

Disputes between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan over the Artsakh conflict after the signing of the Bishkek ceasefire agreement

Tadevosyan Suren G.,

Master in Political Science, Yerevan State University (Yerevan, RA)

suren.tadevosyan1@ysumail.am

UDC: 327(55+479.24); ; EDN: YAAZOI

Keywords: Bishkek ceasefire, mediator, security, 44-day war, disagreements, neutrality, approaches, corridor, military exercises, challenges

Արցախյան հակամարտության շուրջ Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետության և Ադրբեջանական Հանրապետության տարածայնությունները Բիշքեքի զինադադարի հաստատումից հետո

Թադևոսյան Սուրեն Գ.

քաղաքագիտության մագիստրոս, Երևանի Պետական Համալսարան (Երևան, ՀՀ)

suren.tadevosyan1@ysumail.am

Անփոփագիր. Այս հոդվածում փորձել ենք հիմնավորել մեր այն պնդումը, որ դեռևս չկարգավորված արցախյան հակամարտությունը շարունակում է անհամաձայնության և լարվածության աղբյուր լինել Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետության և Ադրբեջանական Հանրապետության հարաբերություններում: Մեր տեսակետը հիմնավորելու համար վերլուծել ենք հակամարտության շուրջ Իրանի վարած քաղաքականությունը 1994 թվականի Բիշքեքի զինադադարից ի վեր: Փորձել ենք բացահայտել Իրանի ազգային անվտանգությանը սպառնացող այն մարտահրավերները, որոնք բխում են հակամարտության չկարգավորված վիճակից, քառասունչորսոթյա պատերազմից և Ադրբեջանի ապակառուցողական արտաքին քաղաքականությունից: Ընդգծել ենք նաև Թեհրանի պաշտոնական դիվանագիտության և հակամարտության ուղղությամբ իրականացվող «ռեպլայդիսիվի» միջև եղած տարբերությունները:

2020 թվականի սեպտեմբերին Ադրբեջանը, Թուրքիայի լայն աջակցությամբ, հրահրեց Արցախյան երկրորդ պատերազմը, որի արդյունքում նոր սպառնալիքներ ստեղծվեցին տարածաշրջանի բոլոր երկրների, այդ թվում նաև Իրանի անվտանգության համար: Ինչպես 1990-ականներին, այս անգամ էլ Թեհրանը փորձում էր նպաստել ռազմական գործողությունների դադարեցմանը միջնորդական քաղաքականության միջոցով:

2021 թվականին Իրանի և Բաքվի միջև լարվածությունը հասավ անսխալեզայ մակարդակի. Թեհրանը հստակ ցույց տվեց, որ հարևան երկրների սահմանների փոփոխությունները և ոչ տարածաշրջանային դերակատարների ներթափանցումը Հարավային Կովկաս համարում իր ազգային անվտանգության «կարմիր գիծ»:

Հանգուցաբառեր` բիշքեքյան զինադադար, միջնորդ կողմ, անվտանգություն, 44-օրյա պատերազմ, տարածայնություններ, չեզոքություն, մոտեցումներ, միջանցք, գորավարժություններ, մարտահրավերներ

Разногласия между Исламской Республикой Иран и Азербайджанской Республикой по арцахскому конфликту после подписания Бишкекского соглашения о прекращении

ОГНЯ

Тадевосян Сурен Г.

Магистр политологии, Ереванский государственный университет (Ереван, РА)

suren.tadevosyan1@ysumail.am

Аннотация: В данной статье мы попытались обосновать наше утверждение о том, что до сих пор неурегулированный арцахский конфликт продолжает оставаться источником разногласий и напряженности в отношениях между Исламской Республикой Иран и Азербайджанской Республикой. Чтобы поддержать нашу точку зрения, мы проанализировали политику Ирана в отношении конфликта после подписания Бишкекского протокола в 1994-ом году, определили вызовы национальной безопасности Ирана, вытекающие из неурегулированного состояния конфликта и деструктивной внешней политики Азербайджана. Мы также попытались подчеркнуть различия между официальной дипломатией Тегерана и проводимой «реальной политикой» по отношению к конфликту.

В сентябре 2020 года Азербайджан при широкой поддержке Турции спровоцировал 44-дневную войну в Арцахе, в результате чего возникли новые угрозы безопасности всех стран региона, в том числе Ирана. Как и в 1990-х годах, на этот раз тоже Тегеран пытался положить конец войне путем активной посреднической политики.

В 2021 году напряженность между Ираном и Баку достигла беспрецедентного уровня. Тегеран наглядно показал, что считает изменение границ соседних стран и проникновение внерегиональных акторов на Южный Кавказ «красной линией» для своей национальной безопасности.

Ключевые слова: Бишкекское соглашение о прекращении огня, посредник, безопасность, 44-дневная война, разногласия, нейтралитет, подходы, коридор, военные учения, вызовы

Introduction:

In May 1994, the Russian-mediated Bishkek ceasefire between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Artsakh temporarily put an end to hostilities in Artsakh. Iran, which neighbors the conflicting parties, despite its active mediation efforts in 1992, failed to achieve its destination - to become the main mediator in the settlement process. The main platform of the settlement process became the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States. The failure of the negotiations, which lasted for two and a half decades, in 2020 led to the outbreak of a full-scale war, which generated new threats to Iran's national security.

In this article, we have tried to analyze Iran's policy over the Artsakh conflict since the 1994 ceasefire, how its security environment has transformed as a result of the 44-day war, and what new disagreements have emerged between Iran and Azerbaijan. The relevance of the topic is conditioned by the fact that the South Caucasus direction of Iran's foreign policy is becoming a counterbalancing factor to the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem, and it is an essential factor for the national security of Armenia.

Analysis:

Since the independence of Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been one of the main sources of mutual distrust and disagreement between Azerbaijan and Iran [13, p. 300]. Although Iran has always recognized the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan at the official level, this fact has not prevented the establishment of friendly relations with Armenia [14]. Contrary to Baku's expectations, Tehran did not impose sanctions on Armenia during the war, and after the ceasefire, it did not join the Turkish-Azerbaijani policy of blockade and isolation of Armenia from the outside world. On the contrary, Iran has gradually expanded political and economic cooperation with Armenia.

During the relatively peaceful period of 1994-2016, the role of Iran in the settlement process significantly decreased. The Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations were mostly held within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, and in practice, Russia's role had become more decisive overtime. Because of the failure of the negotiations, it was not possible to reach a comprehensive settlement of the conflict and establish long-term peace in the region. Azerbaijan preferred a military solution to the conflict, as it enjoyed the unconditional political,

economic, and military support of Turkey. Moreover, Baku sought to convey nationalist-religious content to the issue and to prevent the possible activation of the Iranian mediation activities.

After 1994, Azerbaijani state propaganda was actively disseminating the idea that Iran had allegedly played a decisive role in the "occupation of Azerbaijani territories" by providing significant assistance to the Armenian and Artsakh armed forces. The Azerbaijani media and some political groups blamed Iran for disrupting the stability of Azerbaijan and forming an anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis. For instance, the ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Iran, Aliyar Safarli, stated that Iran had allegedly prepared armed formations in order to invade Azerbaijan and provoke a civil war there and that the Republic of Armenia had allegedly agreed to provide territory to those formations in Artsakh [2, p. 25].

Contrary to these beliefs, Mansour Haghghat-Pur, a member of the National Security Committee of the Iranian Parliament, presented evidence of Iranian humanitarian and military assistance to Azerbaijan during the first Artsakh war. These included the Revolutionary Guards and Mansour's military advisory assistance to the Azerbaijanis, and the transfer of some 2,000 Afghan mercenaries to the Artsakh battlefield to fight the Armenian forces [9, p. 131]. After the 1994 ceasefire, a number of Iranian religious and political figures have uncovered other facts about Iran providing military assistance to Azerbaijan during the harshest episodes of the war. Mohsen Rezaee, the former commander of the IRGC, claimed that he had personally ordered the assessment of the situation and the level of readiness of the Azerbaijani army during the war and coordinated the participation of many Iranian troops in the hostilities. [17, p. 150].

During the passive period of the conflict, the principles of the Iranian stance were the exclusion of military tension and hostilities between the conflicting parties [8, pp. 15-16]. According to Erendor and Öztarsu, the frozen state of the conflict was favorable to Iran, as it limited Azerbaijan's ability to provoke Iranian Azeris against the authorities [15, p. 169]. A similar approach is expressed by Shaffer; it was in Iran's interest for Azerbaijan to be in a protracted conflict, as it reduced Iran's attractiveness to "Iranian Azeris" and

prevented the threat of territorial ambitions against Iran [19, p. 115]. The closure of the Armenian-Turkish, and Armenian-Azerbaijani borders, and the absence of direct land connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan made it difficult for Turkey to trade with the South Caucasus and Central Asian countries and allowed Iran to maintain its advantage as the main transit country between Turkey and Azerbaijan [19, pp. 115-116].

After a long hiatus, the Iranian government attempted to activate its mediation policy in 2010. Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki suggested holding a meeting between the representatives of Azerbaijan and Armenia, which, according to Tehran, could contribute to the work of the Minsk Group [11, pp. 176-177].

During the first major escalation since the 1994 ceasefire - the four-day hostilities in April 2016, Iran maintained neutrality at the official level [8, pp. 15-16], as well as reaffirmed its readiness for active mediation [10]. In the days of the escalation in April 2016, Ankara and Baku voiced their concerns over the "occupation of Azerbaijani lands" at the regular summit of the Islamic Conference. Iran's position was that none of the member states of the Conference should make its internal or external problems the subject of the summit agenda [4, p. 178].

As a result of the failure of the negotiations, Azerbaijan provoked the Second Artsakh War in October 2020. Thanks to the military, diplomatic and economic support of Turkey, Azerbaijan occupied most of the Artsakh Republic's territory. The destabilization of the region posed new threats to neighboring countries, including Iran. It was concerned about the growing presence of Israel in the region in favor of Azerbaijan [1]. The information that mercenaries had been transferred from Syria to Artsakh was worrisome as well [1]. From the point of view of Iran's geopolitical interests, the expansion of Turkish influence in the region is quite unfavorable. Relying heavily on its neo-Ottoman foreign policy, Erdogan's objective is to minimize Iran's role not only in Azerbaijan but also in the entire South Caucasus and the Middle East, which could jeopardize Iran's strategic interests in the region.

Shaffer defines the following factors threatening Iran's security as a result of the Second Artsakh War and the subsequent ceasefire: the expansion of the state border with Azerbaijan through the former Armenian-controlled territories; Tehran's non-involvement in the settlement process, the deployment of foreign (Russian) peacekeepers along its northern borders, and the mobilization of the Iranian Azeris against Iran's support for Armenia [20].

During the most severe days of the war, Iran came up with its draft resolution to the conflict; it discussed the plan with the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian authorities. The document was not officially declassified, but, according to Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, it should have ensured "realism and peace through the forces of the countries in the region", and emphasized the importance of "territorial integrity and respect for the rights of [national] minorities" [3].

Despite the active efforts of Tehran, the Iranian initiative did not receive enough attention. Realizing that the war could escalate and penetrate its territory, it deployed units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its northern regions. At the same time, IRI Armed Forces launched large-scale military exercises [6]. On November 3, Ali Khamenei outlined Iran's approach to the conflict: "Azerbaijani territories must be liberated and the security of Armenian citizens must be guaranteed," "International borders must be protected, terrorists must never think of approaching the Iranian borders because if they do, they will be severely punished"[12].

Azerbaijan's ambitions for the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia and the aspiration to build a corridor to Nakhichevan through the territory of the Syunik region are another major threat to Iran's security interests. A number of Iranian experts have described Aliyev's ambitions as an attempt to isolate Iran from international energy trade and reduce its geopolitical role [21]. The realization of this scenario could directly endanger the land communication between Armenia and Iran, reduce their opportunities to communicate with the outside world, and endanger Iranian influence in the South Caucasus. In response to this concern, the Iranian press reported that, if necessary, Iran should establish a military base in Syunik in order to prevent the opening of the "Zangezur Corridor" [7].

A significant increase in tensions in Iran-Azerbaijani relations took place a year after the war, in the fall of 2021. Tehran was concerned about the closer military-technical cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, as well as the transfer of terrorists to the region by Azerbaijan and Turkey. In September, Iran launched excessive military exercises along the section of the Azerbaijani border occupied by Azerbaijan in the 2020 war [18].

Tehran's rhetoric hardened after the arrest of Iranian drivers by the Azerbaijani military in the territory of Armenia. In parallel with the Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises in the Caspian Sea, the Iranian army initiated another round of military exercises on October 1. The Iranian Foreign Ministry justified these actions by the need for the

inviolability of neighboring countries' borders and the inadmissibility of the spread of "Zionist proxies" [16].

On the other hand, Azerbaijani authorities accused Iran of transporting drugs through Armenia to Europe [5], which was denied by both Yerevan and Tehran [22]. High-ranking Iranian diplomats and military commanders actively responded to various accusations of Baku [7]. Although Baku and Tehran managed to somewhat lessen tensions and avoid a military confrontation, it became clear that the deep differences between them remained unresolved.

Conclusion:

After the Bishkek ceasefire in 1994, the post-war discourse of the Azerbaijani society was characterized by a critical, even accusatory, assessment of the Iranian mediation, which added to the obvious tension in bilateral relations. Baku was making efforts to minimize Tehran's influence in the region and especially in the settlement process.

During the period between the first and second wars in Artsakh (May 1994 - September 2020), the Iranian position did not change radically. Iran now continues to assert its principles of borders' inviolability, respect for territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of the conflict, and the exclusion of extra-regional actors' involvement. Taking into account the issue of separatist forces and compact national minorities living inside Iran, Tehran officially defends the principle of "territorial integrity" of Azerbaijan. However, this circumstance does not prevent Iran from developing strong political and economic relations with Armenia, which is negatively perceived by the Azerbaijani authorities.

The relations between Azerbaijan and Iran reached an unprecedented level of tension after the Second Artsakh War. In terms of Iran's national security, the significant increase in Turkey's role in the South Caucasus, the gradually closer Azerbaijani-Israeli strategic cooperation, and the relocation of mercenaries and terrorist groups near the north-western borders of Iran are considered unacceptable. In our view, the main reason for the aggravation of bilateral relations is the plans of Azerbaijan to acquire a "land corridor" to Nakhichevan and Turkey through the territory of Armenia, in case of which Iran may be isolated from the region and face the challenge of pan-Turkic separatism in its territory.

Bibliography

1. Ազիզի, Հ. (2 Հունիս, 2021). Ի՞նչ նպատակներ է հետապնդում Իրանը հետպատերազմյան տարածաշրջանում. (Գ.Միրզաբեկյան, Չրուցավար) CIVILNET <https://clck.ru/h3zpw> [հղումը կրճատված է]
2. Բայբուրդյան, Վ. (2003). Իրան-Ադրբեջան. Հարևանների թե՛ աշխարհաքաղաքական ու աշխարհատնտեսական ախտյաններ. *Մերձավոր և Միջին Արևելքի երկրներ և ժողովուրդներ*, 8, 7-38.
3. Բունիաթյան, Հ. (29 Հոկտեմբեր, 2020). Ազատություն Ռադիոկայան <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30919136.html>
4. Կարապետյան, Ռ. (2016). Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետության դիրքորոշումը Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի հիմնախնդրում, Երևան, ԱԵԳՄՄ
5. Մուսայեյան, Լ. (15 Հոկտեմբեր, 2021). Այլևր Հայաստանին և Իրանին մեղադրում է Ադրբեջանի տարածքով դեպի Եվրոպա թմրանյութեր փոխադրելու մեջ. Ազատություն Ռադիոկայան <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31511100.html>
6. Ստամբուլյան, Գ. (26 Հոկտեմբեր, 2020). Ազատություն. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30913181.html>
7. Վարդանյան, Ժ. (2 Նոյեմբեր, 2021). Բարք-Թեհրան նոր լարվածության ընթացքը. [orbels.am https://clck.ru/h44Py](https://clck.ru/h44Py) [հղումը կրճատված է]
8. Տոնյան, Ա. (Սեպտեմբեր, 2021). Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետության դիրքորոշումը Արցախյան հիմնախնդրի վերաբերյալ. (Ա. Շահբազյան, Խմբ.) *Դրոշակ. Հայ Յեղափոխական Դաշնակցության պաշտոնաթերթ*, 1655, էջեր 14-16.
9. Ahmadi, H. (2017). The clash of nationalisms: Iranian response to Baku's Irredentism. In M. Kamrava (Ed.), *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus* (pp. 105-141). London: Oxford University Press.
10. Azizi, H. (2016, April 14). *Will Iran and Russia join forces on Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict?* Retrieved December 15, 2021, from Al-Monitor. The Pulse Of The Middle East <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/04/iran-azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabach-mediator.html>
11. Azizi, H., & Hamidfar, H. (2021). Continuity and Change in Iran's Approach toward the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis (1997-2018). *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 16(4), 165-189.
12. Civilnet. (3 Նոյեմբեր, 2020). Ահաբեկիչները երբեք չպետք է մտածեն իրանական սահմանների մոտենալու մասին. [այսօրյա Այի Իրամենեի, civilnet.am https://clck.ru/h45tm](https://clck.ru/h45tm) [հղումը կրճատված է]
13. Cornell, S. E. (2011). *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (1st ed.). New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.
14. Dermoyan, H. (2021, October 6). *The Escalating Tensions Between Iran and Azerbaijan*. Retrieved October 16, 2021, from EVN Report: <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/the-escalating-tensions-between-iran-and-azerbaijan>
15. Erendor, M. E., & Öztarsu, M. F. (2019). Iranian Relations With Azerbaijan And Armenia: A Comparative Approach In The Case Of Pragmatist Politics. *Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 19(1), 157-176.
16. Khatibzadeh, S. (2021, September 28). *Iran says military drill in northwest a sovereign issue*. Retrieved November 25, 2021, from Islamic Republic

- News Agency (IRNA):
<https://en.irna.ir/news/84486788/Iran-says-military-drill-in-northwest-a-sovereign-issue>
17. **Kouhi-Esfahani, M.** (2015). *Iran's Regional Policy In The South Caucasus: Case Studies Of Relations With The Republics Of Azerbaijan & Armenia*. 205. Durham, UK: Durham University. Retrieved May 5, 2021, from <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11870/>
 18. **Rahimov, R.** (2021, October 6). *War Games Shine Light on Deep-Running Iran-Azerbaijan Tensions*. Retrieved December 7, 2021, from The Jamestown Foundation. Global Research and Analysis: <https://jamestown.org/program/war-games-shine-light-on-deep-running-iran-azerbaijan-tensions/?fbclid=IwAR0EbowddbaNX9vMmHJL8oB3NrB998cLrK00Y-8kdBwBI4cfSgEOsx1IDQ8>
 19. **Shaffer, B.** (2017). The Islamic Republic of Iran's Policy Toward the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. In S. Cornell (Ed.), *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original "Frozen Conflict" and European Security* (pp. 107-124). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
 20. **Shaffer, B.** (2020, November 25). *The Armenia-Azerbaijan War: Downgrading Iran's Regional Role*. Retrieved May 10, 2021, from The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst. A BIEWEEKLY BRIEFING ON CURRENT AFFAIRS: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13650-the-armenia-azerbaijan-war-downgrading-iran%E2%80%99s-regional-role.html>
 21. **Тарасов, С.** (3 Май 2021 г.). *НАГОРНЫЙ КАРАБАХ: ЗАРНИЦЫ БОЛЬШОЙ ГРОЗЫ В ЗАНГЕЗУРЕ*. Фонд Нораванк http://www.noravank.am/rus/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=19335
 22. **ТАСС.** (15 Октябрь 2021 г.). *МИД Ирана отверг заявление Алиева о причастности Тегерана к наркотрафику*, ТАСС <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12678151>

Сдана/Հանձնվել է՝ 13.04.2022

Рецензирована/Գրախոսվել է՝ 27.04.2022

Принята/Ընդունվել է՝ 02.05.2022