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Iran's Quandary on Nagorno-Karabakh

by Arvin Khoshnood and Ardavan Khoshnood

Tehran viewed the Russian-Turkish-brokered cease-fire of November 10, 2020, which ended the 45-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, with very mixed feelings. On the face of it, the cessation of hostilities on Iran's northern border, which attracted considerable foreign intervention at a time when the country is reeling from dire economic problems, the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and lingering domestic restiveness should not have been more welcome for the Iranian regime, not least since it represented the triumph of a Muslim state over its Christian, Washington-backed adversary.¹ Yet, this victory was largely due to the military support provided both by Israel, which had been steadily rolling back Tehran's military presence in Syria and frustrating its progress toward nuclear weapons, and by Turkey, which has persistently sought to expand its foothold in the South Caucasus. Thus, the potentially adverse strategic implications could not be lost on Tehran. This was especially so as Israel might feel forced to escalate its anti-nuclear activities—evidenced by the recent killing of “the architect of Iran's nuclear program”



¹ See U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, telephone interview, *The Erick Erickson Show*, WSB (Atlanta), [Oct. 15, 2020](#).

Mohsen Fakhrizadeh—with the inauguration of a less activist U.S. administration. Does Tehran's behavior indicate a new moderation in its hegemonic goals?

Iran, the world's only Shiite regime, can hardly turn its back on a Shiite-majority state at war with a Christian enemy.

Iranian-Azeri Affinity

There is little doubt where Tehran's heart lies in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. While both sides share borders with the Islamic Republic, Azerbaijan is not just a neighboring state but a historic part of Iran usurped by Tsarist Russia in the early nineteenth century. Not only do Azeris and Iranians (especially those of Azeri origin) share longstanding religious, cultural, and historical ties, but the Islamic Republic, as the world's only Shiite regime, can hardly turn its back on a fellow Shiite-majority state at war with a Christian enemy.

Small wonder, therefore, that when Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a six-year war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988-94, Tehran had few qualms about throwing its weight behind Baku. President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani identified Armenia as the clear aggressor, and the Iranian regime concluded a \$30 million arms deal with the Azeri government and sent Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders to Azerbaijan to train the local armed forces. Tehran also allowed Afghan mujahedeen to cross its territory to Azerbaijan to help it defend the strategic Khoda-Afarin dam against Armenian attacks.²

² Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani, *Daily Memoirs*, [Aug. 26, 1993](#), [May 13, 1997](#); *Mashregh News* (Tehran), [Sept. 6, 2011](#); [Basij News Agency](#) (Tehran), [Apr. 20, 2015](#).

At the same time, the Iranians sought to mediate an end to the fighting to no avail. A trilateral Tehran communiqué, signed on May 7, 1992, by the Iranian, Armenian, and Azeri presidents, lasted

only briefly with hostilities resuming within days. Subsequently, Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei chastised the Armenians for occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and oppressing its Muslim population.³ When Azeri president Heydar Aliyev visited Tehran in 1994, Khamenei claimed it a religious duty for the Azeri people to defend their country.⁴ Offering a belated explanation of the Iranian conduct during the conflict, a senior protégé of the supreme leader argued that the war had been instigated by the West as a means of undermining the close relations between the Shiite states of Iran and Azerbaijan, which in turn forced Tehran to keep its military support for Baku under wraps so as to deny Washington a pretext to deepen its regional involvement.⁵

The Changing Geopolitical Landscape

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union changed the geopolitical equation confronting Tehran in the South Caucasus. Turkey, especially under the reign of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

³ "Sokhanrani-e Rahbar-e Enghelab Dar Ejtema-e Azim-e Mardom-e Tabriz," Khamenei.ir, [July 27, 1993](#).

⁴ "Didar-e Aghay-e Heydar Alief Rayis Jomhor-e Azarbaijan Ba Rahbar-e Enghelab," Khamenei.ir, [July 2, 1995](#).

⁵ *Tabriz-e Bidar* (Tabriz), Apr. 6, 2016.

sought to fill the void left by Moscow's retreat and viewed Azerbaijan (including the Azeri region in northern Iran) as an avenue for reconnecting with Central Asia's "Turkish peoples" and restoring neo-Ottoman glory. And the new states emerging from the ruins of the Soviet empire adopted independent courses of action that were often anathema to Tehran.

Following the Soviet demise, not only did the Republic of Azerbaijan opt for a secular path that was diametrically opposed to the theocratic model offered by its Shiite counterpart, but it established close relations with a string of countries deemed hostile by Iran. These ranged from Turkey at a time when Ankara was fostering separatist tendencies in Iran's Azeri provinces; to the European Union, which considered Baku a strategic partner with an important role to play in reducing Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources;⁶ to the United States, dubbed the "Great Satan" by the Islamic republic's founding father Ayatollah Khomeini. And while relations with Washington had their ups and downs as successive administrations deferred to the Armenian-American lobby and backed Yerevan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, U.S.-Azeri ties intensified steadily following the establishment of diplomatic relations after Azerbaijan's independence in 1991 with Baku cooperating with NATO within the Partnership for Peace program.⁷

⁶ "European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, [Azerbaijan](#)," European Commission, Brussels, updated Oct. 29, 2019; "[Facts and Figures about EU-Azerbaijan Relations](#)," European Commission.

⁷ "[Relations with Azerbaijan](#)," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Brussels, [Oct. 21, 2020](#).



Azeri soldier in Haditha, Iraq, March 2005. U.S.-Azeri ties intensified following the establishment of diplomatic relations after Azerbaijan's independence in 1991. Azerbaijan supported the U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo.

After 9/11, Azerbaijan supported the U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo, as well as the international sanctions that drove Tehran to sign the 2015 nuclear agreement (JCPOA). When Washington re-imposed sanctions against the Iranian regime in 2018, Baku suspended oil and gas deliveries to Tehran.⁸ The Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations reciprocated by extending Azerbaijan a waiver to the 1992 Freedom Support Act, making it possible for

⁸ TURAN Information Agency (Baku), [Nov. 3, 2018](#); *Azer News* (Baku), [Aug. 3, 2020](#).

Washington to provide Baku with different types of assistance.⁹

But the most galling aspect for Tehran of Azerbaijan's foreign policy was its multifaceted relationship with Israel.

Dissatisfied with its lackluster combat performance in the first Nagorno-Karabakh war despite Iranian support, Baku turned to Jerusalem for arms supplies and military support. The two states established diplomatic relations in 1992, and in subsequent decades, Azerbaijan evolved into one of Israel's foremost Muslim allies, providing some 40 percent of the Jewish state's oil consumption,¹⁰ maintaining close military and intelligence collaboration (parts of which are reportedly directed against the Islamic Republic),¹¹ and purchasing vast quantities of Israeli weapons and military hardware, which proved highly instrumental to its successes in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war.¹²

In response, Tehran warmed relations with Armenia as a means of maintaining a balance of power in the South Caucasus. Its

Azerbaijan became one of Israel's foremost Muslim allies, maintaining close military and intelligence collaboration.

support for Azerbaijan during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war notwithstanding, Tehran helped Yerevan abort a proposed territorial exchange involving the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to

Armenia in return for substantial territory in southern Armenia that would have severed Armenian contiguity with Iran while connecting the autonomous Nakhichevan enclave with the rest of Azerbaijan. In subsequent years, Iranian-Armenian relations deepened significantly with all Iranian presidents from Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005) to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13) to Hassan Rouhani (2013-) visiting Yerevan.¹³ By 2009, Iranian-Armenian trade had grown to \$200 million, hitting a record \$364 million in 2018 with Iranian exports accounting for \$269 million of the turnover.¹⁴ During a 2019 visit to Tehran by Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, Khamenei called for the intensification of bilateral economic cooperation,¹⁵ a topic that gained special relevance the following year due to the economic deterioration occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶

However, there was another geopolitical aspect to the bilateral relationship. With Armenia a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization

⁹ See "Restriction on assistance to Azerbaijan," [S.2532-Freedom Support Act](#), 102nd Congress (1991-92), Washington, D.C., sec. 907.

¹⁰ *The Jerusalem Post*, [July 21, 2020](#).

¹¹ Emil Avdalani, "[Defying Geography](#): The Israel-Azerbaijan Partnership," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Ramat Gan, Perspective Papers, no. 1723, Aug. 31, 2020.

¹² Galia Lindenstrauss, "[Israel-Azerbaijan](#): Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship," *Strategic Assessment*, Jan. 2015, pp. 69-79; Alexander Murinson, "[The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan](#)," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Mideast Security and Policy Studies, no. 110, Oct. 26, 2014.

¹³ "[Bilateral Relations: Iran](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan, [Apr. 5, 2019](#).

¹⁴ *Today.az* (Azerbaijan), Jan. 28, 2010; Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA, Tehran), [Sept. 30, 2019](#); *Tehran Times*, [Jan. 10, 2020](#).

¹⁵ "Didar-e Nokhost Vazir-e Armanestan Ba Rahbar-e Enghelab," Khamenei.ir, [Feb. 27, 2019](#).

¹⁶ Tasnim News Agency (Tehran), [Apr. 29, 2020](#).

(CSTO)—a military alliance also comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Belarus—the “Yerevan connection” gave Tehran an important avenue to Moscow, whose goodwill and support it deemed crucial for maintaining the Central Asian status quo.

An Iranian Conundrum

Against this backdrop, the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities on September 27, 2020, could not have been more inopportune for Iran, forcing it to walk a tightrope between two principal yet contradictory sets of interests. On the one hand, supporting Armenia could weaken the position of Tehran’s rivals in the South Caucasus—Israel, the United States, and Turkey—while also softening its extremist, anti-Christian image in the West. On the other hand, there was the prospect of denting the steadily improving relations with Ankara (despite their ongoing competition).¹⁷ In addition, support for Armenia could kindle domestic protests as Tehran turned its back on Azerbaijan, a fellow Muslim state with which it shared longstanding history. Further, the Islamic Republic risked losing its carefully contrived image as leader of the Muslim world and betraying the bequest of its founding father to “export our revolution throughout the world ... until the calls ‘there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah’ are echoed all over the world.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Tamer Badawi, “The Economic Turn in [Turkish-Iranian Relations](#),” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., Mar. 12, 2020.

¹⁸ Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 217.



The Iranian ayatollahs adopted an ambiguous policy that sought to placate both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif (above) offered “to provide good offices to enable talks.”

Torn between these opposing pressures, the ayatollahs adopted an ambiguous, at times self-contradictory, policy that sought to placate both sides while seeking a quick end to the fighting.¹⁹ “Iran is closely monitoring the alarming violence in Nagorno-Karabakh,” tweeted Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif upon the outbreak of hostilities on September 27. “We call for an immediate end to hostilities and urge dialogue to resolve differences. Our neighbors are our priority and we are ready to provide good offices to enable talks.”²⁰

The next day, the government’s spokesman expressed Tehran’s readiness to join Moscow and Ankara in mediating a peaceful

¹⁹ IRNA, [Oct. 13, 2020](#).

²⁰ *Iran Daily* (Tehran), [Sept. 27, 2020](#).

solution to the conflict²¹ while President Hassan Rouhani urged both sides to stop fighting. When told by Armenian prime minister Pashinyan of the arrival of Turkey-affiliated jihadists in Azerbaijan, in a transparent bid to rally Iranian counter-support, Rouhani said that foreign intervention could only prolong the conflict and complicate the situation.²² This warning was amplified by the government's spirited denial of social media reports of Iranian arms deliveries to Armenia.²³

Meanwhile, the regime's official news agency IRNA and the conservative *Kayhan* newspaper, close to Supreme Leader Khamenei, took a neutral stance on the conflict. Limiting themselves to battlefield reports, they noted that both sides accused each other of starting the war, criticized the longstanding failure of the Minsk Group (created in 1994 by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) to achieve its goal of finding a lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, and emphasized the Islamic Republic's commitment to a sustainable peace in the South Caucasus.²⁴

With the passage of time, however, various factions within the regime took opposing positions on the belligerents with some siding with Azerbaijan and others with Armenia. On September 30, for example, four of Khamenei's representatives in Iranian



Azeri president Ilham Aliyev (right) welcomes incoming Israeli ambassador George Deek, December 25, 2019. Some Iranian news sources portrayed Azerbaijan as a threat to Iran in part because of its close alliance with Israel.

Azerbaijan issued a statement justifying Baku's "move to recapture the [Nagorno-Karabakh] region" as "completely legal according to the Shari'a and in line with four U.N. Security Council resolutions."²⁵ A somewhat softer version of this position was offered by the supreme leader's international affairs advisor Ali Akbar Velayati. While describing Nagorno-Karabakh as an Azeri "occupied territory" and voicing the Iranian regime's readiness to help Baku reclaim it, he stressed that "the occupied territories should not be liberated at the cost of shedding the blood of the people" and called

²¹ Press TV (Tehran), [Sept. 29, 2020](#).

²² "Doktor Rohani Dar Goft-e Goo Ba Nokhost Vazir-e Armanestan," President.ir, [Sept. 30, 2020](#); Armenpress News Agency (Yerevan), Sept. 30, 2020; *Iran Daily*, [Sept. 30, 2020](#).

²³ IRNA, [Sept. 29, 2020](#).

²⁴ Ibid., [Sept. 27, 2020](#), [Oct. 4, 2020](#); *Kayhan* (Tehran), [Sept. 27, 2020](#).

²⁵ *Radio Farda* (Prague), [Oct. 3, 2020](#).

on Ankara to work with Tehran to mediate a negotiated settlement.²⁶

By contrast, several news outlets associated with the IRGC—albeit no IRGC officials—blamed Baku for the conflict, which they described as antithetical to Iranian national interests.²⁷ In a lengthy commentary, for example, *Mashregh News* presented Azerbaijan as a threat to Iran: not merely on account of its close alliance with Israel, which was allowed to use Azeri territory for intelligence and military operations, but because Baku had set its sight on Iran’s Azeri provinces. This in turn made Nagorno-Karabakh a vital buffer zone between Iran and Azerbaijan, whose “capture by Aliyev’s forces and the terrorists sent by Erdoğan will pose a serious threat to Iran’s national security and territorial integrity.”²⁸

Fars News Agency offered a somewhat less vitriolic indictment, yet blamed Baku for the conflagration, which it described as an anti-Iranian conspiracy instigated by Azerbaijan’s Israeli and U.S. allies. In its account, the U.S. embassies in Baku and Yerevan had prior knowledge of the impending crisis and warned American citizens to avoid the region two days before fighting erupted.²⁹ As proof of Israel’s culpability, Fars quoted the Armenian president’s claim of sustained Israeli military support for Azerbaijan during

Fars News described the conflagration as an anti-Iranian conspiracy instigated by Israel and the United States.

the war.³⁰ Another IRGC-associated agency, Tasnim News, took a different approach. While blaming Washington and Jerusalem for the conflict and warning all parties against playing into the

hands of these two “Satans,” it quoted an Iranian expert who claimed that Azerbaijan had the right to drive Armenia from its “occupied territories.”³¹

Given this eagerness to have its cake and eat it, too—to criticize both belligerents while alienating none—it was hardly surprising that Tehran quickly endorsed the various mediation efforts. When on October 10, Moscow managed to broker a ceasefire, Rouhani called Russian president Vladimir Putin to congratulate him on the breakthrough and to offer Tehran’s help in transforming it into a lasting settlement.³² For his part, Foreign Minister Zarif tweeted the regime’s appreciation for the “constructive efforts of our Russian neighbors” and urged the warring parties “to engage in substantive dialogue based on respect for international law and territorial integrity.”³³ When the ceasefire broke down within days, the Iranian regime expressed its concern and pleaded for restraint.³⁴

In his first public allusion to the conflict on November 3, Khamenei called for an immediate cessation of hostilities while indicating the broad contours of the desired

²⁶ *Kayhan*, [Oct. 5, 2020](#).

²⁷ *Mashregh News*, [Sept. 27, 2020](#); Fars News Agency (Tehran), [Oct. 1, 2020](#), [Oct. 3, 2020](#).

²⁸ *Mashregh News*, [Oct. 2, 2020](#).

²⁹ Fars News, [Sept. 28, 2020](#) (“Trump’s Reaction”); [Sept. 28, 2020](#) (“Yerevan claim”); [Sept. 28, 2020](#) (“Saudi reaction”); [Oct. 1, 2020](#).

³⁰ Fars News, [Oct. 17, 2020](#); *Mashregh News*, [Oct. 17, 2020](#).

³¹ Tasnim News, [Oct. 3](#), [Oct. 4, 2020](#).

³² *Tehran Times*, [Oct. 10, 2020](#).

³³ *Ibid.*, [Oct. 10, 2020](#).

³⁴ IRNA, [Oct. 12, 2020](#).

peace settlement. “The war between our neighbors, Azerbaijan and Armenia, is a bitter event and must end as soon as possible,” he said. “Of course, Azerbaijani land seized by Armenia should be freed and the safety of its Armenian residents must be secured.”³⁵

Small wonder, therefore, that when a week later Russia and Turkey brokered another ceasefire that involved substantial Azeri territorial gains in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the establishment of a land corridor between Nakhichevan and mainland Azerbaijan,³⁶ Tehran offered its unreserved support. “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,” read a Foreign Ministry statement, before expressing the Iranian regime’s readiness to contribute to the implementation of the agreement by assisting, among other things, the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces along the Azeri-Armenian fault line in Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁷

Conclusion

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war affords further proof of what historian Efraim Karsh calls the “tail wags the dog principle,” namely that

modern Middle Eastern history has been the culmination of long-existing indigenous trends, pas-

Ankara was probably the foremost winner of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, consolidating its presence in the South Caucasus.

sions, and patterns of behavior ... External influences, however potent, have played a secondary role, constituting neither the primary force

behind the region’s political development nor the main cause of its notorious volatility.³⁸

Though backed by Moscow and Washington, with the EU adamant that “the Minsk Group talks were the only way to end violence,”³⁹ Armenia was comprehensively routed by a foe supported by two regional powers. It was the superior weaponry and military training provided by Israel that enabled the Azeri army to defeat its largely Russian-armed adversary, and it was Turkey’s mercenaries and air support that helped tilt the scales in Baku’s favor. Indeed, Ankara was probably the foremost winner of the conflict, consolidating its presence in the South Caucasus and joining Moscow in monitoring the agreement: the ultimate affront to Armenians given Turkey’s continued denial of its World War I Armenian genocide.⁴⁰ Putin was thus forced to make the best of a bad situation by forcing his protégé to sign the surrender agreement, triggering an explosion of rage by Armenians against their government, yet paradoxically transforming Moscow’s image there from the traitor it was seen during the conflict into a savior that prevented Baku

³⁵ Khamenei.ir, [Nov. 3, 2020](#).

³⁶ *BBC News* (London), [Nov. 10, 2020](#).

³⁷ IRNA, [Nov. 10, 2020](#).

³⁸ Efraim Karsh, *The Tail Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 2.

³⁹ *Euobserver* (Brussels), [Oct. 8, 2020](#).

⁴⁰ Michael Rubin, “The Problem with the [Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire](#) Agreement,” *The National Interest*, Nov. 10, 2020.

from pushing its victory to more extreme heights.⁴¹

As far as Iran is concerned, the conflict stretched the duality of its foreign policy to its limits. Though driven since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 by Khomeini's relentless world conquering agenda, Iranian foreign policy has shown a remarkable degree of pragmatism whenever confronted with insurmountable obstacles.

Yet this pragmatism must not be misconstrued for moderation. Rather it is rooted in the conviction that since the fall of the regime will leave no one to defend Islam and the Shiites, Tehran must do whatever is needed to ensure its survival without relinquishing its ultimate ideological goals. Hence, just as the acquisition of U.S. weapons during the Iran-Iraq war did not lead to a thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations and the signing of the JCPOA did not diminish Tehran's nuclear ambitions, so the Iranian regime's decades-long relationship with Yerevan does not change its perception of Nagorno-Karabakh as Muslim and Azeri territory, or its hope of seeing Baku shed its infidel allies and return to the Islamic

Republic's fold. In the final account, unless confronted with clear and present danger to its continued existence, the Iranian regime still abides by the world conquering vision of its founding father, however long and winding the road is.

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⁴¹ Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, [Nov. 24, 2020](#).