

# BAKU DIALOGUES

## POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# Iran's Longstanding Cooperation with Armenia

## Domestic Azerbaijani Opposition May be Rising

*Brenda Shaffer*

When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, Iran's stable northern boundary suddenly became a shared border with five states: land borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, and maritime borders with Kazakhstan and Russia. Tehran viewed this momentous change as a source of several new security challenges. Among these were maritime delimitation in the Caspian Sea and the establishment of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, two states that shared ethnic ties with large numbers of Iranian citizens.

Consequently, Tehran did not view the breakup of the Soviet

Union and the establishment of six new states populated by Muslim-majorities in the Caspian region as an opportunity to expand its influence and "export the revolution." Rather, Tehran's position was defensive: protecting against this new potential source of threats. The officially-sponsored *Tehran Times*, wrote in late December 1991 that

the first ground for concern from the point of view in Tehran is the lack of political stability in the newly independent republics. The unstable conditions in those republics could be serious causes of insecurity along the lengthy borders (over 2,000 kilometers) Iran shares with those countries. Already foreign hands can be felt at work in those republics,

[e]specially in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan republics, with the ultimate objective of brewing discord among the Iranian Azeris and Turkmen by instigating ethnic and nationalistic sentiments.

During the period of the Soviet collapse, all-out war emerged between two of Iran's new neighbors: Armenia and Azerbaijan, which created a critical security and political challenge for Tehran. This was not some faraway conflict like those in the Gaza Strip or Lebanon; this war was taking place directly on Iran's borders, and at times created refugee flows into Iran. Thus, Iran's own national security and domestic stability was seen to be directly threatened by the conflict. The danger was especially sensitive since over one third of the population of Iran is ethnic-Azerbaijani; the regions of northwest Iran that are contiguous to the conflict zone—East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardebil—are populated primarily by ethnic-Azerbaijanis, many of whom share family ties with co-ethnics in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

While the ruling regime in Iran formally asserts that its foreign policy is based on Islamic solidarity, Tehran

almost always puts pragmatic interests above ideology in instances where Islamic solidarity conflicts with primary geopolitical interests. In the specific case of the war between two of its northern neighbors, the clash between ideological and pragmatic considerations was unmistakable: Christian-populated Armenia had invaded Shia majority Azerbaijan (the only majority-Shia former Soviet republic), captured close to 20 percent of its territory, and turned almost one million Azerbaijani Shia into refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

However, the devastation created by the war and occupation in Azerbaijan in the early years of the con-

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lict served a main Iranian policy goal by dimming the new country's attraction to Iran's Azerbaijani minority. Thus, Tehran adopted a policy in support of Yerevan in the war with Azerbaijan and has continued

to engage in close cooperation with Armenia until the present day.

In January 2008, Mahmoud Vaezi, Iran's then-Deputy Foreign Minister responsible for the former Soviet region (he now

serves as chief of staff to the country's president) wrote the following about how Iran had approached the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict during the early war period:

Iran was in the neighborhood of the environment of the conflict. Karabakh is situated only 40 km distance from its borders. At that time, this possibility raised that the boundaries of conflict extended to the beyond of Karabakh. Since then, Iran's consideration was based on security perceptions. [...] Iran could not be indifferent to the developments occurring along its borders, security changes of the borders and their impact on Iran's internal developments.

Tehran's policy tilt toward Armenia—for reasons of security, as Vaezi made clear—was predicated on the assumption that Iran's domestic Azerbaijani community would not mount significant opposition to this policy. For most of the period since the emergence of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Tehran's bet had paid off.

However, growing awareness of the extent of cooperation and ties between Tehran and Yerevan, violent flare-ups between Armenia and Azerbaijan that caused significant casualties, and a wave of anti-

regime protests in Iran since late 2017, have increased opposition to Iranian-Armenian cooperation among Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani community, both at grassroots and elite levels. Iran's tilt may thus become domestically costly and difficult to sustain.

This essay will examine the activity and attitudes of Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani population as it relates to Iranian cooperation with Armenia and Tehran's tilt toward Yerevan in its conflict with Azerbaijan, beginning with a discussion of Iranian policies toward the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

### Iran's Policy

From the beginning of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the main factor weighing on Iran's policy toward the war was the perceived impact on its security. Tehran held no special sentiments for Azerbaijanis as co-religionists. Iran's main concern was preventing identification of its domestic Azerbaijani community with the new Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1992, Mahmoud Vaezi (the country's aforementioned then-deputy foreign minister), pointed to internal

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considerations as one of Iran's major factors in its policy toward the Karabakh conflict. According to an Armenian official I interviewed in winter 2000, Tehran put pressure on Armenia to reject U.S.-initiated peace proposals (the "Goble Plan") that would have led Armenia to cede back to Azerbaijan control of territory bordering Iran. The Islamic Republic preferred to preserve a large de facto border with Armenia to limit ties between Azerbaijan and Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani population. Vaezi also stated Iran's preference for a border with Armenia (and opposition to direct links between Turkey and Azerbaijan):

Iran expressed its opposition to the change of political geography of the region. If this plan could have been somehow implemented it would have had wide political, economic and security effects on the region. Linking Nakhchevan to Azerbaijan would have reduced the importance of Iran's unique and distinctive position in the Caucasus and interrupted Iran's linkage with Armenia.

The activities of the main political actors in Azerbaijan during the Soviet collapse and the policies of the Republic of Azerbaijan's

first post-independence governments reinforced Tehran's fears that Baku would engage in irredentism. During the late 1980s and the initial independence period, the Popular

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Front of Azerbaijan political movement campaigned for language and cultural rights and eventual reunification with ethnic-Azerbaijanis residing in north-eastern Iran, to

which they referred as "South Azerbaijan." Prior to the Soviet collapse, beginning in December 1989, large-scale protests of Azerbaijanis emerged in the border area between Iran and Soviet Azerbaijan, in the region of Nakhchevan. Activists from Baku, together with local villagers, held rallies in the border area, and attempted to communicate with co-ethnics and family members in Iran. The protestors also destroyed some of the border posts.

After the renewal of Azerbaijan's independence, President Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993) elevated the campaign for language and cultural rights for ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran to the level of state policy. For instance, the new state's new elementary school textbooks' covers displayed a map of historical Azerbaijan that included territories in present-day Iran.

Tehran developed relations and trade with Armenia during the height of the battles between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1992-1994. During the war period, Armenian and Iranian officials conducted regular high-level visits and cordial exchanges.

While officially Tehran remained neutral, Iran served as Armenia's main supply route during most of the war. In 1992 and 1993, supply routes from all of Armenia's neighbors except for Iran were closed or unreliable: for example, a civil war in neighboring Georgia hindered Russia from using land routes to supply Yerevan. Armenia was able to continue the war effort due to critical fuel and food supplies that reached it through Iran. For instance, in April 1992, at one of the most critical points in the conflict, Iran agreed to supply fuel to Armenia and improved transportation links with Armenia. Moreover, Russian fuel was often delivered to Armenia by way of Iran. Iranian fuel supplies critical for the war effort included oil for heavy vehicles and coal for heat and cooking. Hrant Melik-Shahnazaryan, an Armenian specialist on Iran's policies in the South Caucasus, claimed in May 2011 that "Iran [had] provided Armenia's food safety during the war."

In April 1992, two cargo planes of aid funded by ethnic-Armenians in Iran arrived in Yerevan. The planes were dispatched to Armenia by the Iranian Red Crescent. Iranian Armenians also reportedly contributed funds to the construction of a bridge linking Armenia and Iran, which was inaugurated in May 1992. During the war, the sides inaugurated direct flights between Tehran and Yerevan.

Armenian officials thanked Iran a number of times for the supplies and for serving as a supply route. For instance, Armenian Prime Minister and Vice President Gagik Harutyunyan remarked in May 1992, in a ceremony opening a bridge over the Araz river that this would contribute to his country's economic stability by providing alternatives to transport routes blocked as a result of the war. The bridge was opened just after Armenian forces had captured the pivotal city of Shusha, the historical capital of Azerbaijanis in the Karabakh region. Shusha was captured by Armenia's forces while Tehran was holding a peace summit of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite the embarrassing timing, Tehran offered no condemnation of Yerevan: Iranian reaction was limited to an expression of "concern over the recent developments in Karabakh." Tehran

continued to forge ahead with trade and cooperation with Yerevan.

Considering that the Armenians sought to change existing borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan and occupied a significant amount of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory, the lack of Iranian criticism and the adoption of a "balanced" approach to the sides in actuality favored Armenia. Iranian official media often adopts the Armenian official practice of referring to the occupied territories as the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" despite the fact that the Iranian government does not recognize the occupied territories as a state or recognize Armenia's sovereignty over these territories.

In regional fora with Muslim-majority state membership, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization, Tehran has refrained from criticizing Armenia. Iranian representatives and Iranian official media reserved their criticisms in the early 1990s for "colonial powers" and other external agents, such as Russia, Turkey, the United States, and occasionally the "Zionists," and even blamed Elchibey for the conflict with Armenia, while refraining from pointing a finger at Yerevan.

Tehran's rhetoric toward the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has not changed significantly in recent

years. Iran's official media shows no special feelings toward the refugees and IDPs in Azerbaijan or Azerbaijan's loss of control of its lands, nor special identification or solidarity with Azerbaijan as Muslims or Shiites. However, a small shift in the official Iranian messaging took place around 2012: Iranian officials and official media began to add that Iran supports "Azerbaijan's territorial integrity," which would imply return of the territories captured by Armenia.

One of the best indications of Iran's conciliatory position toward Armenia is the fact that Armenian representatives in the 1990s repeatedly praised Iran's role in the negotiation process, expressed their preference for Tehran over many other foreign representatives, and called for the deployment of Iranian observers along the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia's first post-independence president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, stated in May 1992 that "the Iranians have proved their complete impartiality in this issue, respecting the rights of both sides and striving for a just solution, and therefore the sides trust Iran."

During his September 2011 visit to Iran, Armenian foreign minister Eduard Nalbandyan praised Tehran's position on the conflict with Azerbaijan, stating that he

“appreciated the Islamic Republic of Iran for presenting proper and balanced views on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and expressed the hope that Tehran would maintain the same stance and continue presenting such positive views in future.”

In contrast, Azerbaijan’s representatives voiced critical statements regarding Iran’s role in the negotiations, illustrating their perception that Tehran was not promoting their interests. As Elchibey remarked in May 1992:

Unfortunately, there was no benefit from the activity of Iran’s peacemaking mission, for example. Khodzaly fell after their first visit to Karabagh, and Shusha fell after their second visit, and the fall of Lachin is the sequel to this.

In 1994, Iranian officials also stated that early in his term as president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev had complained to Tehran about its cooperation with Armenia.

Iran openly advocates for expanding its cooperation with Armenia, including in infrastructure projects that traverse the occupied territories. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad remarked during Nalbandyan’s September 2011 visit that “Tehran-Yerevan ties could be enhanced promptly as Iran considers no limits on its relations with Armenia.”

On a visit to Yerevan in late January 2015, Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif remarked that “Iran is ready to cooperate with Armenia in different areas, including telecommunications, railway, energy, gas, electricity and the cleaning of the Aras river.”

Iran and Armenia also continue to engage in energy trade: Iran supplies natural gas to Armenia, while Armenia supplies Iran with electricity from its nuclear power plant. During Prime Minister Pashinyan’s February 2019 visit to Iran, the sides expressed support for the establishment of an additional electricity line between the countries to expand Armenia’s electricity exports to Iran. During the same visit, Pashinyan expressed support for Armenia serving as a transit state for Iranian natural gas supplies to Europe.

Iran is even involved in infrastructure projects located in the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenia. For instance, in 2010 Iranian and Armenian company officials inaugurated a hydroelectric dam on the Araz river near the Khoda Afarin Bridge in an area that straddles Iran and the occupied territories. (It should be noted, however, that in 2016 Iran and Azerbaijan signed an agreement allowing Iran to use the occupied territories, thus Iran reconfirmed

its recognition of Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over the territory. Tehran also agreed that the Armenian side could not display any national symbols, such as flags, at the plant and dam.) Moreover, products in Iran are supplied directly to the occupied territories and Iranian companies and individuals conduct direct trade with entities there. Iran also supports a radio station that broadcasts in the Talysh language (a Persian dialect) from the occupied city of Shusha, targeting the Talysh minority in Azerbaijan. Iranian companies have also conducted restoration work on mosques in the occupied territories, such as the Govhar aga in Shusha.

### *The Role of Ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran*

Tehran’s close cooperation with Armenia is grounded on the assumption that Iran’s domestic Azerbaijani community will neither actively nor strongly oppose this policy. For most of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Iranian Azerbaijanis have expressed support for Azerbaijan and some criticism of Tehran’s close

cooperation with Armenia, but the opposition was not sufficient to impose a constraint on Iranian-Armenian cooperation.

Since late 2017, as open public opposition to the Iranian regime has grown, so has open opposition to Iran’s cooperation with Armenia.

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In parallel, Iran’s ethnic-Azerbaijani community has received through social media a better picture of the extent of Iranian-Armenian cooperation, including Iran’s direct aid to the occupation

forces in the Armenian-occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Flare-ups in the conflict that resulted in significant Azerbaijani casualties have also galvanized opposition among ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran. Since late 2017, several events have sparked a significant ethnic-Azerbaijani response in Iran: the visit of Armenia’s prime minister to Iran (February 2019), appearance on social media of clips of Iranian aid and trade convoys to the Armenian occupation forces (spring 2020), and the recent re-ignition of the conflict (July 2020).

During the initial war period (1992-1994), Iranian ethnic-Azerbaijani activists publicly

criticized Tehran's policy toward the conflict. The activists distributed petitions, held demonstrations, and ethnic-Azerbaijani members of the Iranian parliament condemned Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan's lands and Tehran's support for Armenia.

In addition, during the war period, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abdulkarim Mousavi Ardebeli, an ethnic-Azerbaijani cleric, often mentioned the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in his Friday sermons and frequently expressed solidarity with the Azerbaijani side. Iranian deputies from its majority ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces led campaigns aimed at limiting Iranian relations with Armenia, openly called for Tehran's assistance to Azerbaijan, and participated in demonstrations against Armenia. Ethnic-Azerbaijani parliament members distributed petitions. In April 1993, Kamel Abedinzadeh, an ethnic-Azerbaijani deputy from Khoy, even spoke in the Azerbaijani language in the Iranian Majles when he condemned Armenian actions against Azerbaijan. He also issued press releases for publication in *Hamshahri* and other Iranian journals on this issue.

**I**ranian officials of ethnic-Azerbaijani origin and parliament members from the ethnic-Azerbaijani populated regions

of Iran also expressed views on the conflict that contradicted Tehran's official policy that did not criticize Armenia. In a September 2010 interview for a news service in Azerbaijan, Iran's Vice-President for Parliamentary Affairs, Sayyed Mohammad-Reza Mir-Tajeddini, stated that

Nagorno-Karabakh is Azerbaijani territory. We cannot support an Armenian policy of aggression and occupation that aims to separate the region from Azerbaijan. [...] As part of my activities as an MP from Tabriz, I wrote an article about the situation with the Agdam mosque and denounced this fact. Several other members joined me. Naturally, we condemn any disrespect to Islam. A mosque is a symbol of religion and faith. The mosques in Karabakh are not an exception. Our theologians condemn the desecration of mosques.

In addition, in several protests, Iranian ethnic-Azerbaijanis expressed their solidarity with Azerbaijan and criticized the Iranian government's support for Armenia in the conflict. In May 1992, 200 students demonstrating at Tabriz University chanted "Death to Armenia" and, alluding to Tehran, described the "silence of the Muslims," in the face of the Armenian "criminal activities" as "treason to the Quran." According to the Iranian newspaper *Salam*, the ethnic-Azerbaijani demonstrators

in Tabriz urged Tehran to support Azerbaijan in this struggle during a march that was marked by "nationalist fervor and slogans." *Salam* reported that the demonstration was held "despite the opposition of the authorities." The next year, Tehran University students held a demonstration in front of the Armenian embassy to show their support for Azerbaijan in the conflict. During the demonstration, the embassy was stoned, and subsequently the Iranian ambassador in Yerevan was summoned by the Armenian foreign minister to explain the incident.

Iran allows the publication of a limited number of literary journals in the languages of its ethnic minorities. *Varliq* is a bilingual Azerbaijani-Persian publication produced in Tehran, and it is the only Azerbaijani-language journal that has been published since the revolution in 1979. It has frequently published articles on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, often expressing solidarity with Azerbaijan. In spring 1994, the journal's editor, Javad Heyat, addressed an article to then Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, calling on Turkey to come to Azerbaijan's aid. *Varliq* has frequently carried articles about Azerbaijani victims of this conflict, as well as poems written in memory of fallen Azerbaijani soldiers.

**I**n addition, ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran have been involved in providing aid to their co-ethnics in Azerbaijan. In 1992-1993, much of the humanitarian and refugee assistance from Iran to the Republic of Azerbaijan was organized directly from Iran's majority ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces. Beginning in summer 1992, some of the Azerbaijanis wounded in the war with Armenia were treated in Tabriz hospitals. Throughout 1992-1993, and initially organized by ethnic-Azerbaijani representatives from the Iranian provinces, convoys of supplies and other aid were sent directly from these provinces to the needy and refugees in Azerbaijan. For instance, a delegation from Urmia in June 1992 set up a refugee center in Nakhchevan and Iran's East Azerbaijan Province opened a refugee camp within the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan in September 1993.

In May 2006, mass demonstrations broke out in Tabriz, Tehran, and other cities in Iran with large ethnic-Azerbaijani populations in response to a caricature in an official Iranian newspaper that equated Azerbaijanis to cockroaches. Iranian security forces killed dozens of protestors and arrested hundreds and many were convicted of violations and sent for long prison

sentences. During the demonstrations, support for Azerbaijan regaining control of the occupied territories was also expressed.

In mid-January 2008, the Iranian government approved the opening of an Armenian consulate in Tabriz, a city in northern Iran populated primarily by ethnic-Azerbaijanis. This decision was reportedly protested by a petition campaign among Azerbaijanis in Iran. Nevertheless, Tehran continued to encourage Armenia to open the consulate.

In the last two decades, Iranian soccer matches have also become a venue for frequent expression of ethnic sentiments among ethnic-Azerbaijani fans of Tabriz's main soccer team, Traktor Azerbaijan (formerly Traktor Sazi), and of ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Tehran. Teams and their fans from Persian-majority centers also often unfurl Armenian flags at games in attempt to incite the ethnic-Azerbaijani players.

In recent years, anti-Armenian sentiment has been expressed regularly at matches. A few days after Pashinyan's February 2019 visit to Iran, for instance, Traktor fans burned an Armenian flag during a match. They also waived the flag of the

Republic of Azerbaijan and chanted "Karabakh is and will be ours." Reportedly, Iranian security forces arrested 29 ethnic-Azerbaijani citizens for participation in this activity during the soccer match.

Pashinyan's visit to Iran in February 2019 was a trigger for ethnic-Azerbaijanis in the country. During his visit, in meetings with Pashinyan, the Iranian

Armenian community hung banners stating that "Karabakh is Armenia," and the prime minister posted pictures with these banners, all uninhibited by Pashinyan's Iranian hosts. Ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran re-

sponded with protests in front of the Armenian embassy in Tehran and stuck posters on the embassy's walls stating that "Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan."

In an Iranian parliament session following Pashinyan's visit, Ruhulla Hezretpur, a deputy from the majority ethnic-Azerbaijani city of Urmia, denounced the visit and Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani lands. He also condemned the fact that the visit had taken place during the anniversary of the Khojaly massacre of Azerbaijanis in the hands of Armenians. He pointed out that

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*Azerbaijanis in Iran reacted to the April 2020 open appearance of evidence of Iran's aid to Armenians in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.*

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according to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, "Karabakh is an Islamic land. Now I ask, what is the difference between Palestine and Karabakh?" Hezretpur also read a nationalist poem in the Azerbaijani language and was booed by Majlis members.

Most recently, Azerbaijanis in Iran reacted to the April 2020 open appearance of evidence of Iran's aid to Armenia in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. While Iranian trade and cooperation with the Armenian occupation forces has been taking place since the war period, the surfacing of clips and films verifying this cooperation spurred public complaints from ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran and in various media. Some suggested blowing up the gas pipeline to Armenia or sabotaging the bridges between Armenia and Iran, all which run through areas of Iran inhabited by ethnic-Azerbaijanis.

Ethnic-Azerbaijanis also called for protests against Armenia in front of the Armenian embassy in Tehran and many Azerbaijani populated cities in Iran in response to a July 2020 flare-up of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that led to many casualties. Iranian security forces arrested dozens of ethnic-Azerbaijani activists on the eve of the planned demonstrations to preempt them. Consequently, only small numbers of protestors managed to demonstrate.

None of these events—taken in their own—have been significant enough to change Iran's policy on the conflict; but through the policy of arrests, it is clear the regime fears further activity. Moreover, should wider protests against the ruling regime take place, Tehran's policy of cooperation with Armenia will increase the incentive of Iran's domestic Azerbaijani population to protest.

### *Coming to an End?*

Iran's policy on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict strongly illustrates the interconnection between Iran's foreign policy and domestic issues. More than half of Iran's citizens are of non-Persian origin, belonging to ethnic groups that share ties with groups in bordering states: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These groups can put pressure on Tehran's ties with neighboring states and some of those states pay close attention to Tehran's policies toward co-ethnics in Iran. This creates not so simple policy challenges for Iran. To date, the ruling regime in Tehran has been able to weather domestic Azerbaijani opposition to its close cooperation with Armenia. Continued flare-ups in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan may lead to increased domestic pressure on Tehran to end its support for Armenia in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. **BD**