

IN THE RUSSIA, TÜRKİYE AND IRAN TRIANGLE; KARABAKH

RUSYA, TÜRKİYE VE İRAN ÜÇGENİNDE; KARABAĞ

Vugar AKİFOĞLU* 

Abstract

Karabakh, situated within the strategic triangle of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, serves as a crucial gateway connecting Türkiye to Central Asia. Historically, this region has been part of Azerbaijan's territory beginning in the early 1800s, Armenians and migrants from regional powers, including Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, started settling in Karabakh. Especially, Russia and various European countries sought to separate Türkiye from Central Asia by facilitating the migration of Armenians into the area. The intentions of Russia and the European states were clear: to create an ethnic barrier consisting of Armenians between Anatolian Turks and Central Asian Turks. Atatürk referred to this barrier the "Caucasian Great Wall" perceiving its construction as a project aimed at the ultimate destruction of Türkiye. He emphasized, "We must take every possible risk to prevent the Allied Powers from constructing the wall". Following the fall of Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union supported Armenian territorial claims on various platforms in alignment with its own interests. This study examines Armenia's policies of seizing Azerbaijani lands throughout history and the approaches of neighboring countries to this situation. Specifically, it analyzes the policies of the three regional countries during the First and Second Karabakh Wars, the November 10 ceasefire agreement that concluded the conflict, the crimes committed by Armenians during the wars, their subsequent withdrawal from Karabakh, and the international response to these issues, drawing on various sources.

Keywords: Türkiye, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Karabakh

Öz

Türkiye, Rusya ve İran üçgeninde yer alan Karabağ özellikle stratejik açıdan önemli bir bölgedir. Özellikle Türkiye'yi Orta Asya'ya bağlayan kapı niteliği taşımaktadır. Zira Karabağ tarih boyunca Azerbaycan sınırları içerisinde yer almıştır. 1800 yılının ilk çeyreğinden itibaren bölgeye göç eden Ermenilerle birlikte bölge devletleri olan Rusya, Türkiye ve İran'dan da insanlar göç etmiştir. Özellikle Türkiye ile Orta Asya ülkelerini ayırmak isteyen başta Rusya ve Avrupa devletleri Ermenilerin bölgeye göçünü desteklemiştir. Bilhassa, Rusya'nın ve Avrupa Devletleri'nin amaçları "Anadolu Türklüğü ile Orta Asya Türklüğü arasında Ermenilerden oluşan etnik bir bariyer koyarak irtibatı kopartmaktır. Atatürk bu bariyeri "Kafkas Setti" olarak adlandırmıştır. Söz konusu bu seddin yapılmasını Türkiye'nin kat'i mahvı projesi saymıştır. Bahse konu olan seddi itilaf devletlerine yaptırmamak için her türlü tehlikeleri göze almak zorundayız" ifadesini kullanmıştır. Zira Çarlık Rusya'sının çökmesiyle kurulan Sovyetler Birliği

* Dr., vugarakifoglu@gmail.com, 0000-0003-4662-9667



kendi menfaatleri çerçevesinde Ermenilerin toprak iddialarını çeşitli platformlarda desteklemişlerdi. Bu araştırmada, tarihi süreç içerisinde Ermenistan'ın Azerbaycan topraklarının ele geçirme politikaları ve çevre ülkelerin duruma yaklaşımı irdelenmiştir. Özellikle Birinci Karabağ ve İkinci Karabağ savaşı sırasında üç bölge ülkesinin politikası, savaşı sona erdiren 10 Kasım anlaşması, Ermenilerin savaş sırasında ve Karabağ'dan çekilirken işlediği suçları ile uluslararası devletlerin konuya yaklaşımını çeşitli kaynaklar ışığında incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Rusya, Azerbaycan, Ermenistan, Karabağ

Introduction

Karabakh, located within the triangle of Russia, Türkiye and Iran, lies within Azerbaijan's national borders. After the Turkmenchay Treaty, Russia created artificial Armenia in the region by settling the Armenians it brought from various regions of the Caucasus, Türkiye and Iran, in Karabakh and other Turkish lands.¹ After gaining its independence Armenia tried to transform the autonomous structure in Karabakh into an independent state based on the Armenian population living there.

Following this agreement, Armenians began to settle in the region. Over time, Armenians asserted ownership of the region and sought international support. In the subsequent period, there were occasional tensions and conflicts between Azerbaijani Turks and Armenians. In 1920, the Red Army occupied Azerbaijan and settled Armenians in the Zangezur region in line with its policies, severing the land connection between Azerbaijani Turks and the Turks living in Anatolia. Additionally, Armenians took advantage of the weakening of the USSR and committed genocide and brutal murders in Karabakh, which is Azerbaijani territory, between 1988 and 1994. Until the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Armenia did not abandon its policy, despite the interventions of international organizations. The Second Karabakh War was started by Armenia, which began with attacks on local residents and lasted for 44 days, where Azerbaijan managed to liberate its occupied lands.² Azerbaijan achieved a significant victory in the Second Karabakh War, partly due to Russia's relative neutrality and Türkiye's full support. Our study primarily examines the stance of Türkiye, Iran, and Russia during this war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The Caucasus region, situated between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins, holds a key position between Europe and Asia. Historically, this region has been a place where great powers pursued their interests and where conflicts of interest occurred. Today, the energy resources of the Caspian Sea and China's Belt and Road Initiative have further increased the region's significance. Relations between the neighboring countries in this geography—Türkiye, Armenia, Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan—have historically followed a fluctuating course. In addition to its historical and cultural significance in the region, Türkiye has pursued an active regional policy, particularly since the 2010s, and has played a leading role in strategic energy, transportation, and

1 Okan Yeşilot, Bihter Gürışık Köksal, *Karabağ Dünü, Bugünü, Yarını*, Selenge Yayınları, İstanbul 2021.

2 Haydar Çakmak, *Dünden Bugüne Karabağ Sorunu*, Yenisey Yayınları, Ankara 2021.

transit projects. Türkiye's historical and cultural ties with Azerbaijan have gained importance, and by 2020, the relationship between the two countries had evolved into a process where Türkiye provided diplomatic support to Azerbaijan against Armenia. Within the framework of Türkiye's Caucasus policy, it is observed that Türkiye supported Azerbaijan during both the First and Second Nagorno-Karabakh Wars. Russia's stance, however, emerged as a decisive factor between the two wars.

1. The Policies of Türkiye and Azerbaijan On The Nagorno-Karabakh Issue

Following Azerbaijan's proclamation of sovereignty on August 30, 1991, Türkiye assumed the vanguard position in extending diplomatic recognition. Türkiye's geopolitical significance for the nascent Caucasian and Central Asian republics can't be overstated. During the inaugural Summit of Turkish-Speaking State Presidents convened in Ankara on October 30-31, 1992, the incumbent Turkish President, Turgut Özal, prognosticated that the 21st century would herald a Turkish renaissance. At this convocation, Özal proposed the establishment of a Turkish Common Market and the Türkiye Development and Investment Bank. These propositions were met with approbation by the then-President of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey.

In the wake of the Khojaly Massacre on February 26, 1992, despite vociferous advocacy for intervention against Armenia from certain Turkish political party leaders and a substantial segment of the Turkish populace, spearheaded by Özal, the incumbent Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, while acknowledging the potential of military intervention, demurred from providing support due to international opprobrium. Consequently, Demirel posited that the issue could be ameliorated through the auspices of the UN³, OSCE⁴, and NATO⁵. Demirel had even eschewed dispatching the helicopters requisitioned by Azerbaijan for civilian evacuation from the region to preclude confrontation with European powers and Russia.

By June 4, 1993, with Russian support to Surat Huseynov, Elchibey's administration was deposed, and the management power gap was arisen in Azerbaijan. Huseynov's tenure proved ephemeral, and on September 1, 1993, he handed over the management of the country to Heydar Aliyev. During Aliyev's incipient period, certain Turkish political decision-makers espoused Elchibey-supportive sentiments. In response, Aliyev suspended numerous accords forged during the Elchibey era, terminated the missions of Turkish military experts in Azerbaijan, and instituted visa regulations for Turkish nationals. Possessing a more nuanced understanding of Russian politics and bureaucracy than his predecessor, Aliyev adroitly began to leverage the prevailing

3 United Nations

4 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

5 North Atlantic Treaty Organization

circumstances to Azerbaijan's advantage, cognizant of the divergent perspectives within Russia's Foreign, Defense, and Energy Ministries.⁶

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence by many of its former countries, Azerbaijan's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was approved by the parliament on September 21, 1993, which softened relations with Russia. Azerbaijan officially became a CIS member on September 24, 1993. The initially negative trajectory of Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations gradually began to improve after this membership. In January 1994, Heydar Aliyev made a significant visit to Ankara. During this visit, Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations were evaluated from multiple perspectives. Aliyev announced that Azerbaijani oil would be transported to the West through Türkiye and that Turkish soldiers would continue to train Azerbaijani officers. Aliyev's description of Türkiye and Azerbaijan as "one nation, two states" during his Ankara visit became historically significant and would influence later periods.⁷

The most significant change in Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations occurred during Aliyev's second visit to Ankara from February 8-10, 1994. After this visit, relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan progressed positively, while Azerbaijan-Russia relations slowed down except for trade. During this visit, the Presidents of the two countries, Aliyev and Demirel, signed a "Friendship and Cooperation Agreement." Additionally, supplementary agreements were signed to cover trade, investment, scientific, and cultural cooperation. An agreement on exporting Azerbaijani oil through Türkiye from the Azerbaijani Popular Front era was agreed to remain in force.

Aliyev's dual-policy approach can be divided into two periods. The first period covers 1993-1994, during which some concessions were made to gain Russia's trust. After 1994, a period began where balanced relations with Russia were maintained while trying to gradually reduce Russia's influence in Azerbaijan and adopt a positive policy towards the West and Türkiye. Azerbaijan's independence was greatly important for Türkiye in terms of both spiritual relations and political and regional interests. Türkiye has always been targeted by accusations from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora. During the First Nagorno-Karabakh War up to the 1994 ceasefire, Türkiye sought to strengthen its close relations with Azerbaijan and defend Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. However, it could not be a decisive actor on the ground or at the negotiating table.

On October 29, 1998, the Ankara Declaration regarding the transportation of Caspian and Turkestan oil to Western countries via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline was signed by the presidents of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson also attended as an observer. The fact that Russia consistently supported and

6 İrfan Sancak, "Bağımsızlık Sürecinde Azerbaycan ve Haziran Darbesinin Dış Politikaya Etkileri", *Balkan Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, VII/13, p.63.

7 Çağla Gül Yesevi and Burcu Yavuz Tiftikçigil, "Turkey-Azerbaijan Energy Relations: A Political and Economic Analysis", *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (2015), p. 32.

protected Armenia in the Caucasus and sided with Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue significantly influenced Azerbaijan's efforts to strengthen relations with Türkiye and the U.S. Despite everything, Russia did not remain indifferent to the changing dynamics and new developments and sought to increase its influence in the region through a policy of rapprochement with Azerbaijan. The process of ratifying the legal documents signed by Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye regarding the transportation of oil via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline began on May 26, 2000, with the approval of the Azerbaijani President.

On March 2001, during an official visit to Ankara, Heydar Aliyev emphasized in his speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on March 13 that "Türkiye, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, is not just for the Republic of Türkiye but for the entire Turkic world, for Azerbaijan," highlighting the importance of Türkiye not only for Azerbaijan but also for the Turkic world. He stated that Azerbaijan needed Türkiye's support, especially in terms of political and strategic aspects, to resolve the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, and that Türkiye was their primary ally and friend. Aliyev's lengthy speech underscored the significance and impact of Türkiye's policies on the region.

Generally speaking, during Heydar Aliyev's period, Azerbaijan-Türkiye political relations became continuous and regular, creating an atmosphere of trust between the two countries. Aliyev made a total of 15 working visits to Ankara, including three official ones, while Türkiye conducted four official visits at the presidential level to Baku. It is worth noting that Aliyev's frequent visits to Türkiye and the rapprochement in relations were also influenced by his personal friendship with Demirel, which began when he was the Chairman of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic's Assembly. The two presidents met frequently in bilateral meetings and occasionally held face-to-face discussions at regional or international meetings.

Heydar Aliyev's son, İlham Aliyev, succeeded his father as the President of Azerbaijan after winning the election on October 15, 2003.⁸

İlham Aliyev adopted an equilibrium strategy in relations with regional states, aiming to foster improved relationships with Azerbaijan's neighboring countries. He initiated economic and political engagements with Asian nations and accorded significance to international bodies such as the Council of Europe. Aliyev's primary objective was to advance Azerbaijan's petroleum and natural gas ventures and pipeline strategies, with the aim of establishing Azerbaijan as a crucial actor in regional energy policies.

In 2009, some steps towards normalizing Türkiye-Armenia relations led to certain issues in Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations. During this period, during the Türkiye-Armenia match played in Bursa, the Azerbaijani flags have been banned from entering the stadium, which led to a flag crisis. Despite some difficulties between the two countries, efforts were made to address these

8 Araz Aslanlı, "Azerbaycan'da Devlet Başkanlığı Seçimi ve Sonrasındaki Gelişmeler", *Karadeniz Araştırmaları*, I/1, (2004), p. 102.

issues without compromising the brotherhood and friendship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Subsequent steps strengthened the economic relations and elevated the strategic level of the relationship. A consensus emerged on taking new steps to strengthen the relationship in every aspect.⁹

On June 26, 2013, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev and then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met in Istanbul and signed an intergovernmental agreement on the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) project. TANAP, which is expected to significantly contribute to the energy security of both Azerbaijan and Türkiye as well as Europe, aims to transport Caspian gas to European countries, allowing Azerbaijan to access international markets and strengthen its presence there. The project also aims to enhance the economic potential, energy security, and strategic role of Azerbaijan and Türkiye.¹⁰

In Azerbaijan's most painful issue, the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, the brotherly country Türkiye has always supported Azerbaijan and its rightful position in the international arena. Significant steps have been taken to develop all aspects of relations between the two countries. For example, Türkiye has ensured that Azerbaijani Armed Forces personnel participate in various exercises and receive military training. The Azerbaijani army demonstrated significant heroism in capturing Lalatepe in 2016, thanks to the combat skills acquired through various trainings in Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

Regarding the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War that took place in 2020, Türkiye demonstrated its influence by acting in concert with Azerbaijan, showing its impact not only in rhetoric but also in action. Türkiye has cultural, historical, ethnic, and linguistic ties with Azerbaijan, and the peoples of the two countries share almost the same spiritual bonds as parts of the same nation. Furthermore, mutual interests and the "Strong Azerbaijan, Strong Türkiye" reality continue to grow in regional importance.¹¹

Azerbaijan is highly significant for Türkiye, both in terms of energy resources and as a link to Central Asia. Additionally, Azerbaijan is extremely important for Türkiye in terms of determining regional influence, managing relations with Armenia, Russia, and Iran, and maximizing interests. Although Azerbaijan was the visible side in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, it is clear that Türkiye took a clear stance in favor of Azerbaijan in this war. Türkiye, both during and after the war, has been a winner of the conflict in the region alongside Azerbaijan. Consequently, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, or the 44-Day Patriotic War, has been recorded in Turkish and world history as a major success of Turkish foreign policy.¹²

9 Orhan Baskın, *Türk Dış Politikası Cilt: III: 2001-2012*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2013, p. 214.

10 Serkan Arıkan, *Türkiye Azerbaycan Enerji Birlikteliğinde TANAP Örneği*, (Yayımlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi), İstanbul Üniversitesi, İstanbul 2014, p. 72.

11 Yalçın Sarıkaya, *44 Gün Savaşı: Azerbaycan'ın Karabağ Zaferi*, TASAV, Ankara 2020, p. 124.

12 Museyib Shiraliyev, "Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Obama ve Trump Dönemi Güney Kafkasya Politikasında Güvenlik Faktörü", *Kafkasya Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 8, (2022), p. 9.

As a result, the signing of the Shusha Declaration between the two countries on June 15, 2021, elevated their relations from strategic partnership to the level of an alliance. The Shusha Declaration represents an important step in preserving the new geopolitical reality that emerged in the region following the Karabakh victory. Today, the armies of both countries have reached the highest level of operational and military-technical cooperation and joint action.¹³

The process of Azerbaijan's army transitioning to the Turkish army model has been accelerated. With Türkiye's guidance and contributions, the aim is to elevate the military-technological level of the Azerbaijani army, continue command and Special Forces training, and enhance the ability of the two armies to fight according to shared goals.

2. Iran's Stance on The Nagorno-Karabakh Issue

The 689-kilometer frontier separating Azerbaijan and Iran necessitates close engagement between the two nations. Maritime demarcations, commercial exchanges, population movements, interactions with third countries, implicit territorial claims, and secessionist tendencies render Azerbaijan-Iran relations intricate. A comprehensive examination of the entirety of Azerbaijan-Iran relations exceeds the scope of this research; however, elements contributing to Iran's soft power approach in this bilateral relationship will be explored.¹⁴

Iran's approach to the South Caucasus region, especially regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, has been inconsistent and often in favor of Armenia, both before and during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Despite the clear facts about Nagorno-Karabakh's status, Iran's reluctance to accept these facts has led it to continually destabilized situation. Unsurprisingly, there is a wardety of information and documentation indicating that Iran has cooperated with both Armenia and the separatist formations in Nagorno-Karabakh and has participated in joint illegal activities in Azerbaijani territories under Armenian occupation for nearly 30 years. For example, even during the 44-day Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, videos were published showing the supply of Russian weapons and military equipment to Armenia via Iran.¹⁵ The 44-Day War became a source of inspiration and increased solidarity between the Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to the information reported by various media outlets, Turks living in Southern Azerbaijan supported Azerbaijan against the Armenians during the war. Azerbaijani Turks living in Iranian territory held large protest demonstrations and called on Iran and Russia to cut off their military aid with Armenia. In fact, military logistics vehicles sent

13 APA news [Azerbaijan/English], "President İlham Aliyev: Azerbaijani Army is developing on basis of Turkish model", June 13, 2023, [Date of access : 05.05.2024].

14 Elçin Neciyev və Teymur Gasımlı, "Azerbaycan-İran İlişkileri (1991-2018)", *Anemon Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 4, (2020), p. 1268.

15 "Video footages spread regarding weapons and military equipment transport from Iran to Armenia – VIDEO", Apa. az, https://apa.az/en/xeber/nagorno_garabagh/Video-footages-spread-regarding-weaponsand-military-equipment-transport-from-Iran-toArmenia-colorredNEW-FACTScolorcolorredVIDEOfcolor-331624, [Date of access : 15.02.2024].

from Iran to support Armenia have been intercepted and set on fire.¹⁶ Also “The presence of Azerbaijani Turks in Iran is perceived as a survival problem by the Iranian administration. This perception is one of the main reasons why Iran follows a policy closer to Armenia”.

Additionally, information that around 300 PKK terrorists reached Nagorno-Karabakh via Iranian territory has appeared in various media outlets, including Turkish press organizations. Many illicit goods were transported from Iran to Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian-inhabited areas before, during, and after the war, with Russian peacekeeping forces temporarily stationed in the Lachin corridor allowing these vehicles into the region. Despite numerous messages from Azerbaijan to Iran and related video footage being shared online and on television, the Iranian side has consistently denied these reports and images. Although Iran has denied all these claims, following Azerbaijan’s diplomatic note, an Armenian TV channel confirmed on August 11 that Iranian trucks were en route to Khankendi via the Lachin corridor. It is unequivocal that Iran facilitated the transportation of materiel intended for secessionist elements in Nagorno-Karabakh via this corridor.¹⁷ Indeed, Iran’s stance regarding Armenia and Azerbaijan aligns with historical patterns. Over the course of three decades, Iran has consistently enabled both the entrenchment of separatist forces in Karabakh and the mitigation of Armenia’s geopolitical isolation. It is incontrovertible evidence that Iran’s support for Armenia and separatist entities in Nagorno-Karabakh, both before and during the conflict, is indisputable.

During the current period, Armenia’s destructive policy of focusing on redrawing borders and opening transportation and communication links has been indirectly supported by Iran. Unfortunately, the attitudes and approaches of regional countries like Iran and Russia have historically encouraged the hopes of separatists in Karabakh. This support and hope have been provided not only to Karabakh Armenians but also to the Republic of Armenia. Looking at the pre-war years, Iran’s support for Armenia and the separatists aligns with its traditional interests. According to sources, Azerbaijan’s occupied territories have been used for drug trafficking connections with Armenia. In contrast, Azerbaijan has made every effort to close the route of international drug trafficking within the emerging geopolitical realities in the region. Given that revenue from illegal drug trade is one of the most profitable areas in the world, Iran is certainly disturbed by this new reality. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Iran has used occupied Azerbaijani territories for drug trafficking with Armenia in the past. İlham Aliyev emphasized this issue in his speech during the video conference of the CIS Heads of State Council on October 15, 2021, stating: “With the transfer of the section of the state border with Iran, which was under Armenian control for about 30 years, and particularly the Jabrayil district, which played a critical role in this regard, the drug route extending to Europe has been closed. The amount of heroin seized in the other sections of the Azerbaijan-Iran border has doubled compared to the same

16 Fuad Şahbazov, “Şərqi Zəngəzur-Naxçıvan Dəhlizi: Azərbaycan və İran Nə Qazanır, Ermənistan və Rusiya Nə İtirir?”, *BBC News Azərbaycanca*, 17 Mart 2022.

17 Zaur Məmmədov, “İran nə istəyir? – təhlil”, *Apa.az*, <https://apa.az/xeber/siyasi/iran-ne-isteyir-tehlil656532>, [Date of access : 02.02.2024].

period in previous years. This means that Armenia, which secretly agreed with Iran, used the occupied Azerbaijani territories for drug trafficking to Europe for about 30 years.”¹⁸

Iran has intermittently moderated its diverse allegations against Azerbaijan, notably its persistent accusations regarding Baku’s purported establishment of relations and collaboration with Israel. Fundamentally, the decision to cooperate or not with any nation falls within Azerbaijan’s sovereign prerogative, and Iran does not possess determinative authority in this matter. Conversely, as previously elucidated, Azerbaijan has consistently adhered to a policy of non-permissiveness regarding the utilization of its territory by any foreign entity against neighboring states. Furthermore, the Azerbaijani administration has repeatedly articulated that a hypothetical military intervention by the United States, Israel, or any other external actor against Iran would not engender favorable outcomes for the regional equilibrium.¹⁹ Azerbaijan has resolutely opposed any attack on Iran from its territory due to various reasons, including the potential damage to the gas pipeline extending from Iran to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, risks to the millions of Azerbaijanis residing in Iran, and the threat of northern migration. Despite all this, Iran’s accusatory stance and false claims against Azerbaijan have continued.²⁰ Unfortunately, Iran has not shown the same tolerance and closeness to Azerbaijan as it has to Armenia, and has sided with Armenia rather than Azerbaijan on many issues.

The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh crisis has served Iran’s interests during that period. Over the last thirty years, Iran has obtained significant commercial revenues. The land-based gap between Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan has made Iran one of the mandatory routes for trade between Türkiye and Central Asia. It has been proven that Iran had commercial relations with the unrecognized autonomous republic established in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has caused a serious reaction in Azerbaijan.

In summary, with these actions, Iran aims to present itself as a stabilizing force in the region, justifying its leadership claim in the Islamic world. Ultimately, Iran is attempting to reach every place where Shiites are present in the Islamic world, promote the propaganda that Shiism is the only savior, and spread the idea that Iran is an indispensable country in the region and the world. It is also trying to carry out this effort in Azerbaijan while indirectly supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan.²¹

During the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Iran provided indirect military aid to Armenia, became a gateway to the Indian Ocean for Armenia, and significantly helped Yerevan bypass

18 İlham Əliyevin, “MDB Dövlət Başçıları Şurasının iclasında çıxışının mətni”, <https://oxu.az/politics/537742>, [Date of access : 04.03.2024].

19 Elif Yıldız Yüce, “1940’dan Günümüze Azərbaycan-İran Münasebetləri”, *Gab Akademi*, 3, (Haziran 2023), p. 83.

20 “ABŞ və İranın Cənubi Qafqazda geosiyasi maraqları və Azərbaycan”, <http://huquq.org.az/az/publication/geopolitical-interests-of-the-u-s-and-iran-in-the-south-caucasus-andazerbaijan/>, [Date of access : 17.02.2024].

21 Şahin Səfərov, *90-cı İllərdə Azərbaycanın Beynəlxalq Vəziyyəti Və Xarici Siyasəti*, Azərbaycan Dövlət Pedaqoji Universiteti, Bakı 1999, s. 30.

economic sanctions from Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Iran's close monitoring of these issues and its stance on these points have been advantageous to Armenia. This situation has allowed Iran to act as a mediator in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and maintain influence over ongoing developments in the Caucasus. Due to Iran's insidious approaches, the Azerbaijani side has suggested that the loss of part of its territory was caused by Iran's occasional mediation efforts and has indirectly held Iran responsible.²² Armenia, on the other hand, has been receptive to Tehran's mediation in peace talks, seeing it as advantageous to its own interests.

Until the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Iran had recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory in rhetoric but had not been bothered by the Armenian control of the region, attempting to maintain a cunning balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The rapid advance of Azerbaijani forces during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War put Iran's balancing policy to the test. Officially, Iran's response to the war and the return of the region it accepted as Azerbaijani territory was limited to expressions of concern due to rising tensions.

During and after the war, despite Azerbaijan and Türkiye denying the claims, international media circulated news about Türkiye bringing militants from Syria to Azerbaijan. In Iran, these reports not only circulated in the media but also elicited reactions from some officials. On November 3, 2020, Ali Khamenei emphasized that terrorists should never consider approaching Iranian borders and warned that Iran would fight fiercely if they did.²³

Although Iran's attempts to intervene diplomatically during the war were ineffective, it welcomed the ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia on November 10. Iran's reaction throughout the 44-day Second Nagorno-Karabakh War can be characterized as a process of dealing with dilemmas

3. Russia's Stance On The Nagorno-Karabakh Issue

Russia has been a permanent member of the OSCE Minsk Group since 1997. However, there is no concrete evidence showing Russia's effectiveness in resolving the Karabakh war. In short, Russia has historically turned a blind eye to Armenian aggression, supported them in every way, and has regularly armed Armenia with millions of dollars worth of weapons since the 1990s. It seems that Russia has kept issues like Nagorno-Karabakh under its own control and has not been interested in solving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

Russia, one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, played an active and leading role in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and its resolution after the independence period. In military terms, the Russian army supported the Armenians in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan

22 Vali Kaleji, "The 2020 Karabakh War's Impact on the Northwestern Border of Iran", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17/181, (December 2020), p. 3.

23 IRNA, "Leader: Iran not to be Affected by Who Becomes Next US President", 03 Novembre 2020, [Date of access : 06.05.2024].

centered around Karabakh in the early 1990s. During the conflicts and problems between the two countries from 1992 to 1994, some Russian officials took encouraging stances towards Armenia. The Four-Day War between the two countries in 2016 was halted by Russian initiatives.²⁴

Regarding the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Russia exhibited a different approach compared to its previous policies in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September 27 to November 9, 2020, was critical in terms of its military results and its impact on the regional power balance in the South Caucasus. The stance of international actors, including Russia, during and after the war was of great interest and importance. Russia's position is significant due to its previous role in both the emergence and resolution of the Karabakh conflict, as Russia had previously been effective in indirectly supporting Armenia in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh disputes.

During the beginning, the course, and aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia appeared to adopt a balanced policy, different from its previous approaches towards Azerbaijan and Armenia. At the onset of the war, Russia exhibited a cautious approach, refraining from significant reactions and calling for dialogue and calm between the parties. Putin, in a meeting with Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, stated that Moscow does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries but supports efforts to stabilize the situation through comprehensive dialogue among all political forces. Experts believe that Putin's statements regarding the Kyrgyz political crisis also served as a message to Armenia.²⁵

In this context, the stance of Russia in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which began with the violation of the ceasefire regime by the Armenians on September 27, 2020, is of interest. Based on previous experiences, it was expected that Russia would not allow the war to start or would quickly halt it to maintain strategic balance between the parties.²⁶ However, Russia attempted to maintain neutrality during the war's early stages and later, even expressing the view that the Karabakh region belongs to Azerbaijan, demonstrating a different stance. The Kremlin's approach to the Karabakh issue, differing from previous periods, caused general surprise.²⁷

Two factors determine Russia's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. Firstly, Russia prefers to remain neutral and is in favor of maintaining the status quo in the region. This policy is built upon the principles of "mediation" and "peace." This approach allows Russia to maintain good relations with both its ally Armenia and its "strategic partner" Azerbaijan. Through this,

24 Musa Qasimov, *Beynelxalq Münasibetler Sisteminde Azərbaycan (1991-1995)*, Genclik Yayınları, Baku 1996, p. 28.

25 "Не могут нащупать баланс": как события в киргизии повлияют на соседей, *gazeta.ru*, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/10/07_a_13310977.shtml, [Date of access : 13.03.2024].

26 Nazim Caferov, "Karabağ Sorununda Ateşkes ve Rusya", *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, 53, (2016), p. 243.

27 "Russia, Iran Concerned about Risk of Foreign Fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh: Ministry," Reuters, (October 6, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-russia-iran-idUSKBN26R2U4> [Date of access : 08.04.2024].

Russia aims to make Armenia dependent on it while preventing Azerbaijan from completely distancing itself. To achieve this, the issue needed to be frozen without significant conflict.

On the other hand, as the geopolitical landscape changes both in the region and globally, Moscow recognizes that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue cannot remain unresolved and that Azerbaijan, particularly in the military domain, is becoming increasingly powerful. Therefore, a policy solely based on Armenia, as demonstrated by the Pashinyan era, could have negative long-term consequences for Russia. Despite its close cooperation with Armenia, Russia's relations with Azerbaijan remain strong in many areas. Russia's trade volume and investments with Azerbaijan are higher compared to Armenia. Thus, while Russia is an "ally" of Armenia, its relations with Azerbaijan are becoming increasingly important. Russia's gradual shift away from a one-sided policy on Nagorno-Karabakh is welcomed by Baku.²⁸

One reason for Russia's "silence" might be its intention to punish Pashinyan and make him more "compliant." Indeed, Moscow's stance on events in the Caucasus resembles its approach to the events in Belarus at the beginning of Lukaşenko's presidency. Before the elections, Lukaşenko accused the Kremlin of various issues, seemingly confronting the Putin administration and signaling a rapprochement with the West. After the elections, Lukaşenko faced internal and external pressure. Moscow remained silent until Lukaşenko weakened significantly and was on the verge of losing his position, after which it openly supported him. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, like Lukaşenko, has pursued policies that irritate the Russian administration and harm Russia's regional interests. Thus, one reason for Moscow's silence is its intention to pressure and punish Pashinyan, aiming to provide a warning to future leaders of Armenia who will follow Pashinyan. Moscow is also aware that the West will not offer concrete support to Armenia. Just as Lukaşenko faced Western disapproval after attempting to draw closer to the West before the elections, Pashinyan is expected to face a similar situation and gradually realign with Moscow.

The reasons behind Russia's policy during and after the 44-day Karabakh War include:

- Pashinyan's attempts to pivot Armenia from Russia towards the West,
- The desire to continue its mediation role in conflict resolution and maintain its influence in the South Caucasus,
- The intention to sustain the strategic partnership developed with Azerbaijan during Putin's era,
- The need to maintain the multidimensional relations developed with Türkiye in recent years.²⁹

28 Uğur Deniz Yaşayan, "Moskova'nın Dağlık Karabağ' Politikasındaki Dönüşümü", *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 6, (2023), p. 2794.

29 "Azerbaycan-Ermenistan Çatışması ve Güney Kafkasya'da Jeopolitik Dengeler", insamer.com, https://insamer.com/tr/azerbaycan-ermenistan-catismasi-ve-guney-kafkasyada-jeopolitikdengeler_3343.html, [Date of access : 18.04.2024].

Aliyev announced that immediately after the military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the volume of military cargo transported from Russia to Armenia via Kazakh, Turkmen, and Iranian airspace exceeded 400 tons, stating that this issue needed clarification.³⁰

According to sources, although Russia's stance and policy on the Karabakh issue have partially changed, it provided about 280 tons of military aid to Armenia during the early days of the Second Karabakh War. This aid included modern radio-electronic warfare equipment such as Krasukha, Avtobaza, and Sky-M, which are used in real combat conditions.

On the 44th day of the war, Russia, not wanting Azerbaijan to advance further, contacted both sides and brought them together to end the war and establish an urgent ceasefire. On November 10, 2020, the representatives of Azerbaijan and Armenia, gathered under Russian leadership, signed a ceasefire agreement known as the Triple Declaration.

The declaration signed by the three heads of state on November 10, 2020, was a significant step towards ending the conflict that had lasted for over 30 years. This declaration marked a turning point in strengthening stability and security in the region. From the terms of the declaration, it is evident that Armenia suffered a major defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, while Azerbaijan achieved significant success. Additionally, the declaration indicates that Russia's influence in the region remains strong, as it implies that Russian soldiers will be stationed in the region under the guise of peacekeeping for a certain period. Although the war largely cleansed the region of Armenians, Russia's influence and presence continue.

While the ceasefire agreement shows Azerbaijan's success, it also highlights Russia's significant gains. For example, the agreement recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial gains confirms Moscow's influence in the region. This agreement demonstrates that while Russia will continue to maintain positive relations with Baku, it also aims to intimidate Yerevan. Since the end of the war, relations between Russia and Azerbaijan have continued to improve. Although Azerbaijan has recently sought to meet its defense industry needs from various countries, including Türkiye, Russia still holds a significant share in weapon supplies.³¹

Ultimately, Russia not only established a military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh but also indicated that its influence in the region's future would continue. Furthermore, this ceasefire agreement sidelined the Minsk Group, the UN, and the OSCE, with no international organization or Western state mediator involved. The ceasefire and the war were ended by a declaration signed through Russia's initiative among Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

30 "Prezident İlham Əliyev Vladimir Putinə telefonla zəng edib", apa.az, <https://apa.az/az/xeber/xaricisiyaset/prezident-ilham-liyev-vladimir-putin-telefonla-zng-edib-600804>, [Date of access : 17.04.2024].

31 Mushvig Mehdiyev, "Azerbaijan, Russia To Develop Military-Technical Cooperation Under New Declaration", Caspian News, 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijanrussia-to-developmilitary-technical-cooperation-under-newdeclaration-2022-2-23-0>, [Date of access : 13.04.2024].

Conclusion

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been one of the most tragic conflicts of the 20th century, with consequences that have seriously affected the lives of millions of Azerbaijanis. The conflict, which began with Armenia's claims and ethnic attacks on Azerbaijani territory from the late 1980s, culminated in the Second Karabakh War, which lasted 44 days in 2020.

Armenia's attacks and claims intensified between 1988 and 1994, with Russia consistently supporting Armenian forces. A ceasefire agreement was reached with the signing of the Bishkek Protocol in 1994, but about 20% of Azerbaijan's total territory remained under occupation.

Numerous efforts to resolve the issue were made by both regional states and international organizations. The OSCE initiative can be seen as the most comprehensive peace-seeking endeavor from the start. While the Bishkek Protocol established a ceasefire, Armenia continued provocative actions during and after this process, leading to a period marked by frequent violations and significant casualties.

During this period, the OSCE proposed various solutions, including a comprehensive resolution, a phased resolution, and a joint state solution. None of these were realized due to Armenia's objections and reservations. Expectations for the Minsk Group's activities diminished day by day starting from 2010, while Armenia did not cease its border violations. In April 2016, during the conflict known as the April War, Armenia was forced to relinquish some of the territories it had occupied. A similar situation occurred in 2018 in Nakhchivan, where Armenia faced the same fate.

The OSCE Minsk Group, despite creating various negotiation platforms and attempting to bring the parties together since its establishment, failed to prevent the violation of recognized state borders by the UN and the legal adherence of the occupying side.

The Second Karabakh War started as a result of Azerbaijan's patience over nearly thirty years of negotiations. The inability to resolve the issue through diplomatic means, the ineffectiveness of mediators and mechanisms established to solve the problem, and Armenia's aggressive and uncompromising attitude made the problem increasingly untenable. Armenia's military activities and violations of Azerbaijani territories in Karabakh and surrounding areas violated international legal norms, effectively disregarding them.³² Armenia's periodic bombings of civilian settlements and attacks targeting civilians were considered war crimes by the international community. Despite these accusations, Armenia continued to attack health facilities, personnel, and vehicles without regard.

The 44-day Second Karabakh Conflict, spanning from September 27 to November 10, 2020, culminated in the cessation of Azerbaijani territorial occupation and laid the groundwork for regional stability in the South Caucasus. The trilateral accord that terminated hostilities not only

32 Ömer Lütfi Taşcıoğlu, "İkinci Karabağ Savaşı ve Sonuçları", *Trakya Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 25/2, (Aralık 2023).

resolved territorial disputes but also delineated the future trajectory for the region. As such, it transcended a mere ceasefire agreement, augmenting the prospects for a comprehensive peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Türkiye has consistently maintained a vested interest in the Karabakh issue, meticulously monitoring developments since its inception. Within the parameters of international jurisprudence, Türkiye has exerted diplomatic pressure for both the preservation of Azerbaijani sovereignty in Karabakh and the cessation of Armenian occupation. Following the disintegration of the USSR and Azerbaijan's subsequent declaration of independence, Türkiye operationalized the principle of "one nation, two states," extending military, diplomatic, and economic support while adhering to Azerbaijan's national sovereignty. In the wake of enhancing its military capabilities and particularly consolidating its regional position by thwarting the 2016 coup attempt, Türkiye has sustained its multifaceted support to Azerbaijan, with a particular emphasis on military assistance, for the liberation of Karabakh. Indeed, the then-Minister of National Defense, Akar, articulated that the liberation of Karabakh was facilitated by the deployment of indigenous and national weapon systems. Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) played a pivotal role in this conflict. The impact of Turkish UAVs utilized by the Azerbaijani armed forces has been repeatedly underscored by Azerbaijani President Aliyev. Türkiye has consistently supported Azerbaijan in ensuring regional stability and facilitating diplomatic processes, both prior to and during the conflict, and continues to do so. The most vociferous opposition to France's parliamentary resolution recognizing Karabakh as an independent state emanated from Ankara, second only to Baku. President Erdoğan emphasized the inviolability of state sovereignty and condemned such egregious violations. The joint victory celebration in Baku on December 10, attended by Erdoğan and Aliyev, symbolized the zenith of this solidarity.

Conversely, Iran has been observed to adopt a stance that perpetuates the status quo in the region since the inception of the Karabakh crisis. Regrettably, Tehran has framed this position within the paradigms of "neutrality" and "mediation," consistently failing to articulate Azerbaijan's legitimate claims during this period. Undoubtedly, geopolitical and ethnopolitical considerations shape Iran's policy. However, from the perspective of international law or religious and sectarian proximity, it is untenable to justify Tehran's stance. Consequently, the legal and social (e.g., among Iranian Turks) erosion of legitimacy is among the ramifications of Iran's policy. Thus, it would not be erroneous to posit that Tehran is a partial casualty of the Second Karabakh Conflict. However, this should not lead to the inference that Iran has relinquished its central and strategic position vis-à-vis the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. Although Iran has redirected its power and focus more towards the Middle East than the South Caucasus, it will continue to be a significant determinant in the new equilibrium established in Karabakh. Despite Iran's less-than-favorable policies and stance during this process, Azerbaijan has endeavored to maintain its relations with Iran at a certain level. Notwithstanding numerous pieces of evidence suggesting Iran's partiality towards Armenia during the hostilities, Azerbaijani President Aliyev has made concerted efforts to prevent the deterioration of relations with Tehran. The Azerbaijani

administration's endeavor to establish stable relations with neighboring Iran, from the perspective of *realpolitik*, is a highly rational position. Certainly, tensions between the two neighbors will not yield benefits for either party. It is worth contemplating how Azerbaijan's victory in the Karabakh crisis will influence Iran's relations with its Turkish population. Azerbaijan's triumph in the conflict appears to have temporarily assuaged the anger of Iranian Turks towards the administration. However, Tehran must navigate this issue with utmost sensitivity. Approaches in the opposite direction will indubitably exacerbate tensions and widen the chasm between Iranian Turks and the Tehran administration. Moreover, Iran's negative stance towards Türkiye regarding Karabakh has not contributed positively to bilateral relations. Despite aggressive and unfounded attitudes of Iranian officials, Turkish authorities have responded with measured diplomacy and have been keen to preserve diplomatic ties. However, maintaining bilateral relations at a certain level is only feasible with mutual consideration and mutual effort. Furthermore, Tehran's accusatory stance towards Türkiye does not seem likely to harm Ankara-Baku relations. Therefore, a more constructive approach by Iran towards Türkiye on the Azerbaijan issue will also contribute positively to Iran-Azerbaijan relations.

On the other hand, Russia's policy on Nagorno-Karabakh has been shaped by a quadripartite framework of factors. These encompass the geopolitical dynamics in the region, the foreign policy orientations of Azerbaijan and Armenia, bilateral relations between Russia and the two states, and the varying approaches of decision-makers in Russia towards the issue. It is imperative to consider these four factors when evaluating Russia's policy on Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, it would be judicious to analyze why Russia refrained from direct military intervention on behalf of its strategic ally Armenia during the 44-day conflict within the framework of these four factors

In conclusion, Russia has sought to leverage the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to preclude Western encroachment in the region and to maintain the resolution of this issue within its sphere of influence. Moreover, it has aimed to sustain its military presence in the region by targeting the deployment of peacekeepers from the outset. Given that the areas where the Russian peacekeepers are stationed are internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan, the Baku administration possesses greater leverage. According to regional experts, Azerbaijan has precedent in expelling Russian bases and troops from the country, as evidenced in 1992 and 2012, and the removal of Russian military presence from the region will not pose a significant challenge when the opportune moment arises. Indeed, the tripartite statement legally affirms Azerbaijan's right to such action. However, the tripartite statement also stipulated that Russia's role was to facilitate the withdrawal of armed Armenian elements from the region.

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