general approaches and its foreign policy we should take a look at its national interests as well as the main threats against it; because the main problem in adopting the constructivist approach in defining Iran's national security is that you could face with controversies and controversial dimensions. I could raise a related example about the Karabakh issue and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. When I was in Baku I had a discussion with my Azeri colleagues. Some of them were saying that why Iran has better relations with Armenia, while Azerbaijan is an Islamic Shiite country? My answer was that it's because of Iran's definition of its national interests; because for a long period after the

collapse of the Soviet Union Azerbaijan diverted its focus towards the West and also established close relations with Israel, which is the main threat against Iran. So, Azerbaijan actually became an important part of Israel's encirclement policy against Iran. And it is obvious that Iran could not initiate a very close relationship with Azerbaijan in such a situation. It was just an example; but you can also see this in the other issues related to Iran's National Security and Foreign Policy.

Because of the lack of time, I just want to refer to some other points related to Iran's bilateral relations. First of all, about Iran-Russia relations; it's true that Iran enjoys very close relationship with Russia and this relationship has been developing during the recent years. But a very delicate issue we should remind is that the relationship is still far from being an alliance or even a strategic partnership. This is because of not only some specific ideological aspects or something, but it is actually related to the very specific issues about the areas of their cooperation. For example, even in Syria the two countries have some points of differences of opinion in such issues as the fate of Assad and federalism in Syria and some other points. Although we have had a very positive cooperation and a very positive partnership with Russia in some issues, it is still very soon to speak about a strategic partnership.

The other point is about Iran's view towards the Karabakh issue, as I think it's more relevant to this conference. Actually, from the early years after the break of the Soviet Union Iran has always tried to mediate in the conflicts in its neighboring regions, as it did so in Tajikistan civil war and tried to do regarding the Karabakh issue in the early years of the conflict. A very important point to consider in this regard is that due to Russia's sensitivities towards its periphery and its so-called "near abroad", Iran has always been somehow cautious not to provoke Russia's sensitivity in this regard. So Iran is willing and ready to play a constructive role in this issue, as far as it does not put into stress its relations with Russia.

My final point is about Iran-Azerbaijan relations. The text speaks a lot about Iran's influence within the Shia population of Azerbaijan. It is true that there are similarities between the viewpoints of the two countries

towards Islam, as the majority of the population of both countries are Shias. But again, there's a very delicate point. This talk of Iran's influence in Azerbaijan has so far promoted mostly by the Western media and some Western politicians and they interpret it as a potential threat; because they claim that by this Shia instrument, Iran wants to develop its influence in its neighboring regions, so not only the West but also the Russians should be worried about it and the governments of the region should be worried about it as well. However, we should remind that Azerbaijan's view towards Shia Islam has been widely influenced by the Soviet experience, so it's actually different from what we know as Shia Islam in Iran or some of the other countries. Therefore, we should be more cautious when discussing about Iran's influence in the Shia population in its neighboring countries and especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Thank you very much for your attention.