

DEALING WITH AZERBAIJAN: THE POLICIES OF TURKEY AND IRAN TOWARD THE KARABAKH WAR (1991-1994)

October 28, 2011

gloria-center.org

This article explores the policies of Turkey and Iran toward the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh during the 1991-1994 period. It identifies Azerbaijan as a key nation in the region, one rich in oil and natural gas and with which both the Turks and Persians historically shared language, culture, and religion. As the cornerstone of the post-Soviet policies of both regional powers in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan was crucial for Ankara and Tehran as they sought to safeguard their presence in this strategic crossroads linking Europe and Asia. Against this backdrop, the Karabakh policies of Turkey and Iran were formulated.

The year 2011 marked the twentieth anniversary of the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent establishment of three independent nations in the post-Soviet South Caucasus—as well as 11 others elsewhere. In the early 1990s, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia entered the international arena at a time of internal and external turmoil, socioeconomic collapse, and ethno-political conflict. The establishment of the Azerbaijani Republic, a country rich in oil and natural gas, strategically located at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe and bordered by the Caspian Sea to the east, coincided with increasing tensions over Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed enclave within Azerbaijani territory inhabited mostly by local ethnic Armenians and claimed by them and the neighboring Republic of Armenia.

The initial phase of Azerbaijani statehood was thus shaped by the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas; yet external actors played a significant role in the post-Soviet country's process of obtaining independence, establishing nationhood, and securing its territorial integrity. In addition to Russia, which soon regained its dominant standing to the south of the Greater Caucasus mountain range, two influential players, Turkey and Iran, arose following decades of political absence; both were former empires that had historically shaped the fate of the region. For both Turkey and Iran, Azerbaijan was a cornerstone of their regional activism—common Turkic language and nationalism linked Azerbaijan to Turkey, while cultural heritage, history, and Shi'ism connected Azerbaijanis to their Iranian neighbors. In both cases, identity was believed to play a significant role in shaping Ankara's and Tehran's policies toward this newly independent nation. The stance of these two key regional players during the Karabakh War revealed their attitude toward the post-Soviet South Caucasus in general and Azerbaijan in particular. This article will analyze in the regional context the policies of Turkey and Iran toward Azerbaijan during the active phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

TURKEY: THE EUPHORIA OF PAN-TURKISM

The early 1990s witnessed an unprecedented activism in Turkish foreign policy. For 30 years after the founding of the Republic of Turkey (1923), the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish foreign policy followed the principle of neutrality. Ankara's main goal was to continue with the territorial status quo

established in the early 1920s, which included its resignation of territorial claims from the Ottoman era.[1]

Turkey's neutral stance, however, formulated by the secular republic's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was not maintained by Atatürk's successors. Following World War II,[2] in 1952, Turkey joined NATO, becoming the only predominantly Muslim member state to this day.[3] During the course of the Cold War, Turkey served as an important advanced NATO base along the southwest borders of the USSR. Besides Norway, it was the only member state of the North Atlantic alliance sharing an overland border with the Soviet Union. Still, it was not until the need arose to take a concrete position in the matter of the allied operation against Iraq (1990–1991) and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet empire that Ankara was forced to engage in a more active foreign policy—especially toward the East, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus.[4]

“Having based its post-World War II foreign and security policies on the strategic importance for the West of its location vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Turkey, at least initially, hardly welcomed the end of the Cold War. As the subject of the continued relevance of NATO in the post-Cold War world order was opened up for discussion, Turkey suddenly found itself in a ‘security limbo.’”[5] After a certain hesitation in the early 1990s, however, Ankara began to view the formation of independent republics in the southern tier of the former USSR (in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia) as a historical opportunity to fortify Turkey's standing as a key regional actor. It is worth recalling that the Ottoman Empire historically occupied vast areas of the South Caucasus, especially its Western parts, with virtually all of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and southern Georgia coming under Istanbul's brief control during the final months of World War I.

Some 70 years later, Ankara's strategists strove to fill the ideological and power vacuum that was left when Russia departed from regions it had controlled for centuries. Indeed, Turkey:

...was striving for a leading role in a region extending from the Adriatic Sea to China, including the Central Asian republics, the Caucasus, the region around the Black Sea and the Balkans. Finally, Turkey expected important economic benefits from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Turks received support from the former Soviet Union itself. Leaders like Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan dreamed of a unified parliament for a Great Turkey.[6]

Moreover, according to Ziya Onis:

Turkey's embrace of the “Turkic Republics” also embodied an important psychological dimension. A closer bond with people of common historical descent was a means of overcoming Turkey's traditional fear of isolation and insecurity, feelings compounded by the negative attitude on the part of Europe and the Arab Middle East as well as several ongoing conflicts around the country's own borders. The sense of isolation is crucial in understanding both the initial euphoria concerning the “Turkic” republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as the subsequent development of close military and economic ties with Israel in the

Middle Eastern context. It was also hoped, in the process, that an active leadership role in the regions concerned would help to revitalize Turkey's strategic value to the West and, thereby, enhance its own economic and security interests.[7]

Indeed, in accordance to Western strategists at the time, unlike the Islamist model represented by Iran, the secular pro-Western model of Turkish statehood was to serve as an example for the newly independent Muslim states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Indeed, many Turkish politicians and intellectuals at the time, dazzled by a vision of Turkey as a great power, placed their hopes in the creation within a few years of a confederation of Turkish states under the aegis of Ankara, a sort of supranational entity affiliating Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Similar ideas were by no means foreign to Abulfaz Elchibay, then president of Azerbaijan, who with his (ultra-) nationalist pan-Turkist mindset befriended a number of similarly oriented Turkish politicians. Another, albeit rather cautious, proponent of this pan-Turkic vision was Turkey's president at the time, Turgut Ozal (1989–1993), who soon developed a warm relationship with his Azerbaijani counterpart.[8] On December 9, 1991, two weeks before the formal breakup of the Soviet Union, Turkey became the first country in the world to recognize the Azerbaijan's independence. Less than a year later, in a well-known speech, Ozal stated, "[O]ur nations are expecting a special form of cooperation between our states, since we have the same origin... We are branches of the same great tree, and we should constitute one family... The closest possible integration of our states is advantageous for our nations and for the region." [9] In the following years, however, the structural weaknesses in Ozal's visions were revealed, as confirmed by Ankara's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Relations with Armenia

Armenia, too, was in the process of building an independent state during the years marked by the deepening conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian-Turkish relations thus crystallized in the shadow of events in the Karabakh region. The (re)discovery of "Turkic brethren" in Turkey and Azerbaijan took place at the same time as the revival of tragic images from the Ottoman past in Armenia, which was directly related to the strengthening of ties between Turkey and Azerbaijan.[10] Such developments further deepened the Armenian security dilemma, increasingly binding it to Russia.

Initially, there existed an effort on both sides to establish friendly relations. In December 1991, Turkey was among the first countries to recognize Armenian independence. In the spring of the following year, Turkey's ambassador to Moscow at the time visited Yerevan. On the agenda were accords touching on a number of political and economic issues, including among other things the opening of the Turkish-Armenian frontier and trade in the border region. The negotiations, however, were soon burdened by Ankara's demands made as a precondition for the establishment of diplomatic ties with Yerevan. Besides a peaceful solution to the Karabakh conflict with respect to the principle of territorial integrity—that is, de facto in the favor of Baku—Ankara also demanded that Yerevan explicitly repudiate any claims for territory in eastern Turkey and any demands for recognition of the Armenian genocide (1915) under the Ottoman Empire.

Territorial aspirations of the Armenian public and of the influential diaspora over certain areas of eastern Anatolia also aroused concerns in Turkey. Eastern Anatolia is considered by Armenians to be part of so-called Western Armenia, the historical, original Armenian homeland.[11] The Armenian Revolutionary Federation, in fact, still regards the “return” of territory in eastern Anatolia as one of the main goals of its activities. Several post-Soviet Armenian parliamentary deputies have also spoken out against the recognition of the existing Turkish-Armenian borders as defined by the Turkish-Soviet Treaties of Kars (Turkish-Armenian and Turkish-Russian, 1921).[12]

In light of these potential territorial claims by Yerevan, which have never been articulated officially, Ankara had been disrupted by the occasional reports that Armenians, sympathizing with the ethnic separatist activities of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK),[13] have been providing Kurdish commandos with bases for their armed operations against Turkish targets. According to other sources, PKK training camps were even being set up on Armenian territory.[14] These too explained Ankara’s initial interest in keeping the Turkish-Armenian border area under strict control. In addition to the hermetically sealed borders, this primarily served—and still serves—the interests of Baku, which is trying to weaken and to isolate Armenia as much as possible.

Yerevan, which had pushed for the commencement of talks without any preconditions, rejected the demands of the Turkish side. Thus, Turkey and Armenia did not establish diplomatic relations. The war in Karabakh, which had been escalating since 1992, the deepening solidarity between Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as the Turkish public’s increasingly anti-Armenian stance (and vice-versa) kept Turkish-Armenian relations at the freezing point in the early 1990s—in spite of certain less than emphatic bilateral efforts to stabilize mutual relations.

Turkey and the War in Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict with Armenia was the main area in which Elcibay counted on the support of Turkey, which he saw as Azerbaijan’s potential savior. Azerbaijani oil was the only commodity that Azerbaijan could offer for the desired Turkish support, even though the expectations of the Azerbaijani leader were rather marked by his idealism.[15] The shared interests of the two states, however, had a broader background—Ankara and Baku were both interested in limiting Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus as much as possible. Elcibay and his successor Heydar Aliyev were both eager to reduce Moscow’s influence in the region in general and in Azerbaijan in particular. To counterbalance the Kremlin’s dominant standing in the area, they exploited the vision of Azerbaijani oil riches, which were supposed to attract a significant Western presence in the South Caucasus. Moscow, however, considered the region a sphere of its vital interests, its “near abroad,” and made every effort to regain control of its former colonies and disable Western interference in regional affairs.[16]

Turgut Ozal’s initial attempts to “frighten” the Armenians with unambiguous warnings or with an unexpected concentration of Turkish troops near the Armenian border failed to achieve their purpose because of the growing cooperation between Russia and Armenia. In fact, the opposite happened. In 1991, the tension reached a climax, when Russian Marshal Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, commander of the United Armed forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), explicitly threatened Ankara that

any intervention by Turkey in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict would start a third world war.[17] While the Turkish public very strongly supported their “Azerbaijani brethren,” Turkey did not back down from its activism in the Nagorno-Karabakh affair, though it reduced it to the realm of diplomacy and indirect relief. Giving up support for Baku was interpreted in Turkey as the easiest way to “lose face,” not only in Azerbaijan but also in the Turkic countries of Central Asia. For Ankara, this was to a significant extent a matter of prestige. Still, in spite of all of the efforts, Ankara chose a mostly cautious approach toward the Karabakh dispute. Throughout the period of the conflict, Ankara’s support of Baku, as aforementioned, tended to remain at the diplomatic level.[18]

Turkey’s objective unwillingness or inability to influence in any significant way the events surrounding Karabakh to the advantage of Azerbaijan further strengthened the rise of the pragmatic Suleyman Demirel to the presidential office following “idealist” Turgut Ozal’s death in May 1993. At that time, the relatively small number of Turkish military instructors was gradually withdrawn from the Karabakh battleground.[19] A sobering period had already begun in Azerbaijan under Ozal’s rule and was caused by several factors. Following the decision of the Turkish government to join in Azerbaijan’s blockade of Armenia (March 1992), Ankara was subjected to increasing pressure from the United States and European countries to consent to the transporting of thousands of tons of humanitarian aid to Armenia across Turkish territory, with a considerable part of the aid consisting of supplies of raw materials. In the opinion of the Azerbaijanis, this concession by Turkey’s leadership influenced the successful advance of the Armenian army, which in the following months managed to occupy extensive territory in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.[20]

Ankara’s efforts to distance itself somewhat from the declared blockade of Armenia, however, had already been apparent, although this had been based on rather different motives. The Armenian government led by President Levon Ter-Petrossian had expressed agreement with the Turkish proposal assuming (supposedly) the withdrawal of the Armenian demand for recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh. In return, Ankara decided to supply Armenia with 100,000 tons of grain (about one tenth of Turkey’s annual consumption at the time), which fundamentally weakened the effectiveness of the Azerbaijani blockade.

In November 1992, when Turkey began delivering the grain, Yerevan and Ankara agreed on the supply of 300 million kilowatts of electricity to Armenia. This plan would cover around 20 percent of Armenia’s annual consumption and would also counteract the oil blockade imposed by Baku. The decision, supposedly made by the Turkish government for the good of Azerbaijan but without consulting with Baku, caused a wave of protests in Azerbaijani cities. Due to the mostly negative reaction of Turkish public opinion and because of Baku’s uncompromising position, in November 1992, Ozal’s government cancelled the “power industry protocol” before it ever took effect. Beginning in 1993, in spite of vocal international protest, Turkey closed the Armenian-Turkish border even to humanitarian aid to Armenia. In doing so, it attempted, among other things, to get a solid share of the “contract of the century” that was being drafted on drilling for Azerbaijani oil. The following year, Ankara also closed its airspace for flights to Armenia.[21]

Also causing a certain disillusion of the Azerbaijanis regarding Turkey’s ability and willingness to support their country was a highly symbolic event in April 1993, when the Armenians managed to occupy the town of Kelbajar, located to the northwest of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Since Baku had not at all reckoned with the loss of Kelbajar, the government was not prepared to secure a sufficient number of vehicles for the evacuation of Kelbajar’s inhabitants. Baku, therefore, asked that Ankara quickly

provide helicopters. President Suleyman Demirel, however, refused this request on the grounds that the measure in question would contribute towards involving Turkey in the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict and would lead to a dangerous confrontation with Russia.[22]

IRAN: A CAUTIOUS COMEBACK

After the breakup of the USSR in 1991, Iran once again became as a player in the Southern Caucasus after an absence of over 160 years. Persia, which had historically been in control of the eastern parts of the Southern Caucasus, had been forced to retreat under the pressure of the victorious advance of the Russian Army. Yet an opportunity finally arrived for it to carry out an assertive policy in the region and possibly to regain its influence to the northwest of its borders. The Azerbaijan factor was believed to be decisive for the success or failure of Iran's efforts to reclaim its former influence in the Southern Caucasus to a broader extent than is generally assumed when evaluating the problems of extracting and transporting Caspian oil and natural gas. In light of the Russian-Iranian strategic partnership, which intensified in the 1990s, the Russian factor also played a significant role in the Iranian understanding of the southern Caucasus (and of Central Asia):

“Because Russia is a primary partner for Iran, and because it is an important source of weapons and nuclear reactor technology, the relationship with Russia is quite important and often takes priority over other goals in the region.”[23] One could say that the problem of Azerbaijani-Iranian relations—besides Russian-Iranian relations—predetermined to a decisive extent the formation of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy agenda in the South Caucasus region. Seen from a broader post-Soviet perspective, the same applied for Central Asia.

Relations with Azerbaijan

The disintegration of the USSR in the early 1990s harbored a number of potential threats and risks to Iran's territorial integrity. Nonetheless, soon after the emergence of an independent Azerbaijan, nothing seemed to indicate that the newborn “Azerbaijani threat” would be a hot topic, at least from a short-term perspective. Teheran recognized the independence of Azerbaijan, although after some hesitation and not until Moscow had done the same. At the time, the two nations were bound by a feeling of Islamic (Shi'i) solidarity, especially in the case of the Azerbaijani people who, following 70 years of Soviet domination and state atheism, were overcome by a desire to return to their spiritual roots. The Azerbaijanis saw in Iran a country inhabited by millions of ethnic Azerbaijanis, and if perhaps not a direct military ally, at least a pro-Azerbaijani oriented mediator in the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. There was a great increase of Iranian religious missionaries in Azerbaijan, where there were a lack of qualified mullahs. Trade between the two states also went through a period of unprecedented growth. In addition, no visas were required

between Iran and Azerbaijan. The members of thousands of families on both sides of the Araxes River were able to see each other for the first time since 1946, when the border between Iran and the Soviet Union had been hermetically sealed.

Nonetheless, the breakup of multinational Iran, where ethnic Azerbaijanis made up a quarter to a third of the population (today around 15 to 22 million people)—concentrated in the country’s northwest and its large cities—was from the beginning the Elcibay government’s long-term declared, populist “task.” Elcibay, himself a specialist in Arab philology, a great admirer of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and a proponent of the idea of secular statehood with clear pro-Western and pro-American attitudes, scorned the Iranian theocracy. He regarded Iran as a state whose “days are numbered.”^[24] In another interview delivered in Turkey, the Azerbaijani president described himself as a soldier of Ataturk and called for Iran’s downfall. This stirred up serious protests among the Iranian elites and alienated Iranian public opinion.^[25] In a none-too-diplomatic fashion, he condemned the discriminatory violation of the rights of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. He also publicly declared “the unification of [both Northern and Southern] Azerbaijan to be a question of five years at the most.”^[26]

The Iranians, thus, soon came to perceive the emergence of an independent republic in Northern Azerbaijan as a security risk. There were fears in Teheran that this potentially rich country to the north of its Azerbaijani provinces, allied with leading Western powers, could serve as a magnet for Iran’s citizens of Azerbaijani descent thus strengthening any irredentist aspirations. Iran’s rather reserved approach towards its northern neighbor changed under Elcibay’s rule. This was also helped by the growing animosity with its traditional rival—Turkey—the establishment of close relations between Ankara and Baku, the solidifying of the Russian-Iranian strategic partnership in the 1990s, U.S. actions in the region, and other factors occurring later in that decade.

After the Elcibay regime’s overthrow in June 1993 and the installation of the government of President Heydar Aliyev, who unlike his predecessor was a realistic statesman and diplomat, something gradually appeared in the relations between the two countries that some analysts describe as *détente*. Soon after his ascent to power, Aliyev began exerting enormous efforts to achieve normalization with the country’s southern neighbor. However, that presupposed a certain distancing from Ankara and Washington, and—contrary to expectations—this did not come about. The Azerbaijani president personally visited Iran several times to announce the change in his country’s foreign policy priorities and to emphasize that the importance of relations with Azerbaijan’s southern neighbor. Aliyev’s efforts to improve Azerbaijani-Iranian relations did not, however, have a major influence on the strategy Iran had already chosen with regard to the Azerbaijani Republic. Throughout the 1990s, relations between the neighboring countries developed in the spirit of Caspian “oil diplomacy,” with Baku and Teheran standing on opposite sides of the imaginary front line.^[27]

Relations with Armenia

The mutual relations between Teheran and Yerevan in the post-Soviet era have been conditioned in many respects by their relationship with their shared “troublesome” neighbor, Azerbaijan. The conceptual elements of Iranian-Armenian relations are derived from Teheran’s policy toward Baku and—in the broader

context of regional relations—toward Moscow and vice-versa.

Already in February 1992, the Armenian minister of foreign affairs visited Teheran for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union. The issues discussed in the meeting with official Iranian representatives were the Karabakh conflict, the question of the supply of natural gas to Armenia, economic and technological cooperation accords, as well as other subjects.[28] Following the signing of these accords, Armenian-Iranian relations were limited to the economic sphere. After Elcibay came to power in Azerbaijan, however, Armenian-Iranian relations warmed considerably. The Armenian economy was almost completely dependent on Iranian imports, and, according to some sources, Iran also served as a transit country for the supply of weapons and munitions from Russia to Armenia.[29]

Overall, the economic blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan and domestic policy problems in Georgia, which had threatened the supply of strategic raw materials from Russia, made Iran the only window to the world for the landlocked Armenia. It is in this context that one must understand the precipitous growth of trade with Iran. For war torn Armenia, in the early 1990s, the border with Iran became a “path of life.”[30] Food, raw materials, and household goods imported from northern Iran enabled the Armenians to survive under the drastic conditions of the winter of 1992 and 1993. Iran thus became Armenia’s chief trading partner. To summarize, “the assistance to Armenia advanced Iran’s cooperation with Russia, with which Iran shared common interests in the Caucasus by establishing what was later labeled as the Russia-Armenia-Iran axis. Armenia on the other hand, landlocked between Turkey, Azerbaijan and an unstable Georgia, needed Iran in order to disenclave itself, circumvent sanctions imposed by Turkey and win the war with Azerbaijan.”[31]

Iran and the Nagorno-Karabakh War

According to Svante Cornell, the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was of key importance for Iran for numerous reasons. Above all, the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh in several cases (especially in 1993) was taking place in the direct vicinity of the Iranian border, and so the territory of Iran itself was frequently under threat. Still, irrespective of the fact that it was a conflict between two states neighboring Iran, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict played and still plays a significant role in the context of the overall constellation of power in the region, where Iran is one of the leading players.[32] In addition, as aforementioned, due to the existence of a sizable Azerbaijani minority in the country, the Nagorno-Karabakh War could potentially destabilize Iran from within.

This circumstance led Iran to offer its services to both states in the interest of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Iran’s initiatives as a mediator were especially prominent in 1991–1992. Iran did not make active efforts, however, until the Armenian troops had already reached the Azerbaijani-Iranian border at the Araxes River, when their advance farther to the east threatened to lead to the collapse of the Azerbaijani state.[33] An occupation of central lowland parts of Azerbaijan would bring Baku under a direct threat of Armenian incursion that could have catastrophic consequences for regional security. This fact forced Teheran together with Turkey to appeal to the UN Security Council about the need to halt Armenian aggression. Iran gave the firm impression that it was unwilling to accept a major change to the balance of power in the South Caucasus.[34] This was most clearly manifest in the autumn of 1993, when Nakhichevan was subjected to the realistic threat of an Armenian invasion. It was the uncompromising stance taken by Teheran (and Ankara) that at last nearly eliminated the determination of the Armenians to annex the Azerbaijani enclave.[35]

Apart from the times when it was absolutely necessary to take action in order to prevent Armenia from threatening regional security in the South Caucasus, Teheran also took advantage of the Karabakh conflict in order to exert pressure on Baku. Iran was apparently supplying raw materials and goods to Armenia, which was being subjected to a blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey.[36] The transport routes across the territory of war-torn Georgia were not always reliable. Russian deliveries often failed to arrive in Armenia. The gas line leading from Georgia to Armenia was the target of constant attacks, allegedly by Georgian Azerbaijanis. Some claims have been made that Iran, while following Russia's example in avoiding any direct military participation, has served as a transit territory for the supply of weapons to Armenia.[37] A somewhat paradoxical aspect of Teheran's South Caucasian policy, indicative of the regime's pragmatic character at the time, was the de facto support of Christian Armenia in a war against Shi'i Azerbaijan.[38]

Elcibay's controversial comments seem to explain the clear shift in Teheran's policy concerning southern Azerbaijan and Iran. Still, concerns regarding developments to the north of the Araxes River, as indicated, had already existed in Iran in the early 1990s.[39] In 1992–1993, the Iranians gradually came to realize that a real threat to the territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic existed in the South Caucasus, whether in the medium- or long term. Several events during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war showed that Teheran was aware that any serious threat to security in the South Caucasus region could also affect Iran's territorial integrity.

For example, in October 1993, Armenian forces advanced to the Azerbaijani-Iranian border, and tens of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees were able to enter Iranian territory, though for a short time. Thousands of Azerbaijanis swam across the Araxes River and were cordially welcomed by Iranian Azerbaijanis. Teheran reacted immediately. It set up refugee camps, though not on its own territory, as would have been most appropriate for safety reasons. Instead, camps were established in the Azerbaijani territory north of the Araxes River, and thus in the direct vicinity of the approaching front line of the war.[40] One might expect that out of solidarity with the northern Azerbaijanis, the Iranian Azerbaijanis would mobilize themselves and their volunteer forces would participate in fighting against the Armenians. Iran neither wants to be dragged into the war nor to have its large Azeri minority identify with a pan-Azeri political philosophy. Incidentally, Azerbaijani is used for citizens of Azerbaijan; Azeri for ethnic members of the Azeri group. A growing identification of Iranian Azeris with Azerbaijan is one of the Tehran regime's worst nightmares.

The Karabakh war still had some influence on Iranian public opinion. In the early 1990s, some voices in Iran proclaimed the need for the Islamic Republic to intervene in order to help their "Shi'i brothers." The justification was not, however, based solely on the factor of a shared religion. Many Iranians, and to an extent some Iranian Azerbaijanis, are convinced that the Azerbaijani Azerbaijanis are citizens of Iran, since all of Azerbaijan has historically belonged to Iran.

In the early 1990s, the Iranian newspaper *Abrar* published the results of a campaign during which "tens of thousands" of Iranian Azerbaijanis signed a petition demanding the immediate "return" to Iran of "seventeen cities of the Caucasus," including the capitals of independent Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. This reflected the attitudes of a certain revisionist-minded part of the Iranian public, ruled by a vision of Greater Iran (Iran-e Bozorg), the country's regional hegemony, which would soon shape the South Caucasus region as well.[41] Obviously under the influence of those optimistic expectations, several Iranian newspapers urged the government in Teheran to "punish Armenia." Although

“punishing” Armenia, in hindsight, was definitely not the task of Teheran’s policies in the region, the Iranians appear to have tried to limit Armenian expansion in the region. Too great a success by the Armenians on the Karabakh battlefield would have threatened Iran’s domestic political stability and could have caused a confrontation with Turkey. A combination of these factors would have made the northwestern border of the Islamic Republic extremely vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

The foreign policies of Turkey and Iran during the armed phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict indicate that identity played a rather limited role therein. In fact, identity was mostly reflected on by public opinion in both Middle Eastern countries, with the case of Turkey being an explicit one. Unlike Iran, where the awareness of Shi’i solidarity with Azerbaijan was reduced by the apparent Persian-Turkic split and public manifestations in general were subject to the strict control of the authorities, the highly nationalist Turkish public opinion favoring the “Azerbaijani Turkic brethren” in the Nagorno-Karabakh War shaped Ankara’s policies vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, though not as a decisive factor. Yet it also was an issue of prestige closely linked to the vision of Turkey’s upcoming trans-regional domination in the Turkic world. The country’s desire to gain access to the oil riches of Azerbaijan also played a role.

It was also largely believed in Turkey that its efforts among the newly independent Muslim republics of Azerbaijan and Central Asia would be supported by the leading Western powers because of their preference for the secular and pro-Western model of statehood represented by Turkey, in contrary to the Islamic model of Iran. Ankara’s commitment to gain and maintain the role of the leading force in the Turkic world, however, fell short whenever material support for Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh War came into question. Turkish support for Azerbaijan was generally confined to the diplomatic realm. As indicated above, this was a result of a combination of factors including Western pressure, economic interests, and most importantly Ankara’s desire to avoid conflict with Armenia’s key ally, Russia.

Though both Ankara and Tehran at times attempted to legitimize their policy toward Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh war ideologically, by focusing on their common identity with the newly independent Azerbaijani nation (Turkic language and roots or Shi’i religion and heritage), rational factors clearly prevailed. For both Turkey and Iran, the Russian factor was crucial for their regional comeback. Indeed, following a brief period of initial euphoria, the Turks came to realize that Moscow was still an important player in the South Caucasus. Moreover, Turkey understood that Russia’s commitment to Armenia in the fields of military and political cooperation, as mentioned, significantly limited Ankara in lending tangible support for Azerbaijan in its war effort.

For Tehran, its policies in the post-Soviet South Caucasus were merely part of its wider interaction with Russia, which soon became Iran’s key strategic partner in a range of issues of far greater importance for Tehran than that of Azerbaijan. Fortunately for both Russia and Iran, their interests in containing Turkey and the West in the region west of the Caspian Sea coincided, hence Tehran’s rather limited activism in an area that was widely considered Moscow’s backyard.

Indeed, unlike Turkey, the establishment of the newly independent states to Iran’s north brought no joy to

Tehran. Moreover, in the case of Azerbaijan, the country north of the Araxes River came to be perceived as a security risk and a rather cool reception soon prevailed in Iran. Although for the matter of its own security Iran never pushed for Azerbaijan's collapse during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it carried out a policy aimed to reduce its South Caucasian neighbor's power significantly. Teheran acted to prevent Azerbaijan from implementing its largely pro-American foreign political agenda while exploiting its rich oil and natural gas fields, which it feared could in the longterm fuel irredentism among Iran's Azerbaijani community. Thus with the conclusion of the armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s, Tehran implemented a strategy that would shape its policies in the entire South Caucasus region for years to come.

**Emil Souleimanov, Ph.D. is assistant professor at the Department of Russian and East European Studies, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. The present article is based on research carried out in the framework of the Research Design of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, No. MSM0021620841.*

[1] Something of an exception at first were Ankara's aspirations in the oil-rich areas of Mosul and Kirkuk. While at present formally part of Iraq, they are de facto under the control of the local Kurds, who regard the area as an integral part of (southern) Kurdistan. In the early 1920s, the Turks strove for control over that area, which they regarded as a part of the emerging Republic of Turkey. In view, however, of the negative stance of the British who controlled the area at the time under a League of Nations mandate, Ankara was never able to exercise its claims.

[2] In 1994, Ankara declared war on Nazi Germany, which was rather a formal act, the purpose of which was to enter the league of allied nations, with virtually no practical implications whatsoever.

[3] After 1945, Stalin exerted pressure on Ankara in an effort to get Turkey to surrender part of the territory the Soviets claimed to be historical western Armenia (and southwestern Georgia) to the Soviet Union and to give de facto consent for the placement of Soviet military bases in the vicinity of the Turkish Straits.

[4] For detailed information on the post-Cold War activism in Turkish foreign policies and the role of the East in it, see, for instance, Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington D.C: The Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

[5] Mustafa Aydin, "Turkish Policy Towards the Caucasus," *Connections*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 2002), p. 39.

[6] Freddy de Pauw, "Turkey's Policies in Transcaucasia," in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Press, 1996), <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0801.htm> (accessed December 25, 2007).

[7] Ziya Onis, "Turkey and Post-Soviet States: Potential and Limits of Regional Power Influence," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June 2001), <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2001/06/onis.html>.

[8] Soon after taking power, Elcibay appointed as interior minister the controversial Iskender Hamidov, founder and leader of the Azerbaijani branch of the ultranationalist organization Bozkurtlar ("Grey Wolves"), which called for the creation of a Greater Turan encompassing Azerbaijan, Turkey, as well as

vast areas of Russia, Iran, and China inhabited by ethnic groups of Turkish origin.

[9] *Dunya*, November 6, 1992.

[10] Hints of the revival of the pan-Turkic project and its possible impacts on Armenia against the background of the deepening conflict with Azerbaijan (and Turkey) at the beginning of the 1990s increased the security concerns of Armenians. Especially deserving of attention in this regard is the work of Alexander Svarants: *Pantjurkizm v geostrategii Turcii na Kavkaze* (Moskva: Akademija gumanitarnykh issledovanij, 2002).

[11] We should remember that these areas are at present inhabited by millions of Kurds; all that remained of the formerly powerful Armenian population after the tragic events of 1915 and the following years, were a few thousand inhabitants remained, who (unlike, for example, the large Azerbaijani population of northwestern Iran) cannot represent a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the Turkish state.

[12] *Aravot*, 20 April 1992.

[13] Since 1984, in the underdeveloped, mountainous areas of southeastern Turkey, inhabited mostly by Kurds, the PKK has been waging an armed struggle for the creation of an independent Kurdistan. Until his arrest in 1998, the leader of that separatist organization, which professes Marxism-Leninism, was Abdullah Ocalan, who is now serving a life sentence in Turkey.

[14] In recent years, these reports have been coming mainly from Azerbaijani politicians and statesmen, who are now speaking of the PKK not only in Armenia, but with increasing frequency in the territory controlled by Stepanakert as well. *Turkish Weekly*, February 18, 2008.

[15] In fact, in a number of televised interviews, Elcibay appealed to Ankara, underlying its commitment to intervene in the ongoing war in favor of Azerbaijan simply because both Azerbaijanis and Turks shared similar ethnic roots.

[16] For more on the matter, see Stephen Blank, "Russia's Real Drive to the South," *Orbis*, Vol. 39 (Summer 1995), p. 371.

[17] De Pauw, "Turkey's Policies in Transcaucasia."

[18] An important exception has been the training of thousands of Azerbaijani officers in Turkish military academies and the participation of Turkish instructors in the Azerbaijani army and navy.

[19] *Bakinskiy Rabochiy*, June 20, 1993.

[20] *Azadliq*, March 7, 1993.

[21] *Turkish Daily News*, August 21, 1994.

[22] *Turkish Probe*, April 6, 1993. It should be added, however, that on the very next day following the occupation of Kelbajar by Armenian troops (on April 3, 1993), Turkey completely closed its border with Armenia.

- [23] Olga Oliker and Thomas S. Szayna, *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), p. 210.
- [24] *Azadliq*, October 15, 1992.
- [25] **Nozar Alaolmolki**, *Life After the Soviet Union: The Newly Independent Republics of Transcaucasus and Central Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
- [26] For more on Iranian-Azerbaijani relations during this period, see Emil Souleimanov, "Íránská Politika na Jižním Kavkaze," *Mezinárodní Vztahy*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2001).
- [27] See, for example, Jeyhun Mollazade, "Azerbaijan and the Caspian Basin: Pipelines and Geopolitics," *Demokratizatsiya*, (January 2006), p. 32.
- [28] *Lraber*, February 26, 1992.
- [29] Svante Cornell, "Iran and the Caucasus," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (January 1998), p. 60.
- [30] This term was widely used by Armenians during the 1990s in analogy with the path of the same name that a half a century earlier had connected Leningrad (St. Petersburg), besieged by the Germans, with the rest of the country controlled by the Soviets.
- [31] Kaweh Sadegh-Zadeh, "Iran's Strategy in the South Caucasus," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter 2008), http://cria-online.org/j2_5.php (accessed February 3, 2008).
- [33] Abdollah Ramezanzade, "Iran's Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis," in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Press, 1996), <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0701.htm> (accessed January 3, 2008).
- [34] Suha Bolukbasi, "Ankara's Baku-Centered Transcaucasia Policy: Has It Failed?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (January 1997), p. 135.
- [35] Ramezanzade, "Iran's Role As Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis."
- [36] Cornell, "Iran and the Caucasus." For a collection of witnesses indicating Iran's direct support to Armenia in the course of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, see also Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 318.
- [38] For more on Iranian support of Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh War, see Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 327–30.
- [39] The protests in former Persia were caused by the fact that the newly created republic in the eastern part of the southern Caucasus (1918) had chosen the name Azerbaijan. Already then, there were fears in Persia that this amounted to an integral part of a Turkish project to penetrate Central Asia to the east and to annex Iranian territory to Azerbaijan and declare a Greater Turan. Such fears existed especially since parts of Iranian Azerbaijan had been occupied by the Ottomans during World War I.
- [40] Geoffrey Gresh, "Coddling the Caucasus: Iran's Strategic Relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia,"

Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 2008). See also Ramezanzadeh, "Iran's Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis."

[41] Ramezanzadeh, "Iran's Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis."