

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in the Scope of Accelerating Iran-Armenian Relations

By Zaur Shiriyev*

At present, the international community's preoccupation with Middle East Unrest overshadows a new trend in Iranian-Armenian political relations affecting the South Caucasus. The officials and former civil servants of Iran have frequently made statements in support of Iranian-Armenian diplomacy. In these statements they express anxiety, about the armament of the region in particular and that Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict will result in a new war.

In statements made by third parties, there are accusations that Azerbaijan is developing its military industry [1]. At that stage, the efforts of the Iranian officials to demonstrate political support to Yerevan with their statements [2] and speeches with uncertain political motives, geopolitical benefit perspective, are seen in the foreground. Iranian-Armenian relations reveal that Yerevan has a specific status in its foreign policy concept and regional policy pursued by Tehran after the Islamic revolution of 1979. This distinct status is not about historical foundations and rationality of relations between two states; on the contrary, it is about shaping and development of relations contradicting both Iran's foreign policy concept and its national interests. In particular, the two states' relations went upscale after 2008 August Russia-Georgia war, which resulted in recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. Russia changed the vector of its military power, as the result the relations

between official Tbilisi and Moscow were complicated. This development resulted in the closure of the Georgian "door," which is the only one way out for Armenia. Namely, the start of the Turkish-Armenian normalization process was directly connected with the plan of the official Yerevan to free itself from the position of "geopolitical pincers" and to prevent the impact of global economic crises to the country through foreign investments. According to Armenian sources, the Yerevan spends significant amount of efforts in developing its relations with Iran and this is the one of the main strategic aim of Armenian foreign policy [3].

The data of 2009, Iran had a 4.7% share in exports and 4.9% share in imports of Armenia, which ranked it respectively 9th and 6th among other trade partners of Armenia [4]. In short, Iran's export to Armenia less than a 0.05% share in Iran's GDP. It means that the importance of Armenia's market for Iranian economy is about one hundred fifth of one percent, i.e. it even does not have any statistical significance. Thus, in the current situation intensification of Iran's relations with Armenia cannot be considered efficient based on economic indicators as above mentioned, at the same time, in the regional situation, it seems unreasonable that Iran interferes into domestic affairs of Azerbaijan when the latter's policy is to build close neighborhood and friendship with the official Tehran. Iran, which did not achieve expected economical benefits in the Iranian-Armenian relations and whose plans to get

political power over Yerevan through economic support disappeared, stepped into a new in “quality” stage of its relations with the official Yerevan. One may argue that, the Nagorno-Karabakh problem and magnitude of national revival movement among Azerbaijanis in the south made Iran and Armenia strategic partners. Thus, the scope of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the relations between Iran and Armenia becomes an interesting issue.

In its foreign policy principles, Iran claims to be the leader state of the Islamic world, but it becomes evident that the policy pursued by Iran with regards to the conflict issues of the Islamic world is in contradiction with its ideological and doctrinal principles. If we proceed from the claims of the Sunni world that the leadership of Iran in the Islamic world is real only for the Shia, then it also becomes clear that Iran’s leadership in the Islamic world is paradoxical.

From this standpoint, Iran, which indicates the issue of “Palestine” as the chief factor of an Islamic solidarity in its foreign policy, is, in reality, aiming at gaining political benefit – creating an anti-American view in the Arab world by symbolizing this problem. But it is not obvious that Iran is interested in resolution of the problems of the Muslim world. The paradox in official Tehran’s policy becomes more evident with regards to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

On the one hand, in their statements Iranian officials consider Nagorno-Karabakh as the territory of Azerbaijan, while on the other hand, they try to portray the conflict as the war between Azerbaijan and Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. Even though they declare that Nagorno-Karabakh is a historical territory of Azerbaijan, in practice, they want the problem to remain in the present condition without turning into the conflict. Especially, against the background of the declarations of Iran defending the interests of official Yerevan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran’s role in resolution of the conflict is interesting. Since 1991, Iran’s position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been as follows: *First*, Iran strengthened Armenia with its economic aid during the period of the conflict and turned a blind eye to the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories. The continuation of the occupational activi-

ties by Armenia after the official visit of Iran’s foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati to Baku for mediation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in December 1991 and the occupation of the Shusha city by Armenian forces while the leadership of Azerbaijan was negotiating with Armenia in Tehran laid down the foundations of this disloyalty [5].

Second, even though Iran does not want the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to turn into the active military operations, it is interested in the maintenance of the *status quo* from two aspects:

1. It is taken into consideration that as long as the conflict continues, it will have a negative effect on the economic development and the strengthening of statehood of Azerbaijan. To put it in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, former U.S. national security advisor: “If Azerbaijan achieves a political stability

and economic development it needs, Iranian Azerbaijanis will fight for the realization of the idea of ‘Great Azerbaijan’ [6]. From this standpoint, even though it does not impose any danger, the “preventionism” of official Tehran shows that it considers the weakness of a Muslim state as its reason for existence (*raison d’être*), which is contrary to its ideological foreign policy principles.

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2. One of the issues discussed within the resolution package is the deployment of the peacekeeping forces of the West, to be more precise, of the third party in the region after the signature of a political agreement. In the case of peacekeepers, Iran, which is concerned about the deployment of the USA in the region, opposes the realization of this idea through various means and emphasizes this as a threat to its national security [7].

Third, the “neutrality” of official Tehran raises suspicion, which has been claiming to be interested in mediation of the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since the middle of 2010. Especially, Iran’s military cooperation with Armenia and the nature of the signed agreement gives rise to this. Thus according to the memorandum of cooperation in the areas of defense and security signed between Armenia and Iran in Yerevan in 2002, the two sides are mutually cooperating starting from

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exchange of students of military schools to the establishment of joint enterprises that will produce products for defensive purpose. Under the agreement signed between the ministries of defense of Iran and Armenia, the two states will cooperate on the provision of the home front. According to the experts, the agreements signed in the field of defense are directed straight against Azerbaijan [8].

Under such conditions, it becomes clear that there are no diplomatic grounds for the recent efforts of Iranian officials to promote the negotiations on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem between the parties to the conflict as a “neutral” pow-

er. To put it in the words of Tatul Hakobyan, the expert on foreign policy of the “Civilitas Foundation” of Armenia: “In 1992-1994 the official Tehran was the main supporting point for Armenia in its integration into the world at most difficult times” [9] and today the peaceful efforts of official Tehran can be evaluated as attempts to help Armenia to overcome difficult situation.

At the same time, the fact that Iran turns a blind eye to trafficking in drugs and human beings within the occupied territories of Azerbaijan is the display of creation of “gray zones”. 132 km of the border between Azerbaijan and Iran, which is under the *de facto* control of Armenia, has been actively used for production, transit of and trafficking in drugs, arms and human beings, illegal migration, concealment of terrorists, money laundering and other dangerous types of international crimes.

All of these factors make it possible to say that Iran adheres to a “twofaced” position on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Iran’s policy, groundless claims and declarations with regard to the conflict show that official Yerevan prefers the logic of the proverb “enemy of my enemy is my friend”. **PR**

Notes:

*Zaur Shiriyev is a foreign policy analyst at Center for Strategic Studies.

Ideas expressed here reflect the personal views of the author and do not represent the views of any institution.

Email: zaur@caucasusweekly.com

- 1) Former Iranian Ambassador to Armenia: Azerbaijan appeared in isolation, Panarmenian, 09 September 2010, <http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2011/02/09/ambassador-iran/>
- 2) These statements are outburst of interference into internal affairs of Azerbaijan. See: Former Iranian Ambassador to Armenia: Azerbaijan appeared in isolation <http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2011/02/09/ambassador-iran/>; Azerbaijan’s accumulation of weapons unpleasant, Iranian ambassador says <http://news.am/eng/news/47316.html>
- 3) “Agenda for Armenian Foreign Policy 2009-2010”, Yerevan, Armenia, 2009, s.38, <http://www.acgrc.am/Agenda%20for%20Armenian%20Foreign%20Policy%202009-2010.pdf>
- 4) Export and import of the Republic of Armenia by countries, 2010, <http://www.armstat.am/file/doc/99461633.pdf>
- 5) <http://library.aliyev-heritage.org/az/6163780.html>
- 6) Zbigniew Brzezinski. The Grand Chessboard American Primacy And It’s Geostrategic Imperatives, 1998, p.143
- 7) Tehran says will oppose ‘American forces’ in Karabakh, http://www.armenianow.com/karabakh/23799/iran_karabakh_us_peacekeepers
- 8) Shabanov Gunduz, Iran: Policy Versus National Interests, <http://www.525.az/view.php?lang=az&menu=10&id=26015>
- 9) Harout Ekmanian, Armenia-Iran Relations in Light of Recent Developments, 24 November 2010, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/11/24/ekmanian-armenia-iran-relations-in-light-of-recent-developments/>