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## IRAN BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

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Resolution of the Karabakh problem is possible only through diplomatic efforts, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said during his official visit to Azerbaijan. Teheran is interested in stability of the region and insists on preventing military escalation of the conflict, making efforts to maintain diplomatic balance.

Today Iran itself officially remains a rogue state. The US seeks to hinder the development of its nuclear program, believing that peaceful atom technologies can be used to create nuclear weapons, which is highly undesirable in an unstable Middle Eastern region. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, relations between Iran and monarchies of the Persian Gulf have become noticeably strained. Tehran accused these allies of America of destabilizing the Middle East. At the same time, Western policy of sanctions against the Islamic Republic lasts for more than 35 years.

Right now experts highlight high level of Iranian diplomacy, which is able to find common ground without compromising its own interests. A good example of this is balance of Tehran's relations with Yerevan and Baku.

On the one hand, Iran allows Armenia to have a "strong rear" in relations with Muslim world, while gaining access to the EAEU market and strengthening trade relations with Armenia as a supplier of natural gas.

On the other hand, Tehran maintains close ties with Baku. Azerbaijan and Iran are developing joint transport projects, one of which is the Astara-Resht-Qazvin railway. In addition, Iran supports Azerbaijan in the matter of country's territorial integrity.

Iran's interest in maintaining stable relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia is also based on the fact that there are about 240,000 representatives of Armenian ethnos and more than 35 million Azerbaijanis in Iran. Accordingly, Iranian authorities need to respond to any outbreaks of ethnic tension in the region in order to prevent the Karabakh conflict from reaching its own territory, which would pose a potential security threat to the northern part of this country.

At the same time, Iran doesn't stand by Armenia or Azerbaijan when it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement. Tehran understands that Yerevan has a certain level of trust and mutual understanding with only two out of its four neighbors - Iran and Georgia. However, Georgia has difficult relations with Russia, which blames Tbilisi for its attempts to become NATO "outpost" in Transcaucasia. Iran has a long history of conflicts with the West. This explains why Iran

welcomes any initiative to resolve the Karabakh conflict without changes to internationally recognized borders.

Escalation of the Karabakh problem can lead to a flood of refugees, which also raises fears in Tehran. Occupation of not only Nagorno-Karabakh, but also seven regions of Azerbaijan created additional problems for Iran's mediation efforts. Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is forced to consider public opinion within the country, where Azerbaijani community can call for a stricter Armenian policy. Nevertheless, Iran is interested in taking an impartial position and has an opportunity to gain trust of both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

One way or another, Iran doesn't pretend that it's a leading political player in Transcaucasia. In the light of events in Syria, Tehran's main priorities are in the Middle East.

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