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AN OVERVIEW OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

(ERMENİSTAN CUMHURİYETİ İRAN İSLAM CUMHURİYETİ
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Abstract: *Radical changes took place in the international relations system in the 1990s. In particular, the collapse of the USSR necessitated the formation of a “new world order.” The South Caucasus started to be governed by three states in the post-Soviet period. The geopolitical scene of the South Caucasus changed by the dissolution of the USSR, and new opportunities emerged for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran had deep historical ties with the South Caucasus and new conditions in the region brought the need for a new direction in terms of pursuing an active foreign policy to gain credibility in the international arena. The formation of relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on political, economic, and security factors. In an effort to step on the path of becoming a regional power a long time after the collapse of the USSR, Iran has been interested in cooperation with Armenia to strengthen its position in the South Caucasus. Armenia, meanwhile, has tried to get the support of Iran along with Russia to maintain its political presence in the region.*

Keywords: *Armenia, Iran, South Caucasus, geopolitics, Iran-Armenia relations*

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Öz: 1990'lı yıllarda uluslararası ilişkiler sisteminde meydana gelen köklü değişiklikler, özellikle SSCB'nin çöküşü, bir "yeni dünya düzeninin" kurulmasını gerekli kılmıştı. Güney Kafkasya, Sovyet sonrası dönemde üç devlet tarafından yönetilmeye başlandı. Güney Kafkasya'nın jeopolitik sahnesi SSCB'nin dağılmasıyla değişmiş ve İran İslam Cumhuriyeti için yeni fırsatlar ortaya çıkmıştı. İran, Güney Kafkasya ile derin tarihsel bağlara sahipti ve bölgedeki yeni şartlar İran için uluslararası arenada güvenilirlik kazanmak adına aktif bir dış politika izleyebilmek açısından yeni bir yön gerektirmekteydi. Ermenistan Cumhuriyeti ile İran İslam Cumhuriyeti arasındaki ilişkilerin kurulması politik, ekonomik ve güvenlik faktörlerine dayanmaktadır. İran uzun yıllardan sonra SSCB'nin dağılması ile bölgesel bir güç olma yolunda adım atmak için Ermenistan'la iş birliği yapmak istemektedir. Ermenistan ise bölgede siyasi varlığını korumak adına Rusya'yla beraber İran'ın da desteğini kazanmaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ermenistan, İran, Güney Kafkasya, jeopolitik, İran-Ermenistan ilişkileri

Introduction

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century was a period of complexity and dynamism for the international political setting. The Caucasus region has always played a significant role in the foreign policy of Great Powers due to its natural resources and geopolitical position between the East and the West. The fundamental changes took place in the international relations system in the 1990s, in particular, the collapse of the USSR necessitated the formation of the “new world order”. With this change, the South Caucasus witnessed the rise of three states, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, all of which restored their independence after the dissolution of the USSR.

On the other hand, after the collapse of the USSR, new opportunities occurred for the Islamic Republic of Iran, which had deep historical ties with the South Caucasus, regarding pursuing effective foreign policy in the region. It is important to note that the new regime which came into power in 1979 with the Islamic revolution faced the isolation from the Western countries and its political reputation had considerably weakened. Therefore, the establishment of political and diplomatic relations with newly independent states could have led to the Islamic Republic of Iran to restore its previous reputation and to get alleviate isolation from the West.

Diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Armenia initiated on December 25, 1991, by the recognition of the independence of Armenia by Iran.¹ In February 1992, Armenian Foreign Affairs Minister Raffi Hovannisian paid a visit to Tehran, and two weeks later Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Akbar Vilayati officially visited Yerevan. Thus, the start of formal talks between the two sides initiated the practical phase of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The relations between Iran and Armenia have been shaped on the axis of alliances in the context of the Iran-Armenia natural gas pipeline, Armenia’s electricity sales to Iran, and Iran-Armenia rail and road lines, Armenians in Iran as the most beneficiaries of fundamental rights and freedoms, and the connection of the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea.² Relations between Iran and Armenia can be divided into three periods according to their development trends:³

1 Nikolay Hovhannisyan, *The foreign policy of the Republic of Armenia in the Transcaucasian-Middle Eastern Geopolitical Region* (Yerevan: National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, Institute of Oriental Studies, 1998), 43.

2 Onur Okyar, “İran ekseninde Türkiye-Ermenistan ilişkileri: Anlaşmazlıktan kazanca,” *Hitit Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, Sayı 2 (2017): 1182

3 Vusal Gasimli, Zaur Shiriyev and Zulfiyya Valiyeva, *Iranian-Armenian Relations: Geopolitical Reality versus Political Statements* (Baku: SAM, 2011), 11.

Phase I (1991-2001): In this period, there was no major conflict between Iran and Armenia on political, economic, religious, or ethnic grounds, but some minor troubles occurred. This period can be characterized by the possibilities for strengthening the relations between the two countries and several projects in the field of transport and energy that were implemented between the two countries.

Phase II (2001-2008): This stage coincided with the presidency term of Robert Kocharian of Armenia. At this stage, Armenia tried to gradually develop relations with the US and the EU countries alongside Russia and Iran, but unequivocally could not get out of Russia's political orbit.

Phase III (post-2008): In the post-2008 period, Armenia again started to strengthen relations with Iran. Due to the military conflict between Russia and Georgia that led to the abolition of the railway project between Armenia and Abkhazia, the conflict prevented Armenia from accessing the world market through Georgia. Therefore, Armenia sought to restore relations with Turkey.⁴ However, the failure of these attempts resulted in Armenia restoring its relations with Iran. Since 2009, agreements have been signed between the two countries for establishing close ties in energy, agriculture, science, and culture.

The factors influencing to the Iran-Armenia relations

The main aim in the foreign policy strategy of Iran was to establish political-economic relations with the Caucasus region. From this point of view, cooperation with Armenia was of great importance for Iran.

As for Armenia, internal processes, especially the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, played an essential role in the formation of Armenia's foreign policy. Therefore, Armenia's regional and international relations were shaped on this format. Iran is a significant partner for Armenia in terms of its presence in South Caucasus both economically and politically. Also, accessing Central Asia, China, and the Middle East and building political-economic relations with these regions are only possible through Iran.

Moreover, the occupation of the lands of Azerbaijan, problems with Turkey, and unsuccessful attempts to establish good relations with Georgia resulted in the isolation of Armenia in the region. Therefore, the failure of the normalization of relations with Iran could completely undermine Armenia's access to the international arena and make it fall into a political and economic

4 Aybars Görgülü, *Türkiye-Ermenistan İlişkileri Bir Kısr Döngü* (Istanbul: Tesev Yayınları, 2008), 23-26.

crisis. Considering that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been a major partner and important actor for Armenia, however, the non-existence of physical borders with Russia revealed the importance of cooperation with Iran for Armenia.

According to researchers, several vital factors shape the relations between Armenia and Iran.⁵

Political interests. Nearly 30 years after the dissolution of the USSR, Iran became one of the most reliable political and economic partners of Armenia. On September 21, 1991, 99.5% of voters voted in favour of the independence of Armenia and on that day, Armenia declared its independence.⁶ Political and diplomatic relations between Iran and Armenia started with the signing agreement in Tehran on February 9, 1992.⁷ Armenia's effort to build close relations with Iran in a short period was not a coincidence. During the Soviet period, Armenia had managed to stabilize its economy thanks to the internal economic policy of the USSR. Under the Soviet system, private ownership was banned and replaced by centralized industrialization process. However, Armenia faced economic and political difficulties following the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as in the existing economic system, because it was no longer a part of the centrally planned Soviet economy and it could thus no longer receive support of the economic infrastructure that came along with it.

At the same time, territorial claims against Azerbaijan and conflicts around its borders had a pernicious impact on Armenia's political influence. The first and foremost reason was Armenia's transformation into an aggressor state by the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan. When the conflict started in 1992, initially Iran was neutral and emphasized the importance of ending the conflict by ensuring peace between the two sides. However, the economic support provided by Iran during the conflict served to strengthen Armenia as an aggressive country and helped it to escape from its isolation and political-economic crisis.⁸

It is important to note that Armenia also could not properly regulate relations with Georgia due making implicit claims over Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia.⁹ Georgia was one of the two openings for Armenia that allowed

5 Sühban Talıblı, *İran İslam Respublikasının Qafqaz Siyasətində Dağlıq Qarabağ Problemi (1991-2005-ci illər)* (Bakı: Elm və Təhsil, 2016), 112

6 Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Christof Hartmann. *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook*. Vol. I-II - Elections Worldwide (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 329

7 "Bilateral Relations. Islamic Republic of Iran." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*, Accessed February 03, 2019, <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/ir>

8 Brenda Shaffer, "Iran's Role in the South Caucasus and Caspian Region: Diverging Views of the U.S. and Europe," *Iran and Its Neighbours* (2013): 17-22.

9 Vahid Ömarov, Elnur Kəbizadə, və Nəsimə Mirzəyeva. *Gürcüstan: daxili ictimai-siyasi şərait* (Bakı: Mütərcim, 2018), 100-108, 117-123.

Armenia to establish and maintain its relations with the West. After independence, Armenia has tried to revive its economy by importing natural gas and oil resources over Georgia. However, the implicit territorial claims to Javakheti by Armenian governments has damaged these relations. Armenia supported separatist groups in Samtskhe-Javakheti region through various means and contributed to the participation of Armenians in the separatist activities.¹⁰ In line with this, the Armenian minority living in Samtskhe-Javakheti pursued active secessionist claims and separatist movements towards the region. Especially during Russian-Georgian conflict, Armenia supported the social, cultural and political organization of Armenians living in Georgia and helped coordinate their activities.¹¹ As a result, tensions between Armenia and Georgia has noticeably weakened access of Armenia to the West and left it isolated. Therefore, it has been important for Armenia to cooperate with Iran in order to gain its lost reputation in the world arena. The reasons why Iran is essential for Armenia can be grouped as follows:

First, cooperation with one of the biggest actors in the region might restore Armenia's political reputation. Moreover, getting the political support of Iran would allow Armenia to pursue its policy with confidence;

Second, the only way to save Armenia from the economic and political collapse was to establish relations with neighboring countries. However, the occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan, conflicts with Turkey and failed relations with Georgia led Armenia to keep relations with Iran more stable in order to maintain its interests in the region, to restore the degraded economy, and to continue territorial claims against Azerbaijan.

Economic interests. After the overthrow of the Shah regime in Iran, many sanctions were imposed on Iran by the West. After the dissolution of the USSR, the new chance occurred for Iran in the region. Iran's economic interests on Armenia was to get rid of the West's pressure and restore its reputation in the international arena through Armenia. Even for this purpose, Iran tried to get the support of the Armenian lobby in the Western states by establishing closer relations. Economic relations between Iran and Armenia have been intensified with the establishment of the Armenian-Iranian relations Development Commission in 1992.¹² The Iran-Armenia Business Organization and the Iranian-Armenian Business Council were established in

10 Эльнур Кальбизаде, "Криптомиацум," *Kaspiy.az*, accessed March 01, 2019, https://www.kaspiy.az/news.php?id=96094#.XQC_2IgzblV

11 Nilgün Atıcı Köktaş, "Saakaşvili dönemi Gürcistan: iç ve dış politika üzerine bir değerlendirme," *Ardahan Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, Sayı 2 (2015): 101

12 Tiffany G. Petros, "Evolution of Armenia's Foreign Policy," *Armenia International Policy Research*, 2003, doi:10.1.1.489.5895., 9

order to further strengthen economic relations between the two countries.¹³ Since their inception, these two organizations have closely cooperated and played a vital role in the deepening economic relations between Iran and Armenia by being the basis of political relations between the two states as well. For instance, in the one of the meetings of Iran's ambassador to Armenia in 2014, the ambassador emphasized the following: "We discussed the issue of transportation of Iranian gas through the Armenian territories. With this cooperation, we want Armenia to get rid of the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade and Western sanctions to be taken over Iran."¹⁴

Such kind of statements by Iranian officials have already become a factor in support of the development of the Iran-Armenian relations. The reason is that Armenia and Iran cannot participate in all projects happening in the region and try to offer alternatives to these projects in order to draw attention to themselves. Although a number of large-scale projects were taken into consideration to be implemented between the two states, it was not possible to fully realize it as they did not meet existing geopolitical realities. This is because Iran could not participate in major projects in the region and has tried to play a leading role in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus by offering alternative options. However, Iran has not been able to become a leading actor in the region due to existing political conditions, Azerbaijan-West relations, and sanctions imposed by Western states on Iran.¹⁵ Therefore, it was not possible for Iran's proposed projects to compete with regional projects initiated by Azerbaijan. These projects included a high-voltage power line, oil pipeline, and a railway network between the two countries.¹⁶ In addition, both sides have taken positive steps to create a free economic zone.

Economic relations between Iran and Armenia are based on energy, transport, agriculture, machinery, and food industry cooperation.¹⁷ Statistical analysis shows that in the post-Soviet period, most of the investment in the economy of Armenia belonged to Iran and Russia.¹⁸

13 Petros, "Evolution of Armenia's Foreign Policy."

14 Yücel Tanay, "İran-Ermeni İlişkileri Tarihi Ve İranlı Mollaların Bir Millet İki Devlet Tezi," *TürkHareketi.org*, accessed March 10, 2019, http://www.turkhareketi.org/m_31_iran-ermeni-iliskileri-tarihi-ve-iranli-mollaların-bir-millet-iki-devlet-tezi.html

15 Zafer Yıldırım, "İran-Ermenistan ilişkileri: Ortak sorunlardan doğan işbirliği," *Demokrasi Platformu*, Sayı 35 (2014): 7

16 Şakir Batmaz, "Ermenistan'ın Bölge Ülkeleri İlişkilerinin Tarih, Ekonomi Ve Nüfus Gibi Parametrelerle Analizi," *Marmara University*, accessed March 14, 2019, <http://turksandarmenians.marmara.edu.tr/tr/birinci-dunya-savasından-gunumuze-ermenistanın-bolge-ulkeleri-iliskilerinin-tarih-ekonomi-ve-nufus-gibi-parametrelerle-analizi/>

17 Sübhan Talıblı, *İran İslam Respublikasının Qafqaz Siyasətində Dağlıq Qarabağ Problemi (1991-2005-ci illər)* (Bakı: Elm və Təhsil, 2016), 115

18 "1995 Country Reports on Economic Policy and Trade Practices," *US Department of State*, accessed March 20, 2019, https://1997-2001.state.gov/issues/economic/trade_reports/russia_nis95/ARMENIA.html

Economic competition with Turkey, which is another geopolitical actor in the region, also boosts relations between Iran and Armenia. Iran sees Turkey as a rival in the region and Azerbaijan as a threat since 1990.¹⁹ The political influence of Turkey in this region is undesirable for Iran because of its desire to gain a reputation as a regional power. In addition, given the economic impact of Azerbaijan's influence on the Azerbaijani population living in Iran, official Tehran has viewed the rapid growth of Azerbaijan, in terms of it becoming a strong state in the region, as a threat to its security. Iran's inability to improve its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan increased the importance of Armenian-Iranian economic cooperation.

Security factor. After the collapse of the USSR, one of the most critical issues for Armenia was security. Armenia had been offered protection by Moscow during the Soviet period, and Armenia has been unable to ensure its own security without the help of Moscow since its independence. Meanwhile, the new geopolitical scene in the Caucasus created severe threats to the security of Russia. Therefore, membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) spearheaded by Russia was of great importance for Armenia. That is why Armenia first joined the CSTO within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).²⁰

Armenia's cooperation with Russia has always been in the spotlight of Iran. Iran must indirectly take into account Russia's interests in the region and pursue a policy that is compatible with it. Armenia was in need of Russian support to keep its troops in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. In this regard, according to the treaty signed between Russia and Armenia in 1992, the Russian Border Troops Command undertook the protection of the borders of Armenia with Turkey and Iran.²¹

One of the main issues worrying Iran was Armenia's cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the military alliance of the Western countries. Although the cooperation with NATO was on the agenda after gaining independence, Armenia was more interested in CSTO membership and took more serious steps in this area. However, Armenia has begun to cooperate with NATO within NATO's Partnership for Peace program.²²

19 Mehran Kamrava, *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus* (London: London Hurst & Company, 2017), 58.

20 "International Organisations - Collective Security Treaty Organization," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*, accessed April 01, 2019, <https://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/1>.

21 *Ermənistan Respublikası (məlumat Sorğu Kitabçası)* (Bakı: QESAM, 2006), 54

22 "Relations with Armenia," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, accessed April 04, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/topics_48893.htm

From the initial periods of independence, Iran was considered as a strategic partner in terms of security policy of Armenia, therefore Armenia was interested in military cooperation with Iran. On the other hand, Armenia was necessary for Tehran, because maintaining good relations with Armenia could stabilize relations between Russia and Iran. As a result of the cooperation in the military field, Iran supported Armenia in the South Caucasus. In particular, when Armenia occupied lands belonging to Azerbaijan, Iran's policy towards South Caucasus allowed Armenia to change the balance in the region in favor of the Armenians.²³ Thus, Armenia relied on Iran besides Russia to ensure its security by attracting Tehran's attention on economic, political, and security spheres.

The establishment and further consolidation of cooperation among Iran, Armenia, and Greece is also a crucial issue in the Iran-Armenia relations.²⁴ The basis of this cooperation was the relations established in military and security spheres. The interests of Greece and Armenia were in line with each other. Armenia needed support and unity in order to continue the occupation of lands of Azerbaijan. Greece, along with the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (who claim to act on behalf of all Cyprus), also claimed to the islands in the Aegean Sea by bringing Cyprus problem to the agenda. Thus, the problem between Turkey and Greece prompted Greece to come closer to Armenia and form an official relationship.

On the other hand, Iran was very much interested in this cooperation. Because Armenia's aggression towards Azerbaijan and the problem between Turkey and Greece over the island of Cyprus have reduced both Turkey's and Azerbaijan's activities in the region, Turkey's isolation from the political standpoint of the region and the weakening of political and economic relations with the Caucasian countries could strengthen Iran's position and power in the South Caucasus.

The place of Armenia in the foreign policy of Iran towards South Caucasus

Iran is one of the most important actors in the Middle East. Its energy resources, geostrategic position, and desire to be one of the most influential countries in the region play an important role in Iran's foreign policy activities. After World War II, Western states, especially the US, were interested in

23 Njdeh Asisian, "An Overview of Iran-Armenian Relations in the Post-Soviet Era and Their Impact on Caucasus Regional Stability," *Journal of the European Society for Iranian Studies* (2018): 39

24 "Greece Announces Pending Defense Pact with Iran and Armenia," *Stratfor*, June 1, 1999, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/greece-announces-pending-defense-pact-iran-and-armenia>.

cooperating with Iran in the energy sphere. However, the revolution in 1979 led to radical changes in the domestic and foreign policy of Iran and damaged relations between the West and Iran. After the revolution, sharia laws were adopted, and foreign policy was declared according to the conceptual basis of Islam.²⁵ The economic relations between Iran and the US were at the highest level during the Shah period. Especially in the field of energy, the US maintained its influence and presence in the region by close cooperation with the Iranian government. However, the overthrow of a US ally government and the anti-Western regime led to a shocking effect for the US. In 1979, besieging of the US embassy by the Iranian students and keeping the diplomats captive for 444 days completely shook the ties between Iran and the US.²⁶ After this incident, Western states began to impose sanctions on Iran, and the relations between Iran and the West remained strained until the 1990s.

Following the collapse of the USSR, a new era began in the foreign policy strategy of Iran. Iran started to pursue an active policy to restore its damaged reputation to enter the world markets, to be one of the main actors in the region and strengthen ties with new independent states as well as European countries. Firstly, Iran started to solve the problems with the Middle East countries, and then tense relations with Germany, Canada, and the UK were further improved through diplomatic negotiations.²⁷ After that, Iran concentrated its attention on the South Caucasus region. The South Caucasus was a turning point for Iran in the way of becoming regional power and entry to the international arena.

In the foreign policy of Iran, the Caucasus has always been defined by the concept of “security” as Iran always described the Caucasus as a corridor of “ideological revolutions.”²⁸ The presence of Russia here has always blocked Iran’s political growth and instead Iran had to comply with the interests of Russia in its foreign policy. Despite the collapse of the USSR, Iran’s security concerns remained the same, but its policy towards the Caucasus transformed to a very different level according to the geopolitical changes in the region.

At initial periods after the dissolution of the USSR, Iran was not aware of what exactly it faced. One of the reasons for the collapse of the USSR was the growing nationalist movements inside of the Soviet republics. During this

25 “Iran (Islamic Republic Of)’s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989,” *ConstituteProject.org*, accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en

26 “Iran Hostage Crisis,” *History.com*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/iran-hostage-crisis>.

27 Semira N. Nikou, “Timeline of Iran’s Foreign Relations,” *IranPrimer.usip.org*, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-foreign-relations>

28 Hamed Kazemzadeh, *The Overview of Iran & Caucasus Ties*, vol. 1 (Tbilisi: GeoWel Research, 2016), 5.

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period, similar protests increased in Iran. The main direction of these protests was to criticize the current regime and to urge Iranian government to integrate to the West. One of the biggest concerns of Iran was that the nationalist movements in the USSR would spill over the Iranian borders. Therefore, Iran was cautious with all three Caucasus states, both in the last periods of the Soviet Union and in the early years of independence of these states.

In terms of political interests in the Caucasus, the fall of USSR has created both opportunities and threats for Iran. It could be considered as an opportunity because of Iran's largest and most dangerous neighbor does not exist anymore, Communism has collapsed, and the biggest threat to political Islam was eliminated. Back to historical root of this phenomena, Iran had always seen Tsarist Russia and later on the USSR as a "mighty power to occupy Iranian lands," and this fear was a decisive factor in its relations with them. In fact, with treaties in 1813 and 1828, Azerbaijani lands were distributed between Tsarist Russia and Iran (Persia), however, the boundaries of the territories were more determined explicitly by Russia.

Another concern of Iran was the strengthening of the Turkish presence in the region and the impact of growing relations of Azerbaijan with the Turkish world to the geopolitical scene of the South Caucasus.²⁹ At the end period of the USSR, the rising nationalism ideology spread to the inside of Iran and 25-30 million Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran gave significant support to the independence of Azerbaijan. Therefore, Iran tried to be cautious in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which occurred as a result of the occupation of the Azerbaijani lands by Armenia, because people inside Iran condemned Iran for its silence in this conflict. This reaction was the biggest threat to Iran's internal stability.

Another threat in the Caucasus policy of Iran was the possibility of the US's intervention to and influence on the region as a result of the dissolution of the bipolar world order of the bygone Cold War. The fact that the US remained the only superpower after the post-Soviet period and lack of good relations with Western countries have been a significant obstacle to becoming a regional power for Iran.

If so, three main elements united Russia and Iran in terms of the Caucasus and Central Asia. First, the transformation of the US into the sole superpower in the international system was contrary to the foreign policy course and national interests of both countries. Secondly, the emergence of a nationalist ideology with the independence of Azerbaijan and strong Turkish presence in

29 Mehran Kamrava, *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus* (London: London Hurst & Company, 2017), 58

the region was unacceptable in terms of national security of both countries. Third, both states were dissatisfied with NATO's access to the region and its activities there.

While the principles of the Iranian foreign policy doctrine are radical, revolutionary, and based on Islamic values,³⁰ it is clear that these principles are not applied to the relations between Armenia and Iran, given the importance of Armenia for Iran. After the revolution of 1979, the basis of Iranian foreign policy doctrine was the slogan "Neither East nor West."³¹ However, in the post-1991 period, it is clear that this principle put Iran under the political and economic pressure and was preventing the growth of Iran in the region.

Thus, the reasons why Iran approached Armenia were mostly geopolitical interests:

- The isolation from the international arena due to sanctions imposed by the West;
- Iran's rivalry with Azerbaijan and Turkey and its inability to establish warm relations with these countries;
- Iran's desire to get rid of the results of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 through Armenia;
- To fill the gap in the region with the collapse of the USSR;
- Bringing energy resources to the world markets through Armenia in order to recover its financial situation.

In the post-1991 period, Armenia also was interested in approachment and expansion of relations with Iran. Lack of oil and gas resources and access to sea routes had a negative impact on Armenia's trade and economic relations. Cooperating only with Russia was not enough to boost economic well-being in Armenia. In this case, Iran was an access point to the world as well as the political and economic partner.

Official relations between Iran and Armenia covered economic, trade and cultural spheres between the two countries and resulted in a series of treaties in these fields. Moreover, Iran perceived Azerbaijan's growth in the economic and political spheres as a threat to its security. Therefore, Iran has intensified its relations with Armenia by implementing an active policy. The

30 Mehdi Mozaffari, *Islamist Policy* (Aarhus: CIR, 2009), 10

31 Mozaffari, *Islamist Policy*, 10.

rapprochement between Iran and Armenia intensified during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia damaged Turkish-Armenian relations as well. As a result, Iran has become one of the most critical “doors” along with Georgia in terms of Armenia’s access to the international arena. The condemnation of the Iranian authorities by the ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran due to Iran’s double-position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict made the government worry. As a result, Iran has officially declared its impartiality in this conflict and sought to pursue a policy in that direction.³² However, Iran provided economic assistance to Armenia by supplying gas and fuel in 1992.³³ In 1993, Iran supplied food, raw materials, and electricity to Armenia and prevented its weakening against Azerbaijan.³⁴ It was essential in terms of two major issues; first, Iran’s assumption was to become the leader of the region and provide regional balance. Thereby, Iran has tried to soften relations with Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; at the same time, Iran understood that losing Armenia would restrict its access to the West. In the second place, when Azerbaijan declared its independence, the Azerbaijani minority, who accommodate in Iran, would have been supported the newly independent Republic of Azerbaijan. Fearing that Azerbaijan would influence the ethnicity of Azerbaijanis there, Iran was trying to counter this process by protecting Armenia.³⁵

Cooperation with Iran was of great importance to Armenia. Due to the occupation policy, Armenia has become economically and politically isolated in the region. Armenia lost influence in the political sphere, and economic condition began to gradually deteriorate. Armenia has seen Iran as access to Asia and the seas. By establishing economic relations with Asia through Iran, Armenia also desired to be free itself from isolation in the region. Moreover, Armenia’s other aim was to get its support in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by cooperating with Iran.³⁶

Analysis of the Iran-Armenia relations shows that religion (Islam), which has a dominant position in the foreign policy doctrine of Iran, does not affect these relations. Article 4 of the Iranian constitution clearly states: “All civil, penal,

32 Geoffrey Gresh, “Coddling the Caucasus: Iran’s Strategic Relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia,” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Issue 1 (2016): 3.

33 Soner Cagaptay and Alexander Murinson, “Good Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia?” *Washington Institute*, March 30, 2015, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/good-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-israel-a-model-for-other-muslim-state>

34 Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych, “Iran And Azerbaijan: A Contested Neighborhood,” *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (2007): 106

35 Kamer Kasım, *Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Kafkasya* (Ankara: Uşak Yayınları, 2011), 146.

36 Vusal Gasimli, Zaur Shiriyev and Zulfıyya Valiyeva, *Iranian-Armenian Relations: Geopolitical Reality versus Political Statements* (Baku: SAM, 2011), 7.

financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations, and the fuqaha' of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter."³⁷ However, economic and political relations with Armenia do not comply with these indicators, contain principles based on secular values. In fact, one of the reasons of the West's reaction was that Iran was applying extremist religious principles widely in its domestic and foreign policy. These principles were regarded as being totally contrary to human rights, democracy, peace, and regional security; the growth of such a system (deemed as being totalitarian) in the region was undesirable for the West.³⁸ Despite all of this, Iran did not apply its Islamic principles to its relations with Armenia in order to change the situation in the South Caucasus in its favor. Also, Iran tried to strengthen the relations between two countries by giving privileges and religious freedom to Armenians within Iran. The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Diaspora have great importance for Iran in terms of restoring the reputation and becoming an active actor in world politics.

One of the essential aspects of Armenia-Iran relations is energy cooperation. Iran's desire was to gain access to Georgia, the Black Sea basin, and through passing these regions to expand its pipeline projects into the European market. The pipeline project between Iran and Armenia was officially announced by the Energy Minister of Armenia Armen Movsisian on April 15, 2002, and it started to operate from December 20, 2006. On March 19, 2007, President of Armenia Robert Kocharyan and President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad participated in the official opening ceremony of the pipeline project.³⁹ However, the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict overthrew Iran's plan to turn Armenia into a gas corridor and enter the Western market.

The Armenian Diaspora and the Islamic Republic of Iran

Lobbies are the mechanisms used by the members of diaspora groups that have the power of political influence by using various tools.⁴⁰ Ethnic lobbies, which are able to operate more freely than diplomats in the international system, focus on bilateral cooperation in order to have policies adopted in the direction of their home country's interests. For instance, in the United States,

37 "Iran (Islamic Republic Of)'s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989," *ConstituteProject.org*, accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en

38 Mozaffari, *Islamist Policy*, 10.

39 "Iran-Armenia Gas Pipeline Inaugurated," *Tehran Times*, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/183993/Iran-Armenia-gas-pipeline-inaugurated>

40 Seyfettin Aslan, "Siyasal İktidarı Etkileme Yöntemlerinden Biri Olarak Lobcilik," *Dumlupınar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 23 (2009): 113.

where ethnic lobbies are one of the most active, the diaspora groups of Armenia, Greece, China, India, Israel, and Ireland are vying for influence in Washington in order for the US pursue their interests.⁴¹

The Armenian Diaspora and Armenian lobby groups operate in different countries around the world and can influence political regimes of their place of residence. This factor plays an essential role in the process of rapprochement of Armenia with Iran in terms of the development of relations between Armenia and Iran. Iran is one of the most important centers of the Armenian Diaspora in the Middle East. Armenians have special political privileges in the Islamic Republic of Iran; they can even be represented in public administration bodies (for instance, they have two MPs in the Iranian Parliament). In fact, Iran is interested in activities of Armenians here. The reason is that Armenians living in Iran have relations with Western countries in art, culture, politics, and business spheres. Armenian society is indirectly or directly influencing the relations between Turkey and Iran as well. Iran is located on the strategic position in terms of import and export to Armenia. A limited number of products imported from Turkey to Armenia are exported via Georgia or Iran. Armenia's occupation of territories of Azerbaijan, closed borders with Turkey and implicit territorial claims to Georgia from time to time make Armenia cautious in its relations with Iran. From this point of view, the main objective of the Armenian Diaspora is to manage relations between Iran and Armenia, to cooperate with Iran in the implementation of geopolitical plans, and to establish connections with Asian countries by getting the support of Iran in the international arena.

Common interests of the two countries are based on the strategic nature of Iran-Armenia relations. First and foremost, the interests of these countries overlap in terms of policies towards Azerbaijan. Like Armenia, Iran also does not want to see Azerbaijan as an independent, political, and economically stable country, which has ensured its territorial integrity (as in, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict). In this context, Iran and Armenia have similar approaches to Turkey as well. Although some differences in political courses from time to time, the presence of Turkey in the region, its policies towards the South Caucasus, and increasing influence among Turkic nations are unacceptable to both Armenia and Iran. The activities and the role of Turkey in the Western bloc, intensification of relations of both Azerbaijan and Georgia with West are contrary to the interests of Iran. At this point, the attempts of the Armenian Diaspora to influence the West over genocide claims correspond to the anti-Turkish policy of Iran.⁴² Therefore, the Iranian

41 John Newhouse, "Diplomacy, Inc.: The Influence of Lobbies on U.S. Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (2009): 73.

42 Nilüfer Narlı, "Cooperation or Competition in the Islamic World: Turkish-Iranian Relations from the Islamic Revolution to the Gulf War and beyond," *CEMOTI*, 1993, 266

government uses Armenians for its interests by giving special privileges to the Armenians.

Another issue is the isolation problem which both states face. The occupation of Azerbaijani territories caused Armenia to be left out of important economic projects in the region after the closure of its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey. In this regard, by using political means, the Armenian Diaspora seeks to help the Armenian economy and involve Armenia to the large-scale projects in order to change the situation. Besides that, because of the tension between Georgia and Russia as well as implicit territorial claims of Armenia to the Javakheti region of Georgia⁴³ prevent Armenia cooperating with Russia over Georgia. At the same time, Iran has been condemned and heavily sanctioned by the Western states, including the US, for the policy pursued in the region, especially in the development of its nuclear energy program alleged by Western countries to be a front for a nuclear weapons program. In this case, Iran needed Armenia to continue its nuclear program, and Armenia also gave support to Iran, because both countries were cooperating in the field of electricity within this project.⁴⁴ The main aim of Iran was to get rid of the pressures of the West through Armenia and politically penetrate, where it could not reach, by using Armenian Diaspora in the Western countries.

The Armenia lobby is operating in Iran freely, and by promoting the claims of the “Armenian Genocide” through Armenian churches, they try to achieve recognition of the claimed genocide by Iranian authorities. Although Iran does not officially recognize the genocide claims, it allows Armenians to hold events promoting these claims, and does not interfere with the broad propaganda carried out by the Armenian Diaspora in Iran on this issue.

Conclusion

Diplomatic relations between Armenia and Iran were established on December 25, 1991, when the Islamic Republic of Iran officially recognized the independence of the Republic of Armenia. On February 9, 1992, a declaration on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Iran was signed in Tehran. On that day, the statement was made on the principles and goals of the relationships between Armenia and Iran. The official opening ceremony of the Iranian embassy in Yerevan was held in April 1992, and the opening of the Armenian embassy in Tehran took place in December 1992. More than 180 documents were signed between the two countries in 1992-2018.

43 Vahid Öməröv, Elnur Kəbizadə, and Nəşibə Mirzəyeva. *Gürcüstan: daxili ictimai-siyasi şərait* (Bakı: Mütərcim, 2018), 103

44 “Country Nuclear Power Profiles,” *International Atomic Energy Agency*, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/cnpp2018/countryprofiles/Armenia/Armenia.htm>

The relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Armenia have developed in the frame of practical cooperation in the spheres of science, culture, sport, nature protection, health, agriculture, and education. Since Armenia is in isolation from the region, its primary support in science, humanitarian, and tourism is received from Iran. Although these attempts have been previously awkward due to sanctions against Iran's economy, subsequent processes and particularly the European Union's interest in the South Caucasus, push Iran to be more active towards Armenia.

Iran has been interested in cooperation with Armenia to strengthen its position in the South Caucasus by stepping on the path of becoming a regional power with the collapse of the USSR after long years. As for Armenia, it has been tried to get the support of Iran along with Russia to maintain its political presence in the region. Armenia, which has strong support from Iran to prevent the recession of its economy, uses the Iranian ports, railways, and highways as a transit line for the transportation of its products while Iran hopes for the establishment of relations with Europe and the export of resources on the Armenian-Georgian line. The offer of Iran to Armenia to access the seas and creating conditions for Armenia to establish relations with the Asian countries are also factors that bring both sides closer.

As a result of the study of the interests of Iran in the Caucasus and the place of Armenia in its foreign policy, it is possible to conclude that in the foreign policy of Iran, the Caucasus has always been defined by the concept of "security." One of the major reasons why Iran's Caucasus interests are shaped in such a specific direction is the role of the Caucasus in the history of Iran. One of the main threats to certain groups in Iran was the strengthening of the Turkish presence in the Caucasus and the spread of the relations of the Republic of Azerbaijan with the Turkish world after restoring its independence.

An analysis of Iran's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that has emerged as a result of Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan indicates that in the first years of the war, Iran carried out an intermediary mission to increase its influence in the region, win confidence of the parties and resolve the conflict within its interests. However, Iran's attempt has failed, and despite Iran trying to be closer to both sides, the Armenian side has not sincerely accepted its efforts. Studies show that the Armenian Diaspora in Iran is trying to make a significant impact on the formation of the Caucasus policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the contemporary period, Armenians living in Iran have great privileges as Iranian citizens. Coming to the interests of Iran in the Armenian Diaspora, it is necessary to point out that some groups in Iran are interested in Armenians' activities here because Armenians have trade relations with Western countries. At the same time, their cooperation

with Western countries in art, culture, politics, and business spheres contributes to Iran's integration with the West. Iranian Armenians are indirectly or directly influencing the relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Armenian Diaspora has played an essential role in strengthening the relations in the political, economic, cultural, and scientific fields between two countries over the past period. At the same time, the Armenian Diaspora widely uses the Armenian media for the anti-Turkish propaganda in Iran, something that Iran allows to continue based on its regional interests.

Armenia, which seeks to create a friendly image towards Muslim countries by using its relations with Iran, also uses the way of information manipulation to deceive the society of Iran in its favour. In some instances, Iranian mass media showcases bias because of the overlapping interests of both countries. Herein, Armenia gets to benefit from these diplomatic maneuver policies thanks to the official position of Iranian media, which is influenced by the Iranian ruling class.

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